

## **Ghost 283**

### Chapter 283: Words Left Unsaid

The morning was quiet.

Unlike the lively chaos of the Duke residence, the small shrine at the edge of the estate remained peaceful.

Incense smoke curled gently into the air.

Wind chimes rang softly with the breeze.

It was a place meant for stillness.

Reflection.

Distance from everything else.

—

The Dowager Empress stepped inside.

But today—

She was not dressed as the powerful woman of the palace.

No heavy robes.

No jewels.

—

Only simple clothes.

Plain.

Unassuming.

—

A woman who could pass as anyone.

—

Her steps were slow.

Measured.

—

She had come to pray.

Or perhaps—

To think.

—

But the moment she entered—

Her gaze stopped.

—

Not on the altar.

—

But on someone else.

—

In the courtyard beyond the shrine—

The Empress.

—

Lian An.

—

She was kneeling beside a small table.

Arranging offerings.

Fixing incense.

Helping a maid carry water.

—

Her sleeves slightly rolled.

Her movements—

Natural.

Unforced.

—

No complaints.

No hesitation.

—

And—

She was smiling.

—

Talking lightly with the maid.

Even laughing softly at something small.

—

The Dowager Empress stood still.

Watching.

—

"...She looks comfortable."

—

Not like someone being punished.

Not like someone suffering.

—

Like someone—

Living.

—

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

—

"...So this is how she spends her days."

—

Not crying.

Not struggling.

—

But adapting.

—

Thriving.

—

The Dowager Empress walked closer.

Quiet.

Unnoticed.

—

She observed every detail.

—

The way Lian An moved.

The way she spoke.

The way the servants responded to her.

—

Respect.

Genuine.

Not forced.

—

"...She is not weak."

—

That much—

Was clear.

—

Then—

Her thoughts shifted.

—

To her son.

—

The Emperor.

—

His recent behavior.

His attention.

His presence.

—

"...He has changed."

—

She could see it.

Even if he did not say it.

—

His gaze.

His actions.

—

Everything pointed to one thing.

—

"...He has begun to care."

—

Her expression darkened slightly.

—

"That is dangerous."

—

Because she knew something else.

—

"...This girl..."

—

"...does not love him."

—

Not yet.

—

And perhaps—

Not at all.

—

Her eyes hardened.

—

"If one walks forward..."

"...and the other stands still..."

—

"...someone will fall."

—

She stepped forward.

—

This time—

Lian An noticed.

—

She immediately stood.

Turned.

And bowed.

—

"Greetings, Mother."

—

The courtyard fell silent.

—

The maid quickly retreated.

Leaving only the two of them.

—

The wind moved gently.

—

But the atmosphere—

Tightened.

—

The Dowager Empress looked at her.

Long.

Carefully.

—

Then—

Her voice came.

Sharp.

—

"You have no manners."

—

The words cut through the silence.

—

Lian An did not react.

—

She remained bowed.

—

"You are supposed to be under punishment."

—

"And yet..."

—

Her gaze swept across the courtyard.

—

"You laugh."

"You talk."

"You behave as if this is a vacation."

—

Lian An said nothing.

—

Her silence—

Was not fear.

—

But restraint.

—

The Dowager Empress stepped closer.

—

"You could have ended this."

—

A pause.

—

"If you had simply admitted your mistake..."

"...and apologized."

—

Her voice lowered.

—

"This punishment would have ended long ago."

—

Still—

No response.

—

Lian An remained still.

Head lowered.

—

The Dowager Empress's eyes sharpened.

—

"...But you chose not to."

—

Another step forward.

—

"You chose pride."

—

"You chose silence."

—

Her voice became colder.

—

"Then remember this."

—

"You will regret it."

—

The words hung in the air.

Heavy.

Final.

—

A warning.

Or perhaps—

A prophecy.

—

Lian An slowly straightened.

—

Her expression calm.

—

She bowed again.

—

"I understand."

—

That was all.

—

No defense.

No argument.

No apology.

—

Just acceptance.

—

The Dowager Empress watched her closely.

—

Trying to find something.

Fear.

Regret.

Resistance.

—

But there was none.

—

Only calm.

—

And that—

Made it worse.

—

"...You really are different."

—

She turned.

—

Without another word—

She walked away.

—

Her steps steady.

But her thoughts—

Unsettled.

—

Behind her—

Lian An remained where she was.

—

Watching.

—

Then slowly—

She turned back.

—

And resumed her work.

—

As if nothing had happened.

—

But inside—

Her thoughts were not quiet.

—

"...She is right."

—

"...This path..."

—

"...will not be easy."

—

Her gaze lifted slightly.

—

Toward the distant sky.

—

"...But I chose it."

—

And she would walk it.

—

No matter what came next.

—

Because some decisions—

Once made—

—

Could never be undone.

Quiet Thoughts, Noisy Hearts

The shrine courtyard slowly returned to silence after the Dowager Empress left.

The wind moved gently through the trees.

The faint scent of incense still lingered.

—

Lian An stood still for a moment.

Her hands resting lightly at her sides.

Her expression—

Calm.

—

No anger.

No hurt.

—

"...She never liked me anyway."

The thought came naturally.

Without bitterness.

Without surprise.

—

She turned and walked back toward her room.

Her steps unhurried.

Steady.

—

Inside—

The room was simple.

Clean.

Comfortable.

—

Not luxurious like the palace.

But warmer.

More human.

—

She sat down quietly near the window.

The soft light of the afternoon falling across her face.

—

Her mind replayed the earlier conversation.

—

"You will regret it."

—

She leaned back slightly.

Closing her eyes.

—

"...I don't think so."

—

Because deep inside—

She understood something clearly.

—

The Dowager Empress had never seen her as the right match.

Never believed she belonged beside the Emperor.

—

And maybe—

That wasn't entirely wrong.

—

"...We were never meant to begin like this."

—

Her fingers lightly touched the fabric of her sleeve.

—

Simple cloth.

Soft.

Comfortable.

—

Not royal.

Not heavy.

—

Just... hers.

—

Her thoughts shifted.

—

To him.

—

The Emperor.

—

The man who—

Recently—

Had changed.

—

"...Why?"

—

She remembered—

The clothes he sent.

Simple.

Practical.

Warm.

—

The small things.

—

Snacks.

Warm food.

Careful arrangements.

—

Things he didn't need to do.

—

"...He never did this before."

—

Her brows furrowed slightly.

—

"...So why now?"

—

Was it guilt?

—

Responsibility?

—

Or something else?

—

Her heart felt... unsettled.

—

"...I don't understand him."

—

And perhaps—

That was what troubled her most.

—

Because his actions—

Were beginning to matter.

—

And she didn't know what to do with that.

—

A soft sigh escaped her lips.

—

Then—

Suddenly—

—

A loud wail broke the silence.

—

"I GOT CHEATED AGAIN!!!"

—

Lian An didn't even open her eyes.

"...Of course."

—

The door didn't open.

—

But three figures appeared.

—

The ghosts.

—

Floating in dramatically.

—

Fen Yu (the female ghost) was crying loudly.

Her face scrunched.

Her voice echoing.

—

"He said he loved me!"

"He said I was the only one!"

—

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

"...You've known him for two days."

—

"That's enough!"

—

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves calmly.

"You said the same thing last week."

—

Fen Yu pointed at him.

"That was different!"

—

"How?"

—

"...He had better hair."

—

Silence.

—

Lian An slowly opened her eyes.

—

"...You fell in love because of hair?"

—

Fen Yu sniffed.

"It was very shiny."

—

Wei Rong turned away.

"I can't deal with this."

—

Li Shen nodded.

"This is a recurring pattern."

—

Fen Yu glared at both of them.

"You two don't understand love!"

—

Wei Rong replied immediately,

"No. You don't understand common sense."

—

"That's rude!"

—

"That's accurate."

—

Fen Yu burst into louder crying.

—

"I give my heart every time!"

—

Li Shen muttered,

"And lose it every time."

—

Lian An couldn't help it.

—

A small laugh escaped her.

—

Then another.

—

And soon—

She was laughing softly.

—

The tension in her chest—

Fading.

—

"...You three are impossible."

—

Fen Yu turned dramatically.

"You're laughing at my pain?!"

—

"Yes."

—

"...That's cruel."

—

Wei Rong smirked.

"She deserves it."

—

"I do not!"

—

"You fall in love every three days."

—

"That's because I'm passionate!"

—

"That's because you're foolish."

—

Li Shen added calmly,

"Emotionally unstable."

—

Fen Yu gasped.

"I hate both of you."

—

"No, you don't."

—

"...Fine, I don't."

—

Lian An shook her head, smiling.

—

"...What am I supposed to do with you three?"

—

Fen Yu floated closer.

"You can comfort me."

—

"No."

—

"...Buy me another hairpin?"

—

"Absolutely not."

—

Wei Rong chuckled.

"Good decision."

—

Li Shen nodded.

"Very wise."

—

Fen Yu pouted.

"You're all heartless."

—

Lian An leaned back slightly.

—

Watching them.

—

Listening to their endless bickering.

—

And somehow—

Her thoughts about the Dowager.

About the Emperor.

About everything—

—

Faded.

—

Replaced by something lighter.

—

Warmer.

—

"...This is enough."

—

She didn't need answers right now.

—

Didn't need to understand everything.

—

For this moment—

—

This quiet room.

These noisy ghosts.

This strange peace—

—

Was enough.

—

Fen Yu suddenly spoke again.

"I'm falling in love again tomorrow."

—

Wei Rong groaned.

"...Of course you are."

—

Li Shen sighed.

"I will prepare a report."

—

Lian An laughed again.

—

And outside—

The wind moved softly.

—

As the evening settled in—

—

And for once—

Her heart felt at ease.