

## **Ghost 223**

Chapter 223: meeting parents

(Empress's Dream of Her Past Life)

The world around her was warm.

Not the warm of summer sun, not the warmth of silk blankets or palace lanterns—but the warmth of memory.

When Empress Lian An opened her eyes, she was no longer in the palace bed surrounded by silence and fear.

She stood in a small, familiar kitchen.

The walls were pale yellow, stained by years of steam and oil. The wooden floor creaked faintly beneath her feet. The scent of garlic, ginger, and simmering broth filled the air.

Her heart trembled.

This place...

She knew this place.

Before she could think further, her hands were already moving.

She picked up a knife.

The rhythm of chopping came naturally to her fingers—tap, tap, tap—just like breathing. The sound echoed in the small space, comforting and alive.

Outside the kitchen window, morning sunlight spilled across narrow streets. A faded signboard hung crookedly above the door.

The Whisper Bowl.

No.

Not the Whisper Bowl.

This was her old restaurant.

Her real restaurant.

The one she had run in her previous life.

Her chest tightened.

She turned her head slowly.

Her mother stood near the stove, stirring soup with gentle movements. Her hair was tied into a loose bun, strands escaping around her temples. She looked tired—but happy.

Her father sat on a small stool near the counter, mending a torn apron with clumsy fingers. He was never good with needles, but he insisted on helping.

"You'll prick yourself again," her mother said, not looking up.

Her father chuckled. "If I bleed into the apron, customers will think it's a special sauce."

Her mother snorted softly. "You're shameless."

The Empress felt her throat tighten.

No.

Not Empress.

In this dream, she was not Empress Lian An.

She was just...

Herself.

"Mom," she whispered.

Her voice came out small.

Her mother turned.

Her eyes lit up with familiar warmth.

"You're up early today," her mother said. "Didn't sleep well?"

Her father looked up too, smiling gently. "You always look tired these days. Don't push yourself so hard. The restaurant isn't going to run away."

Tears burned behind her eyes.

They were here.

Alive.

Breathing.

Smiling at her like nothing had ever gone wrong.

She took a step forward.

Then another.

Her legs felt heavy, as if she were walking through water.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice trembling. "I just... wanted to cook with you today."

Her mother laughed softly. "What's gotten into you? You cook every day."

But she moved aside, making space for her at the stove.

The Empress stood beside her mother, stirring the soup. The steam brushed her cheeks, warm and familiar. The scent wrapped around her like a memory she had never been able to forget.

This is my home.

She felt it so strongly that her chest ached.

Her father stood and walked over, peering into the pot. "Smells good. You finally got the balance right."

She smiled.

For a moment, she forgot the palace.

Forgot the lake.

Forgot the blood.

Forgot the cold terror of losing herself to the dark.

Here, she was safe.

Here, she was loved.

Time flowed strangely in the dream.

Morning became afternoon.

Customers filled the small restaurant, laughter and chatter echoing against the walls. She moved between tables, serving food, wiping spills, exchanging small jokes with regulars.

Her parents watched her with quiet pride.

"You've grown up well," her father said as they closed the shop for the day.

Her mother nodded. "You're strong. You don't need us to worry anymore."

Those words struck something deep in her heart.

Why do they sound like farewell?

The sky outside the window darkened too quickly.

The streetlights flickered on.

A strange unease crept into her chest.

"I'll go buy more ingredients," she said suddenly, not knowing why urgency filled her voice.

Her mother frowned. "It's late. We can go tomorrow."

"I'll be quick," she insisted.

Her father sighed. "Fine, but be careful."

She grabbed her jacket and stepped outside.

The night air was colder than she expected.

The street was quieter than usual.

Too quiet.

Her footsteps echoed.

Then—

Headlights.

A blinding flash of white light.

A sharp sound of brakes screeching.

Her mind went blank.

Pain exploded through her body.

The world spun violently.

She felt herself lifted, then falling, then nothing.

Silence swallowed everything.

In the darkness, her body felt weightless.

No pain.

No sound.

No breath.

She was floating.

Then—

Voices.

Soft.

Familiar.

"Child..."

Her heart trembled.

"Come here..."

Light appeared ahead.

A gentle white glow.

Two figures stood within it.

Her parents.

Not the tired versions from the restaurant.

Not the older, worn versions she remembered.

They looked younger.

Healthier.

Their faces were peaceful.

Smiling at her with eyes full of love.

Her mother opened her arms.

"Come home."

Her father nodded.

"You've suffered enough. You don't need to struggle anymore."

Her legs moved on their own.

One step.

Then another.

The light felt warm.

Comforting.

Every step toward it made her heart feel lighter.

The palace... the pain... the loneliness...

All of it felt so far away.

Why am I still holding on?

She reached out her hand.

Her mother's hand extended toward hers.

Just one more step—

And she would be home.

The white light grew brighter with every step she took.

It was not harsh or blinding.

It was soft—like moonlight reflected on water, like the glow of lanterns on a quiet street.

Warmth wrapped around her.

Not just around her body, but around her heart.

Her mother's hand felt real in hers.

So warm.

So familiar.

Her father walked on her other side, his presence steady and comforting, like he had always been when she was small and afraid.

"You look thinner," her mother said softly, lifting her free hand to brush imaginary dust from her sleeve. "You don't take care of yourself anymore."

The Empress wanted to laugh.

But her lips trembled.

"I'm tired," she whispered. "So tired."

Her father's eyes softened. "We know."

They continued walking.

The world behind them faded into shadow. The restaurant, the street, the accident—everything dissolved into mist. Only the path of white light remained beneath their feet, stretching endlessly forward.

Her mother squeezed her hand gently.

"Come with us," she said. "You don't have to carry everything alone anymore."

The Empress felt tears slide down her cheeks.

"I... I didn't want to die like that," she said in a broken voice. "I still had so many things to do. I wanted to make the restaurant bigger. I wanted to take care of you when you grew old."

Her father stopped walking.

He turned to her fully now.

"We know, child."

His eyes were kind. Too kind.

"But life doesn't always give us time to finish what we want."

Her mother stepped closer and wrapped her arms around her.

The Empress froze.

She hadn't been held like this since her parents died.

The warmth of her mother's embrace soaked into her bones.

Her chest ached.

Her shoulders trembled.

She cried silently against her mother's shoulder.

"I was alone," she whispered. "After you died, I was alone. The restaurant was empty at night. I came home to silence. I never got married. I never had a family. I didn't even have time to be sad properly. I just worked and worked until one day I didn't wake up anymore."

Her mother stroked her hair.

"I know. We saw you."

The Empress looked up sharply.

"You... saw me?"

Her father nodded.

"We were watching. You were strong. You endured everything alone."

Her mother smiled sadly.

"You carried the restaurant on your back. You carried your grief quietly. You never complained."

The Empress's breathing became uneven.

"If you saw me... then you know how much I missed you."

Her mother pressed her forehead to her daughter's.

"We missed you too."

Those words shattered something inside her.

She sobbed openly now.

"I tried to move on. I really did. But every time I closed the shop, I imagined you sitting at the table waiting for dinner. Every time I cooked, I thought of you tasting the food. Every time someone praised my dishes, I wished you were there to hear it."

Her father's voice was gentle but heavy.

"We were there in spirit."

Her mother took her hands in both of hers.

"You've done enough, child."

The white light pulsed brighter around them, as if responding to those words.

"You don't need to suffer anymore," her mother said softly. "You don't need to struggle in another life. You don't need to fight, or bleed, or endure misunderstandings."

The Empress's heart wavered.

Another life...

Images flickered at the edge of her mind.

A palace courtyard.

Cold stone floors.

A man with dark eyes.

Three noisy ghosts bickering endlessly.

The smell of food in a strange kitchen.

She frowned slightly, as if trying to remember something important.

Her father noticed the change in her expression.

"Don't think about that," he said gently.

His voice carried a subtle pull.

"That world is not yours."

The Empress hesitated.

"I... I have people there too," she said faintly.

Her mother smiled.

"They are not your real family."

The words were soft.

But they struck deep.

"They don't truly understand you the way we do," her mother continued. "They don't share your blood. They don't carry the memories of your childhood. They didn't raise you. They didn't lose you."

The Empress's fingers tightened.

"That place is full of danger," her father added. "Pain. Schemes. Darkness. You are always on guard there. Always protecting yourself."

He leaned closer.

"Here, you don't need to protect anything."

The light grew warmer.

Softer.

The Empress felt her exhaustion rise to the surface.

Her limbs felt heavy.

Her mind felt tired.

So tired.

"I don't have to be strong here?" she whispered.

Her mother shook her head.

"No. You can rest."

Her father smiled.

"No one will hurt you here."

The white path ahead shimmered, opening into something like a vast field of light.

She could almost feel peace waiting there.

Her breathing slowed.

Her thoughts became hazy.

"Come," her mother said gently, pulling her forward. "Come home."

The Empress took another step.

And another.

With each step, the weight of her other life faded further.

The palace felt distant.

The pain felt distant.

Even her name—Lian An—felt less important.

She was simply a daughter returning home.

Just as she was about to step fully into the brightest part of the light—

A faint, distant sound echoed.

Like someone calling her name.

Not her old name.

Another name.

"Lian An—"

The voice was far away.

Distorted.

Weak.

She paused.

Her parents' smiles stiffened for a fraction of a second.

"You're imagining things," her mother said quickly, tightening her grip. "There is no one else here."

The voice came again.

Softer.

"Lian An..."

The Empress's heart stirred.

Something tugged at her chest.

Like a thread pulling her backward.

Her father's voice became firmer.

"Don't look back."

Her mother's tone softened, but there was an edge beneath it.

"If you hesitate now, you'll only suffer again."

The white light pulsed.

The Empress closed her eyes.

The warmth was so tempting.

The peace was so close.

But the voice...

It carried worry.

Desperation.

Fear of losing her.

Her chest tightened.

"Someone is calling me," she whispered.

Her mother shook her head.

"No one who matters."

Her father added quietly,

"They will forget you."

The Empress opened her eyes slowly.

"No," she said, her voice trembling. "They won't."

Her parents' smiles finally faltered.