

## **Ghost 263**

### Chapter 263: Midnight Panic, Quiet Care

The night had barely settled.

The Duke residence, wrapped in soft silence, breathed peacefully under the dim glow of lantern light.

Inside the Empress's chamber—

Everything had finally gone still.

—

The Empress lay under the covers, her back turned slightly, trying to calm her racing thoughts.

The Emperor lay beside her, maintaining distance—just as he had promised.

No pressure.

No force.

Only presence.

—

For a while—

There was nothing.

Just quiet breathing.

—

Then—

A sudden sound broke the silence.

"Ah—!"

—

The Empress hissed softly.

—

The Emperor's eyes snapped open instantly.

He turned toward her.

"What happened?"

—

She pressed her hand to her forehead.

"...It hurts."

—

His gaze sharpened.

He leaned slightly closer.

"...Your wound."

—

Earlier—

When she had fallen into the lake—

The injury on her head had only been treated quickly.

Now—

It was reacting.

—

Her brows furrowed.

"It suddenly started hurting..."

—

Without another word—

The Emperor sat up.

—

His movements were quick.

Decisive.

—

"Get up."

—

She blinked.

"...Now?"

—

"Yes."

—

Before she could protest—

He had already reached for her cloak.

—

"Wait, I can walk—"

—

"I know."

—

But he still helped her stand.

—

Moments later—

The chamber door opened.

—

The night air rushed in.

Cool.

Sharp.

—

Servants outside startled.

"Your Majesty—?"

—

"Prepare a carriage."

—

His voice was calm—

But carried urgency.

—

"...Now."

—

No one dared delay.

—

Within minutes—

The carriage was ready.

—

As the Empress stepped out—

Another voice echoed behind them.

"Sister!"

—

Lian Hua came running.

Her hair slightly messy.

Clearly awakened suddenly.

—

"I heard—what happened?"

—

"She's coming with us," the Emperor said.

—

Lian Hua didn't argue.

She immediately followed.

—

Inside the carriage—

The atmosphere was tense.

—

The Empress sat quietly, one hand still near her forehead.

—

The Emperor sat across from her.

Watching.

Observing every small reaction.

—

"Does it hurt a lot?" he asked.

—

"...A little."

—

She was lying.

—

He could tell.

—

But he didn't expose it.

—

Instead—

His gaze softened slightly.

—

The carriage moved quickly through the silent streets.

—

No noise.

No crowd.

—

Only the rhythmic sound of wheels against the road.

—

And the quiet tension inside.

—

Lian Hua leaned closer.

"...Does it really hurt?"

—

The Empress nodded slightly.

—

"Why didn't you say earlier?"

—

"...I thought it was fine."

—

The Emperor's expression darkened slightly.

—

"You should speak."

—

She glanced at him.

—

"...You were already tired."

—

For a moment—

He didn't respond.

—

Then—

"...Next time, tell me."

—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

—

"...Okay."

—

The carriage finally stopped.

—

A small house stood ahead.

—

Simple.

But known.

—

The healer's residence.

—

The Emperor stepped down first.

Then turned—

And helped her down.

—

Lian Hua followed quickly.

—

The door was knocked.

—

Within moments—

The healer appeared.

Half-asleep.

Confused.

—

Then—

His eyes widened.

"Y-Your Majesty?!"

—

"No time."

—

The Emperor stepped aside.

"Check her."

—

The healer immediately moved.

"Inside—quickly."

—

They entered.

—

The room smelled of herbs.

Warm.

Comforting.

—

The Empress sat down.

—

The healer leaned closer.

Carefully examining the wound.

—

His fingers were gentle.

Experienced.

—

"Hmm..."

—

Silence stretched.

—

Lian Hua held her breath.

—

The Emperor stood still.

But his gaze—

Never left her.

—

After a moment—

The healer stepped back.

—

"...It's not serious."

—

Both of them reacted.

—

Lian Hua: "Really?"

The Emperor: "...Explain."

—

The healer nodded.

"The wound looks worse than it is."

—

"It's not deep."

—

"The pain is because of impact and cold exposure."

—

He prepared some herbal paste.

—

"This will heal within two days."

—

The Empress blinked.

"...Two days?"

—

"Yes."

—

The healer smiled lightly.

"You're strong."

—

The Emperor finally relaxed—slightly.

—

"Apply this twice a day."

—

"And avoid cold wind."

—

Lian Hua sighed dramatically.

"I thought something serious happened..."

—

The healer chuckled.

"No need to worry."

—

The Emperor stepped closer.

"Are you sure?"

—

The healer nodded firmly.

"I guarantee."

—

Only then—

Did the tension in his shoulders ease.

—

He turned toward her.

"...Does it still hurt?"

—

She shook her head slightly.

"...Less now."

—

Because of the medicine.

Or because of him—

She didn't know.

—

The healer handed the medicine carefully.

"Keep this."

—

The Emperor took it himself.

—

Not letting servants handle it.

—

A small detail—

But noticed.

—

They thanked the healer.

—

And stepped outside again.

—

The night felt calmer now.

—

The carriage ride back—

Was different.

—

Quieter.

Softer.

—

Lian Hua leaned back, already sleepy again.

—

The Empress sat silently.

—

While the Emperor—

Still watched her.

—

"...It doesn't hurt much now," she said softly.

—

"...Good."

—

A pause.

—

"...You didn't need to bring me here."

—

He didn't respond immediately.

—

Then—

"...I did."

—

She looked at him.

—

His expression was calm.

But his voice—

Was firm.

—

"...I won't take risks with you anymore."

—

Her heart skipped.

—

She looked away quickly.

—

"...It was just a small injury."

—

"...Still."

—

Silence again.

—

But not uncomfortable.

—

Just...

Full.

—

The carriage reached the residence.

—

They stepped down.

—

This time—

No rush.

—

No panic.

—

Only calm footsteps back to her chamber.

—

Inside—

Everything was as they left it.

—

She sat on the bed.

—

He opened the medicine.

Carefully applying it.

—

His touch—

Gentle.

Slow.

—

She froze slightly.

—

"...I can do it myself."

—

"I know."

—

But he didn't stop.

—

"...Stay still."

—

Her fingers tightened on the fabric.

—

Her cheeks warmed again.

—

"...He's doing this again..."

—

After finishing—

He stepped back.

—

"Done."

—

She nodded quietly.

"...Thank you."

—

He didn't reply.

—

Instead—

He moved to his side again.

—

And lay down.

—

Maintaining distance.

—

Keeping his promise.

—

She slowly lay down as well.

—

This time—

Her eyes closed faster.

—

Not because she was tired.

—

But because—

For the first time—

She felt—

Safe.

—

Beside her—

The Emperor watched the ceiling again.

—

But his thoughts—

Were no longer restless.

—

Because tonight—

He had done something simple.

—

But important.

—

He had protected her.

—

Even in something small.

—

And for him—

That meant everything.

The night passed gently.

For the first time in a long while—

The Empress slept peacefully.

—

When dawn arrived, soft golden light filtered through the thin curtains.

Birds chirped faintly outside.

The Duke residence slowly came back to life.

—

The Empress stirred.

Her eyes fluttered open.

—

For a brief moment—

She forgot everything.

—

Then—

She remembered.

—

Her gaze shifted instinctively to the other side of the bed.

—

Empty.

—

The blanket was neatly arranged.

Cold.

—

"...He left."

—

A faint feeling rose in her chest.

Not disappointment.

Not sadness.

—

Something... softer.

—

She sat up slowly.

Her fingers touched the pillow where he had slept.

—

"...He didn't wake me."

—

Her lips curved slightly.

—

"...He really waited."

—

She lowered her gaze, her cheeks warming faintly.

—

Just then—

A maid entered quietly.

"Your Majesty, you are awake."

—

The Empress nodded.

"...When did he leave?"

—

"Before dawn."

"He instructed us not to disturb Your Majesty."

—

Her fingers paused.

—

"...Of course he did."

—

A small smile appeared again.

—

She got up and freshened herself.

—

Soon after—

She stepped into the courtyard.

—

And immediately—

She felt something was... off.

—

Too many people.

—

Her mother, her aunt, and even the Grandmother were all there.

Waiting.

—

The moment they saw her—

They rushed forward.

—

"An'er!"

"Are you alright?"

—

The Duchess held her shoulders, checking her carefully.

—

The Aunt frowned deeply.

"Let me see your arm."

—

The Empress blinked.

"...I'm fine."

—

"No, you're not," her mother said firmly.

—

Her sleeve was gently pulled up.

—

The wound—

Still fresh.

Still healing.

—

The Aunt's expression darkened.

"...You were attacked."

—

The Grandmother sighed heavily.

"In our own city..."

—

The Empress tried to reassure them.

"It wasn't serious—"

—

"Not serious?" her mother interrupted.

"You were almost stabbed!"

—

Lian Hua rushed in dramatically.

"Yes! If brother in law wasn't there—"

—

"Lian Hua," the Empress warned softly.

—

But it was too late.

—

Now everyone looked even more worried.

—

The Aunt crossed her arms.

"That's it."

—

The Empress froze slightly.

—

"You are not going out again."

—

"...What?"

—

"Until the wedding is over."

—

The Duchess nodded.

"She's right."

—

"But—" the Empress tried.

—

"No."

—

Firm.

Final.

—

The Grandmother added calmly,

"The outside is no longer safe."

—

"Someone targeted you."

—

The Empress fell silent.

—

She knew they were right.

—

But still—

"...I can take care of myself."

—

Her mother looked at her softly.

"We know."

—

"But we still worry."

—

That sentence—

Made her quiet.

—

For a moment—

She didn't argue.

—

Because—

She could feel it.

—

Their concern.

Their fear.

Their love.

—

"...Alright," she said finally.

—

Lian Hua immediately brightened.

"Good! Then we'll stay together all day!"

—

"...That wasn't the point," Lian Rou muttered from behind.

—

The tension broke slightly.

—

The Empress sighed softly.

—

But inside—

She felt warm.

—

Because—

This time—

She wasn't alone.

—

And as she stood there—

Surrounded by her family—

Her thoughts drifted briefly—

Back to someone else.

—

"...He left early..."

"...Without disturbing me..."

—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

—

"...He really is changing..."

—

A faint smile appeared again.

—

Soft.

Unnoticed.

—

And somewhere far away—

Inside the palace—

The Emperor was already working.

—

But his thoughts—

Were still with her.