

## Ghost 52

Chapter 52: order

The Emperor's voice in the private anteroom was soft but absolute, the kind that cut through pleading and polished smiles alike. Lady Chen, still reeling from the sting across her cheek and the humiliation of the public room, knelt with a face that tried to hold porcelain composure.

"Enough," Zhao Rui said, and the single word closed the chamber like a lid. "Go to your apartments. Tend that cheek. Do not parade this wound through the corridors."

He rose and moved past her as if to unlock a different, older memory between them. "We will speak tomorrow. Rest. Apply the ointment the physician prepared. Tell no one. Your family will be protected."

She stared at him—at his back as he passed beneath the carved lintel, at the steady, unyielding calm in the set of his shoulders. For a stunned instant she could only feel the raw knot of hurt and the sharper needle of rage.

"Your Majesty—" she began, voice threaded with the practiced tremor of a woman who could make sorrow look like virtue. He did not turn.

"You are dismissed," he said simply. The authority in the words left no room for performance.

Lady Chen rose, half-limp, half-possessed by a single, terrible thing: the knowledge that his protection might be real. That thought coiled around her like fire—relief on one hand, a more dangerous heat on the other. If the Emperor would shelter her family, then she must not let him see the rot inside it; she must not let him see her fear. She must make fear look like patience.

When the chamber door closed behind her, she let out a sound that was neither a sob nor a laugh. Her fingers flew to her cheek where Ananya's hand had landed. The skin reddened under her palm—hot and honest.

She bent toward the dressing table, smoothed the ointment into the skin with trembling, deliberate strokes, and looked at herself in the glass. The face that smiled back was arranged and cool; the one beneath it hissed and vowed sharp things.

You think you have won, she thought, watching the faint pink fade to duller bruise. You have only delayed me.

She whispered into the glass, eyes narrow. "You will regret wearing my uncle's shadow across your name."

Outside the window, the palace rang with soldiers' footsteps and servants' whispers. Inside, Lady Chen's breath sharpened into plans.

Night clung to the city like damp cloth when Ananya's carriage reached her family estate.

The gates were open, lanterns flickering unevenly. Servants rushed back and forth, their faces drawn tight with fear.

Inside, the sound of weeping filled the hall.

She pushed the doors wide and ran across the courtyard. "Mother! Lian Hua!"

Her mother turned first—Lady Xiu's eyes were swollen, the fine lines around them deepened by sleepless hours.

"Lian an—!" The word broke halfway between relief and grief. She stumbled forward and caught her daughter in her arms.

"My child... he hasn't woken yet. The arrow went so deep—"

"Don't," Ananya whispered, clutching her. "Don't talk like that. Father's too stubborn to die."

Lian Hua came next, face blotched from crying. "Sister, they said the physician isn't sure—he lost so much blood—"

Ananya turned, gripping her sister's shoulders. "He'll wake. He has to."

Lady Xiu pressed her sleeve against her mouth, trembling. "I told him not to go... I begged him to send another. But he said duty couldn't wait. And now—"

Her voice cracked. She sank onto the nearest chair, tears streaming freely.

Ananya knelt beside her, wiping her tears with gentle hands. "Mother, please. We mustn't fall apart now. He needs us strong."

Her own voice wavered, but she forced it steady. "He always said crying wastes breath we could use to help. So let's help."

Lady Xiu looked at her daughter—at the firm chin, the fierce, determined eyes—and nodded slowly, as though taking strength from the reflection of her husband in her child.

Lian Hua sniffed, rubbing her eyes. "I boiled the medicine. He drank some. The physician said to keep his body warm."

"Good," Ananya said softly. "Keep the room quiet. I'll sit with him tonight."

Together they moved to the inner chamber. The air was heavy with herbs and fever. The Duke lay pale against the pillows, his bandaged shoulder rising and falling with faint breaths.

Lady Xiu sat beside the bed, holding his hand. "He looks so tired," she whispered.

Ananya brushed a stray lock of hair from his forehead and smiled faintly. "Father never rests. Maybe Heaven decided he should sleep for once."

Her mother's lips trembled, caught between a sob and a laugh. "You talk like him."

"Someone has to," Ananya replied, squeezing her hand.

The three of them stayed that way—mother, daughters, and a wounded pillar of their home—through the long hours until dawn's first light touched the shutters.

No more court, no more palace intrigue—only a family clinging together, their tears drying slowly in the quiet hum of hope.