

Ghost 153

Chapter 153: back

The secret passage opened quietly behind them, the heavy stone sliding back into place without a sound. Torchlight flickered along the narrow corridor, casting long shadows that stretched and twisted across the walls.

The Emperor stopped just before the final turn.

"Cover your head," he said in a low voice.

Lian An paused, then pulled the hood of her cloak forward, shadowing her face completely. Only her pale chin was faintly visible beneath the fabric.

Fen Yu leaned closer, whispering with mischief,

"Wow. Sneaking your own wife into the palace like a forbidden lover."

Wei Rong snorted.

"History books will never record this."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves thoughtfully.

"This secrecy is politically sound. Emotionally questionable."

The Emperor ignored them all.

He lifted his hand, and a soft bell rang once.

Almost immediately, footsteps approached—measured, disciplined.

A middle-aged eunuch appeared, head lowered respectfully. His expression did not change, not even when he sensed another presence beside the Emperor.

"Your Majesty."

The Emperor did not look at him.

"Escort her to the Empress's chamber. Quietly."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The eunuch glanced only once—just enough to register a cloaked figure beside the Emperor—then lowered his gaze further, as if he had seen nothing at all.

"Please follow me," he said gently.

Lian An inclined her head and stepped forward.

As she passed the Emperor, he spoke again, his voice so low that only she could hear.

"Take the side corridors. Avoid the lantern halls."

She nodded slightly.

The eunuch led her through winding palace paths rarely used at night. Curtains were drawn aside silently. Servants stepped back without questions. Every movement was practiced—proof that this route had been used many times before, just never for this reason.

The Empress's courtyard soon appeared.

It was dim, peaceful, untouched.

Lanterns glowed softly beneath the eaves, their light warm and steady. The familiar scent of herbs and incense lingered in the air.

Lian An slowed unconsciously.

Fen Yu drifted ahead, peeking inside.

"Everything looks normal. No traps. No spies."

Wei Rong nodded.

"Secure."

Li Shen smiled faintly.

"Your territory."

The eunuch stopped at the chamber doors and bowed deeply.

"Her Majesty's quarters. I will take my leave."

Without waiting for acknowledgment, he retreated, footsteps disappearing into the night.

Lian An stood alone before her chamber.

For a moment, she didn't move.

Fourteen days ago, she had fled this place under the excuse of illness.

Now she was back—smuggled in like a secret.

She pushed the door open.

The room was exactly as she remembered.

The bed was neatly made, curtains tied back. The untouched medicine bowls still sat on the table, preserved exactly as she had left them—evidence of a lie carefully maintained.

Two cats stirred from their cushions.

The moment they saw her, they bolted toward her, meowing loudly, circling her legs in delight.

"There, there," she whispered, kneeling to stroke them. "I'm back."

Fen Yu sighed dramatically.

"They missed you more than your husband did."

Wei Rong smirked.

"Debatable."

Lian An stood, removed her cloak, and placed it aside.

The chamber felt... strange.

Safe.

Familiar.

Yet no longer entirely hers.

Outside, somewhere beyond these walls, the Emperor was returning to his duties—his mask firmly back in place.

Inside, the Empress sat on the edge of her bed, aware that tomorrow the palace physician would arrive, the lie would end, and her quiet rebellion would officially conclude.

She exhaled slowly.

"Rest," Li Shen said gently. "Tomorrow will not be simple."

She lay back, staring at the canopy above.

"No," she murmured. "It won't."

But for the first time since leaving the palace, she closed her eyes without fear.

She was back.

And this time, nothing would be the same.

The soft creak of the door was barely audible, but the Empress's maid still heard it.

She had been half-asleep near the outer room, worry etched into every line of her face even in rest. The moment she sensed movement that did not belong to the night wind, she jolted upright.

"Who—?"

Then she saw her.

Her mistress stood there, unharmed, unmasked, very much alive.

For a heartbeat, the maid simply stared.

Then her eyes filled instantly with tears.

"Your Majesty...!" she rushed forward, lowering her voice at the last moment, as if afraid the walls themselves might overhear. "You're back— you're really back!"

Lian An caught her before she could kneel.

"Quiet," she said softly. "I'm fine."

The maid clutched her sleeves anyway, hands trembling.

"I was so scared. Every day I thought—what if something truly happened? What if the medicine wasn't enough?"

She quickly wiped her eyes, then leaned closer, whispering urgently.

"Everything here is safe. No one suspects anything. No ministers, no concubines, no court ladies. No one visited at all."

Lian An relaxed slightly.

"No one?"

The maid nodded firmly.

"Not once. The court believes Your Majesty is gravely ill. They were all afraid of the plague."

She hesitated, then added carefully,

"His Majesty... he came."

Lian An's fingers paused mid-motion.

"How often?" she asked, keeping her voice steady.

"At first... every day," the maid admitted. "Sometimes twice. He would stand outside, ask about your pulse, your appetite. He sent rare herbs, nourishing tonics, even medicines from the imperial treasury."

She gestured toward the untouched bowls on the table.

"I kept them exactly as he ordered."

Lian An's chest tightened.

"And then?" she asked.

The maid lowered her gaze.

"Then... he stopped coming."

A brief silence followed.

"But—" the maid quickly continued, eyes brightening, "Princess Zhi never stopped."

Lian An looked up sharply.

"Princess Zhi?"

"Yes!" the maid nodded eagerly. "Every two days, without fail. She sends food—light dishes, soups she says are easy on the body. Sometimes she sends letters too."

She pulled a small stack from a hidden drawer and offered them with both hands.

"She always writes, 'Tell Sister-in-law to recover well. I'm waiting to eat together again.'"

Lian An stared at the familiar handwriting.

For a moment, she couldn't speak.

Her throat tightened unexpectedly.

She had assumed... she had assumed no one truly cared. That once she disappeared behind illness and silence, she would be forgotten.

Her heart gave a sudden, painful thump—

Then warmth flooded her chest.

"She still remembers me," Lian An murmured.

The maid smiled softly.

"She worries about you deeply, Your Majesty. Every time she sends food, she asks if you smiled that day."

Lian An let out a quiet breath, one she hadn't realized she was holding.

For the first time that night, genuine happiness surfaced in her eyes.

So he may have guessed.

He may have known.

He may even have been angry.

But Princess Zhi...

Princess Zhi cared.

That alone was enough to make the risk worthwhile.

She carefully placed the letters back in the drawer, her lips curving into a small, sincere smile.

"Good," she said softly. "Very good."

Outside, the palace remained silent and watchful.

Inside the Empress's chamber, something fragile but real quietly took root—

not fear,

not resentment,

but gratitude.

The Emperor sat alone in his chamber, one elbow resting on the arm of the chair, his chin supported by his hand.

A rare smile lingered on his lips.

The room was quiet—too quiet for a man who ruled an empire—but his mind was anything but still. Scenes replayed themselves without his permission: the way she had looked at him earlier, the way she spoke back without fear, the way her eyes no longer held the dull resignation he remembered from before.

She had changed.

No—

he corrected himself slowly.

She had returned to herself.

And somehow, that change pulled at him far more strongly than he expected.

He exhaled softly, fingers tapping once against his cheek.

"When did it start...?" he murmured to no one.

He remembered the Empress from the early days—composed, obedient, distant. A woman who fulfilled her role perfectly yet never reached for his hand. Back then, he thought that was simply how things were meant to be. A political marriage. A crown shared, not a heart.

But the woman he met now—

sharp-tongued, fearless, clever, stubborn, alive—

She occupied his thoughts without asking permission.

For the first time, the idea of a palace without her felt unbearably hollow.

He imagined returning to his chamber after long councils, turning to speak—only to realize she was not there. The thought tightened his chest in a way battlefields never had.

"I can't imagine it," he admitted quietly.

Lady Chen's face surfaced briefly in his mind—gentle, familiar, safe. Years of companionship, shared childhood memories, duty-bound affection. He respected her. Trusted her. Cared for her well-being.

But it was calm.

Predictable.

What he felt for the Empress was not calm at all.

It unsettled him. Challenged him. Drew him forward whether he wished it or not.

With Lady Chen, it was habit... perhaps even obligation.

With the Empress—

It was instinct.

A pull he no longer wished to resist.

His smile faded into something deeper, more resolute.

"She is my priority," he said firmly, as if declaring it to the empty room made it real. "Not the crown. Not appearances. Her."

He straightened, the weight of that realization settling into his bones.

For the first time, he was certain.

Whatever storms awaited them—court intrigue, hidden enemies, secrets still unspoken—

He would not allow a future where she was absent.

And that certainty, more than any decree he had ever signed, felt irreversible.