

Ghost 262

Chapter 262: — A Day in the Market

Morning sunlight spilled gently into the courtyard of the Duke residence.

The atmosphere was lively again.

Servants moved busily, preparing for the upcoming wedding.

Laughter echoed faintly from the inner halls.

—

Inside her chamber—

The Empress was getting ready.

Today—

She was going out.

—

"Are you sure we can go?" Lian Hua asked excitedly, already half dressed in light commoner clothes.

—

The Empress nodded.

"We're not leaving the city. It's fine."

—

"And we'll go to the market?"

"Yes."

—

Lian Hua clapped happily.

"I've always wanted to explore freely like this!"

—

Lian Rou stood near the door, arms crossed.

"You say that like you're imprisoned."

—

"I am. By etiquette."

—

"...That's not imprisonment."

—

"It is."

—

The Empress smiled faintly watching them.

—

"Let's go before someone stops us."

—

They left the residence quietly.

Dressed simply.

Blending in.

—

The streets were already alive.

Vendors shouting.

Children running.

The smell of fresh food filling the air.

—

The moment they stepped into the market—

Lian Hua's eyes sparkled.

"WOW..."

—

She ran ahead.

"Look at this! And that! And that!"

—

"Slow down," the Empress said, trying not to laugh.

—

Lian Rou sighed.

"This is going to be a long day."

—

But—

None of them noticed—

A certain someone had already arrived.

—

The Emperor stood at a distance.

Dressed in simple clothes.

No royal presence.

No guards nearby.

—

Just—

A man.

—

He had received the report earlier.

The Empress was in the market.

—

At first—

He had frowned.

Concerned.

—

But then—

He came.

—

Now—

Watching her.

—

She looked... different.

Relaxed.

Free.

—

Smiling without restraint.

—

His gaze softened.

—

"...So this is how she looks outside the palace..."

—

Without thinking—

He stepped forward.

—

Meanwhile—

Lian Hua had already reached a stall full of accessories.

"Look at this! It's so pretty!"

—

She picked up bangles.

Hairpins.

Small ornaments.

—

"I want this... and this... and this..."

—

"Are you buying or opening a shop?" Lian Rou muttered.

—

"Both."

—

The Empress laughed softly.

"Pick what you like."

—

"But I don't have money—"

—

"You do now."

—

A voice interrupted.

—

They turned.

—

And froze.

—

"...You?"

—

The Emperor stood there.

Calm.

Casual.

—

Lian Hua blinked.

"Why are you here?!"

—

He raised a brow.

"Can't I be?"

—

"That's not the point!"

—

The Empress stared at him.

"...You followed us?"

—

"I came."

—

"That's the same thing."

—

"...No."

—

Lian Rou looked between them.

"...We should leave."

—

"No, wait!" Lian Hua grabbed his sleeve.

"You have money, right?"

—

The Emperor looked at her.

"...Yes."

—

Her eyes lit up.

"Then I want all of this."

—

Lian Rou closed his eyes.

"...Shameless."

—

The Emperor didn't hesitate.

"Take it."

—

The vendor immediately began packing everything.

—

The Empress sighed.

"You're spoiling her."

—

"She's your sister."

—

"That doesn't mean—"

—

"It does."

—

Lian Hua grinned proudly.

"I like him."

—

"You liked him five minutes ago too."

—

"Now I like him more."

—

The Emperor chuckled faintly.

—

Then—

He looked at the Empress.

"...You?"

—

She frowned slightly.

"What about me?"

—

"Buy what you want."

—

"I don't need anything."

—

"...Buy."

—

"...Why?"

—

"Because I said so."

—

She stared at him.

—

Then looked away.

"...Fine."

—

They moved through the market together.

—

For the first time—

It felt natural.

—

No palace rules.

No distance.

—

Just—

Walking side by side.

—

They stopped at different stalls.

—

Clothes.

Accessories.

Food.

—

Lian Hua kept dragging them everywhere.

—

"Look at this dress!"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Please?"

"...Fine."

—

The Emperor paid.

—

Again.

And again.

—

Lian Rou shook his head.

"You're going to regret this."

—

"I won't."

—

The Empress watched quietly.

—

Then—

She stopped at a small stall.

—

Her gaze softened.

—

"...This..."

—

The stall was simple.

Selling small items.

—

A miniature sword.

A finely carved pen.

A delicate keychain.

—

Her fingers brushed over them gently.

—

"...They would like this..."

—

The Emperor looked at her.

"...Who?"

—

She paused.

—

"...Friends."

—

He didn't ask further.

—

"Take them."

—

She picked them up carefully.

—

A small sword.

"...For General."

—

A pen.

"...For Scholar."

—

A hairpin.

"...For Fen Yu."

—

Her expression softened.

—

"...Where did they go..."

—

She hadn't seen them since morning.

—

For the first time—

She felt their absence.

—

"...Are they still exploring..."

—

The Emperor watched her quietly.

—

Then—

Paid for everything.

—

She didn't argue.

—

They continued walking.

—

Eating street food.

—

Lian Hua feeding herself happily.

"This is so good!"

—

The Emperor looked at the Empress.

"...You like it?"

—

"...It's fine."

—

"...You're smiling."

—

"I'm not."

—

"...You are."

—

She turned away.

"...Stop looking at me."

—

"...I can't."

—

Her ears turned red.

—

Lian Rou covered his face.

"...I regret coming."

—

Time passed quickly.

—

The sun began to lower.

—

The market lights started glowing.

—

The atmosphere turned magical.

—

Lanterns lit the streets.

—

The Empress looked around.

—

"...It's beautiful..."

—

The Emperor followed her gaze.

—

"...Yes."

—

But his eyes—

Were on her.

—

Not the lights.

—

Not the market.

—

Her.

—

As the wind passed softly—

Her hair moved slightly.

—

She looked free.

Alive.

—

And he realized—

—

This.

—

This was what he wanted to protect.

—

Not just the palace.

—

Her.

—

They slowly began heading back.

—

Lian Hua still carrying too many things.

—

"This was the best day!"

—

"...Because you spent nothing."

—

"Exactly."

—

The Empress walked quietly.

—

Holding the small items in her hand.

—

Her thoughts with her ghost friends.

—

"...I'll give these to them..."

—

"...When they come back..."

—

Beside her—

The Emperor walked in silence.

—

But for once—

That silence wasn't awkward.

—

It was—

Comfortable.

—

And somewhere between crowded streets—

Soft laughter—

And quiet glances—

—

Something deeper—

Began to grow.

A Blade in the Crowd

The market was alive.

Even at night, it felt brighter than the palace.

Lanterns hung in rows, glowing like stars brought down to earth. The air was filled with laughter, bargaining voices, and the sizzling sound of food being cooked fresh on open flames.

—

The three of them sat at a small wooden stall.

Simple.

Crowded.

Nothing like royal dining halls.

—

The Empress, her younger sister Lian Hua, and the Emperor sat side by side on low stools.

Bowls and plates filled the table—noodles, dumplings, grilled skewers.

—

Lian Hua stuffed a dumpling into her mouth and spoke with a full voice,

"Mmm... it's good!"

—

The Emperor took a bite, then glanced at the Empress.

"...It's decent."

—

The Empress raised a brow.

"Just decent?"

—

He nodded calmly.

"Yes."

—

Lian Hua looked between them and grinned.

"Compared to her cooking, everything is 'just decent' for him now."

—

The Empress rolled her eyes.

"You don't have to compare everything."

—

"I'm not," the Emperor replied, taking another bite.

"I'm stating facts."

—

"Oh really?" she shot back.

"Then eat only palace food next time."

—

"I would prefer your cooking."

—

She paused.

—

Lian Hua burst into laughter.

"HA! Sister, you lost!"

—

"I didn't lose anything," the Empress muttered, looking away.

But her ears had turned slightly red.

—

They continued eating.

Bickering.

Laughing.

—

It was... peaceful.

—

Until—

A sudden shout cut through the noise.

"THIEF! STOP HIM!"

—

The entire market shifted.

People turned.

Voices rose.

—

A man ran through the crowd, clutching a pouch.

Behind him, a merchant shouted desperately.

"He stole my money!"

—

Chaos broke out.

People stepped aside.

Some tried to block him—but failed.

—

The Emperor's expression changed instantly.

—

Calm.

Sharp.

Focused.

—

He stood up.

"I'll handle it."

—

Before anyone could react—

He moved.

—

Fast.

—

Through the crowd.

Like a blade cutting through water.

—

The Empress stood abruptly.

"Wait—!"

—

But he was already gone.

—

The thief pushed through people, knocking them aside.

Breathing heavily.

Desperate.

—

Then—

Suddenly—

The Emperor appeared in front of him.

—

Blocking his path.

—

"Stop."

—

The man froze for a split second.

Then his eyes darkened.

—

Without warning—

He pulled out a dagger.

—

Everything happened—

Too fast.

—

The man lunged forward.

—

The Emperor moved to block—

But—

From behind—

A figure rushed in.

—

"Your Majesty—!"

—

The Empress.

—

She stepped between them—

And—

The blade struck.

—

A sharp sound.

—

A gasp.

—

Silence.

—

The dagger pierced her hand.

—

Blood dripped instantly.

—

The Emperor's eyes widened.

"...What did you do?!"

—

The thief froze.

Shocked.

—

That moment—

Was enough.

—

The Emperor's expression changed.

—

Completely.

—

Cold.

Furious.

Terrifying.

—

He grabbed the man's wrist—

Twisted it harshly.

—

A crack echoed.

—

The dagger fell.

—

Then—

He struck.

—

Once.

Twice.

Again.

—

No mercy.

—

The man collapsed.

But the Emperor didn't stop.

—

Each punch—

Fueled by rage.

—

"How dare you—"

Another hit.

—

"Touch her—"

Another.

—

The crowd stepped back in fear.

—

No one dared to intervene.

—

"Your Majesty—!"

The Empress called out weakly.

—

He stopped.

—

Breathing heavily.

—

Then immediately turned.

—

His gaze fell on her injured hand.

—

Blood.

Still flowing.

—

His anger shifted instantly—

Into panic.

—

"...Are you hurt badly?"

—

"I'm fine..." she whispered, though her face had paled.

—

He grabbed her wrist gently.

Inspecting the wound.

—

His jaw tightened.

—

"You're not fine."

—

Behind them—

Guards rushed in.

—

"Kneel!"

They restrained the thief.

—

The Emperor stood slowly.

His expression returned to cold authority.

—

"Take him."

—

His voice was icy.

—

"To the prison."

—

The guards bowed.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

—

The thief, barely conscious, was dragged away.

—

The crowd whispered.

Shocked.

—

But the Emperor paid no attention.

—

His focus was only—

Her.

—

He turned back to the Empress.

—

Carefully—

He tore a piece of cloth.

Wrapped her wounded hand.

—

His movements were firm.

But gentle.

—

"...Don't do that again."

—

His voice was low.

Controlled.

But trembling slightly underneath.

—

She looked at him.

"...He was going to stab you."

—

"I could handle it."

—

"And I couldn't just watch."

—

Silence.

—

Their eyes met.

—

Something unspoken passed between them.

—

Then—

He sighed.

Softly.

—

"...Let's go."

—

Lian Hua rushed forward.

"Sister! Are you okay?!"

—

"I'm fine," the Empress smiled faintly.

—

But the Emperor didn't relax.

—

Not until—

They left the market.

—

Not until—

She was safe.

—

And even then—

His grip on her hand didn't loosen.

—

Because for him—

That moment—

Had been enough.

—

To remind him—

How close he could come—

To losing her again.