

## **Ghost 221**

Chapter 221: one broke the order

The Empress's chamber was heavy with the bitter scent of medicine.

Candles burned low, their flames trembling in the suffocating silence. The thick curtains were drawn halfway, allowing only a thin thread of pale light to fall across the bed where Lian An lay unmoving.

Her face was bloodless.

Her lips were pale.

Her chest rose so faintly it was as if even her breath feared to stay.

The Emperor sat at the bedside, his fingers curled tightly around the edge of the table. He had not slept. His eyes were rimmed red, his robe wrinkled, his hair loose from its tie.

He had ordered no one to enter.

No one.

This room was supposed to be sealed.

Yet—

The door burst open.

Footsteps stormed in.

The first to enter was Yao Qing.

Her eyes were red, her hair disheveled from running, her chest heaving with rage and fear. Behind her rushed the twins, Lin Yue and Lin Chen, and Wei Jie. Then the Duke and Duchess entered, followed by Lian Rou and little Lian Hua.

The room exploded into chaos.

For a split second, the Emperor froze.

Shock flashed across his face.

"How did you—"

Before he could finish, Lian Rou crossed the room in three strides.

He grabbed the Emperor by the collar and slammed him back against the wooden pillar beside the bed.

"What did you do to her?!"

The impact echoed through the chamber.

The Emperor did not fight back.

His gaze flicked briefly to the bed where Lian An lay, then back to Lian Rou.

"I don't know," he said hoarsely. "She collapsed. I found her in the lake. She—"

"You were sleeping!" Yao Qing screamed. "SLEEPING! While she was being dragged to death!"

The Duchess rushed to the bedside, falling to her knees.

"My child..." she sobbed, clutching Lian An's cold hand. "Open your eyes... mother is here..."

Lian Hua crawled onto the edge of the bed, shaking Lian An's sleeve.

"Sister... wake up... please wake up..."

The Duke stood frozen, his fists trembling.

He had sent his daughter into this palace believing she would be safe.

Now she lay between life and death.

The twins stood stiffly, eyes burning.

Wei Jie's jaw was clenched so hard it ached.

The Emperor finally straightened himself from Lian Rou's grip.

"I did not harm her," he said lowly. "If I could trade my life for hers, I would."

Lian Rou laughed bitterly.

"Trade your life? What good is that now? You married her and let her rot in this palace! You let your mother humiliate her! You let your concubines trample her! You let rumors destroy her name!"

Yao Qing stepped forward, her voice sharp as broken glass.

"You love Lady Chen. Everyone knows it. You neglect your own wife. You let the Dowager humiliate her in front of the entire palace. Now she jumps into a lake and you say you don't know why?"

Her finger pointed straight at his chest.

"You pushed her to this."

The Emperor's face went pale.

"I never wanted her to suffer," he said quietly. "I protected her when I could. I stopped my mother when she went too far."

Lian Rou roared,

"PROTECTED HER?! She jumped into a lake!"

The Duchess sobbed harder, her voice breaking.

"If she dies... I will curse this palace with my last breath..."

The Duke turned to the Emperor, his voice shaking with fury held tightly in check.

"You ordered us not to enter. Not even her family. Are we enemies to you now? Or is my daughter no longer worthy of being loved because she married you?"

The Emperor's throat tightened.

"She was not meant to be alone," he whispered. "I sealed the courtyard to protect her... to keep those who wish her harm away."

Yao Qing laughed bitterly.

"Then who pushed her into the lake? The air?! The water?! Or your beloved Lady Chen and that snake Shin Gu?!"

At the mention of Lady Chen's name, the room went silent.

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"You have no proof," he said.

Lian Rou's grip tightened on his collar again.

"Proof? My sister is dying in your palace! That is proof enough!"

Wei Jie finally spoke, his voice low and dangerous.

"If anything happens to Her Majesty... you will lose more than a wife."

The twins nodded in grim agreement.

The Duchess bowed her head over Lian An's hand, tears dripping onto the sheets.

"I should never have let her marry into this place," she sobbed. "She was safe with us... she was laughing with us..."

Lian Hua looked up suddenly, eyes red and fierce.

"Brother Emperor is bad! He made Sister sick!"

The Emperor's chest clenched painfully.

"I never wanted her to be hurt," he whispered. "I swear it. I don't know who is doing this. But I will find them."

Yao Qing sneered.

"You always say you will find them. You always say you'll protect her. But every time something happens to her, you are one step too late."

She turned to Lian Rou and the Duke.

"If she dies... this palace will drown in blood."

The room fell silent.

Only the faint sound of Lian An's weak breathing remained.

The Emperor slowly knelt beside the bed.

His head bowed low.

"I failed her," he admitted. "But I will not fail her again."

No one answered him.

Because right now—

Words were meaningless.

Only whether Lian An would wake again mattered.

The Empress's chamber was wrapped in grief.

Incense smoke curled lazily in the air, heavy with bitterness. Outside the curtained windows, the palace seemed frozen, as if even the wind did not dare to disturb the woman lying between life and death.

Lian An lay pale on the bed, her breathing faint, her lashes resting softly against her colorless skin. The healer had just left after another round of checking her pulse. His expression had been grim.

"She is still in danger," he had said.

Those words echoed endlessly in the room.

The Duke stood near the window, his hands clasped behind his back, his back straight but rigid with restrained fury. The Duchess sat by the bedside, holding her daughter's cold hand, whispering prayers under her breath. Lian Hua leaned against her mother, crying silently, her small fists clenched in the fabric of her dress.

Yao Qing paced back and forth like a caged animal. The twins stood close to the door, alert and ready, while Wei Jie watched the Emperor with eyes filled with hostility.

The Emperor remained kneeling beside the bed.

His posture was stiff, his head lowered. The golden dragon embroidery on his robe was dulled by shadow. For the first time since ascending the throne, he looked small.

Then—

Lian Rou stepped forward.

His gaze was sharp, his voice steady but burning with suppressed rage.

"Your Majesty," he said coldly, "stop pretending you are innocent."

The Emperor looked up.

Lian Rou continued, each word cutting deeper than a blade.

"This is not an accident. This is not misfortune. This is not fate. This is an attempt to kill my sister."

The room went deathly silent.

The Emperor slowly rose to his feet.

"You are accusing me?" he asked quietly.

Lian Rou laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"I am accusing your palace."

He pointed directly at the Emperor's chest.

"And the woman you keep beside you."

Yao Qing inhaled sharply.

"You mean Lady Chen," she said flatly.

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"You will not slander her."

Lian Rou's jaw tightened.

"Slander? Then explain this to me."

He gestured toward the bed.

"My sister was mocked by the Dowager. Isolated by the palace women. Surrounded by enemies who wish her gone. The Emperor favors Lady Chen openly. The Dowager wants Lady Chen to bear the heir. The Empress stands in their way."

He took a step closer.

"So tell me—why wouldn't they want her dead?"

The Duchess finally looked up, her eyes swollen from crying.

"Your Majesty," she whispered, her voice trembling, "my daughter is gentle. She never harmed anyone. Why is she suffering like this in your palace?"

The Emperor's lips parted slightly, but no sound came out.

Lian Rou continued mercilessly,

"First the miscarriage of Princess Zhi. Then strange energies in the palace. Then my sister walks into the lake like she was possessed. You think this is coincidence?"

Wei Jie spoke lowly,

"The timing is too perfect."

The twins nodded.

"This palace is full of schemes."

Yao Qing's voice shook with fury.

"You love Lady Chen. Everyone in the palace knows. The Dowager wants Lady Chen to be Empress. Now Lian An almost dies. Who benefits?"

All eyes turned to the Emperor.

His breath came heavier.

"No one benefits from this," he said. "If she dies, I lose my wife."

Lian Rou scoffed.

"Your wife?" he repeated mockingly. "You call her your wife now? When she was humiliated? When she was blamed? When rumors spread about her? When she was isolated in her own courtyard? Where were you?"

The Emperor clenched his fists.

"I was protecting her in my own way."

Lian Rou stepped forward until they were only inches apart.

"Your 'own way' almost killed her."

The Duke finally turned around.

His eyes were calm, but his voice was heavy with authority.

"Your Majesty. We are not accusing you of directly harming our daughter. But we cannot deny this palace is unsafe for her. And the source of that danger is not far from you."

The Emperor closed his eyes briefly.

"Lady Chen is not that kind of person," he said slowly. "She would never harm Lian An. I know her."

Yao Qing laughed bitterly.

"You know her? You also thought your healer was loyal. You thought the kitchen accident was an accident. You thought everything was fine while your wife almost died."

Lian Rou pointed toward the door.

"Her family has always wanted power. Your mother favors them. Now suddenly my sister almost dies. You think this is coincidence?"

The Emperor's gaze hardened.

"I will not allow baseless accusations."

Lian Rou's voice rose.

"Then swear it."

The room froze.

"Swear on your throne. Swear on your ancestors. Swear that neither Lady Chen nor her family has anything to do with what is happening to my sister."

The Emperor's throat tightened.

"I swear," he said firmly. "I have never allowed anyone to harm the Empress. And if anyone—no matter who they are—tries to kill her, I will destroy them."

Lian Rou stared at him for a long moment.

Then he turned away bitterly.

"Words are easy," he said. "If my sister wakes, I will believe you. If she dies..."

He did not finish the sentence.

The Duchess suddenly broke down sobbing again.

"If my daughter dies... I will never forgive this palace..."

The Emperor slowly walked back to the bedside and knelt again.

His voice was low, raw.

"Lian An... please wake up. I don't want you to leave me like this."

For the first time, tears fell from his eyes.

Not because he was accused.

But because he realized—

If she did not wake up,

No defense would matter anymore.