

## Ghost 68

### Chapter 68: night talk

The moon hung low above the tiled roofs of the Duke's estate, its soft glow spilling over the tranquil courtyards like water over porcelain. The evening air was cool, scented faintly of osmanthus and the distant crackle of incense from the ancestral shrine.

Most of the estate was asleep; the guards at the gates yawned quietly, the servants retired to their quarters. Only one window remained lit — the chamber of the Empress.

Inside, Lian An sat by her window in silence. The lamplight trembled on her face, tracing the curve of her cheek and the faraway look in her eyes. Her robe of pale white satin pooled loosely around her, its sleeves slipping down as she rested her chin on her palm.

She looked tired, but not from sleeplessness — it was the weight of knowing peace would end soon.

Tomorrow, she would begin preparing to leave the Duke's estate and return to the palace. Back to the golden prison filled with whispering courtiers, scheming concubines, and the cold man she called husband.

Here, within her father's walls, she could breathe.

Here, she could laugh without being watched.

And here, no one called her "Your Majesty" in a tone laced with fear or contempt.

Her eyes drifted to the wooden sword resting on her low table. The faint glint of its polished surface caught the lamplight. She picked it up slowly, running her fingers along the smooth hilt — her cousin Lian Ruo's gift.

A faint smile tugged at her lips.

When he first offered to teach her, she had laughed outright. "An Empress with a sword? How absurd," she had said. But Lian Ruo's patience had chipped at her hesitation.

Now, after many mornings of practice under the bamboo grove, her hands no longer trembled. She could stand her ground, even strike with precision — enough to scare off an intruder, if not kill one.

"I'm not strong," she murmured into the quiet, "but at least I'm not helpless anymore."

Outside, the bamboo rustled gently in the night breeze, the leaves whispering secrets to the moon.

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#### An Unexpected Visit

A sudden knock startled her. "Elder Sister?" came a voice — soft and cheerful, muffled through the wooden door.

Before she could reply, the door slid open and a gust of cool air entered with two figures — Lian Hua, her younger sister, and Lian Ruo, her cousin.

Lian Hua's cheeks glowed pink from the night air, her eyes sparkling mischievously. She carried a rabbit-shaped paper lantern that bobbed as she walked.

"Still awake?" she teased, stepping into the room. "I thought you'd be dreaming by now."

Lian An smiled faintly, setting her sword aside. "I couldn't sleep. The night feels... too quiet."

"That's because you scared all the servants into silence!" Lian Hua laughed, plopping herself next to her sister. "If you smiled more, maybe they'd talk instead of bowing like frightened chickens!"

Lian Ruo followed at a slower pace, his tall frame leaning casually against the doorframe. His expression carried that familiar blend of discipline and gentle humor. "You should rest, Cousin. The palace won't let you sleep this peacefully once you return."

Lian An sighed softly. "I know." She glanced toward the moon outside. "It's strange, isn't it? I've lived half my life in that palace, yet here — just a few days — it feels more like home."

Lian Hua nestled closer, resting her head on her sister's shoulder. "That's because it is home."

Lian An chuckled lightly, brushing a strand of her sister's hair away from her face. "You're growing up fast, Hua'er. Even your mischief is starting to look graceful."

Lian Hua wrinkled her nose. "That's not a compliment, is it?"

"It is," her cousin said dryly from across the room. "Mostly."

Lian Hua turned to glare at him. "You have no right to talk, Brother Ruo! You're the one who told Father we broke his vase!"

"I told him because you tried to blame it on the cat," he replied smoothly.

"It was the cat!"

Lian An laughed softly, the sound like a small wind chime. "Both of you are hopeless."

The room filled with easy warmth — laughter and teasing that needed no guard's approval, no court etiquette to cage it. For a few minutes, she wasn't an Empress. She was simply An'er — daughter, sister, cousin.

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## News Beneath the Moon

Then, as the laughter faded, Lian Hua suddenly straightened, her eyes shining. "Oh! Sister, guess what? There's going to be a huge festival tomorrow! A celebration hosted by the neighboring kingdoms!"

Lian An blinked, startled. "A festival?"

"Yes!" Lian Hua said excitedly, waving her hands. "There'll be dancers, jugglers, fortune tellers, even a parade of foreign animals! They say it's to celebrate the new trade alliance."

Lian Ruo smiled faintly. "They're calling it the Lantern Festival of Peace. I was planning to take Hua'er."

Lian Hua clapped her hands together. "But you must come too! Please, Sister!"

Lian An hesitated. "You know that's impossible. The Empress wandering the streets like a commoner? It would cause a scandal."

"We'll disguise you!" Lian Hua said instantly, already scheming. "No one will recognize you if you wear plain robes and a veil."

Her cousin nodded. "It's safe. I'll handle the arrangements."

Lian Hua tugged at her sister's sleeve. "You always say no. Just this once, come with us! No palace, no rules — only laughter and food and light!"

Lian An looked at their expectant faces, and her resolve slowly melted. It had been so long since she had walked among ordinary people — no gold crown pressing her temples, no calculating eyes watching her every step.

Finally, she smiled, a small, rare smile that reached her eyes. "All right. Just this once."

Lian Hua squealed in delight, hugging her arm. "Yes! I'll pick your outfit myself!"

Lian Ruo sighed dramatically. "Then Heaven help us all."

Lian Hua shot him a glare. "You'll see, she'll look perfect!"

"She always does," he said simply, and for a moment, his gaze softened — protective, proud.

Lian An pretended not to notice, though warmth flickered faintly in her chest.

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#### After They Left

Later, when the laughter faded and her family retired to rest, Lian An remained by the window. The night stretched quiet and endless before her.

She reached for the wooden sword once more, testing its weight in her hand. The moonlight caught the faint calluses now forming on her palms. She smiled ruefully — delicate hands learning to grip steel.

Her father had frowned when he first saw her training, but her cousin had insisted. "An Empress should know the strength she commands," he'd said.

She hadn't understood it then. But now, she did.

Strength wasn't only in armies or crowns — it was in control. The quiet, steady power to stand unbroken when the world tried to bend her.

Setting the sword down, she looked toward the garden where shadows of bamboo swayed like ghosts. Somewhere beyond, she imagined her palace life waiting — gilded and suffocating.

"How short peace is," she whispered, her breath fogging the glass. "But I'll cherish it while it lasts."

Her eyes softened as she remembered Lian Hua's excitement, the warmth in her cousin's eyes, her mother's gentle scolding at dinner.

Tomorrow, she would walk the streets again, laugh under paper lanterns, taste sugar pastries, and pretend — just for a day — that she wasn't surrounded by wolves in silk.

For one fleeting night, she would be herself.

She blew out the candle, leaving only the moonlight to keep her company. The night breeze brushed her hair, carrying the faint sound of laughter from another part of the estate — her family, safe and happy.

And for the first time in weeks, Lian An smiled without restraint.