

Ghost 160

Chapter 160: the man left behind

Prince Liang sat alone at the bedside, the room wrapped in the heavy stillness that follows loss.

Princess Zhi lay sleeping, her breathing shallow but steady, her face pale against the silk pillows. The curtain swayed faintly with the night breeze, brushing against the floor like a whisper that refused to speak aloud.

He stared at her for a long time.

His heart was a mess—tangled memories, regret, anger, fear—knotted so tightly that he didn't know where one feeling ended and another began.

He remembered the first time he had seen her.

It was in the imperial garden, years ago, when the peach blossoms were falling like snow. She had been standing near the koi pond, sleeves rolled up slightly as she fed the fish, her laughter soft and unguarded. Sunlight had filtered through the branches and settled on her hair.

In that moment, something in him had shifted.

He had fallen in love quietly, deeply, without realizing how fast it happened.

Later, he learned the truth about her life.

Her mother had died when she was still young. The palace that should have protected her had instead sharpened its claws. Her stepmother treated her with cold politeness at best, cruelty at worst. She had grown up learning how to shrink herself, how to smile carefully, how to survive without being seen.

That knowledge had stirred something protective in him.

I will take care of her, he had sworn back then. I won't let her be alone anymore.

Their marriage, at first, had been good.

No—more than good.

They shared laughter in private courtyards, whispered secrets late at night, and found comfort in simple routines. She liked to walk in the mornings; he liked to listen to her talk about small things. There were days when he truly believed he could give her a peaceful life.

They made memories that belonged only to them.

But slowly... things changed.

He didn't notice when it started—only that one day, the unease was already there.

He began to dislike the way she talked to others, even casually. The sound of her laughter directed anywhere but at him made something dark twist in his chest. He told himself it was worry. He told himself it was love.

But love, unchecked, can rot into control.

Then his mother—the Dowager—brought a concubine from a neighboring country into his household.

At first, he resisted. He truly did.

But the concubine was clever, vibrant, endlessly attentive. She praised him, admired him, mirrored his moods, made him feel important in a way that required no effort.

And slowly, without meaning to, he changed.

Princess Zhi changed too.

She became quieter. More withdrawn. Yet somehow... also more energetic in moments that had nothing to do with him. There was a spark in her eyes he hadn't seen before—not when she looked at him, but when she was with others.

It unsettled him.

Now, sitting beside her bed, the reality of it all crashed down on him.

Their child was gone.

The boy he had imagined holding, teaching, protecting—gone before he ever took a breath.

Prince Liang lowered his head, gripping the edge of the bed so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Was this my fault?

He didn't know the answer. That terrified him more than any accusation.

Princess Zhi stirred slightly in her sleep, her brow creasing as if trapped in a dream she couldn't escape.

Instinctively, he reached out and adjusted the blanket around her shoulders.

"I wanted to protect you," he murmured, his voice barely audible. "Somewhere along the way... I forgot how."

The room gave no answer.

Only the steady rhythm of her breathing remained—proof that she was still here, even if everything else had been lost.

And for the first time since the tragedy, Prince Liang realized something with painful clarity:

Loving someone was not enough.

If he didn't change,

he would lose her too.

Outside the chamber, the air felt heavy, as if even the palace walls were holding their breath.

The Emperor placed a steady hand on the Empress's arm, his voice low and firm.

"Calm down," he said gently. "You've done all you can for now."

But Lian An couldn't calm down.

Her chest felt tight, her thoughts tangled in guilt and helplessness. Princess Zhi—one of the few women in the palace who had treated her with genuine warmth, who had written letters, sent food, worried for her in quarantine—had lost her child. And the Empress had been unable to protect that innocent life.

It hurt more than she expected.

"I failed her," the Empress said quietly, her voice trembling despite her effort to stay composed. "I couldn't protect the baby of the woman who stood by me when no one else did."

The Emperor turned to face her fully. He had rarely seen her like this—so openly shaken, her usual sharpness dulled by grief.

Lian An lifted her gaze, eyes burning with resolve.

"I will give justice to that child," she said. "I will find out who did this. I won't let it be brushed aside as an accident."

The Emperor studied her for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

"You're not wrong," he said. His voice softened, but beneath it was steel. "If someone dares to harm a royal child today, they will dare to harm others tomorrow. They will dare to harm our children."

That word—our—hung between them.

"I won't allow that," he continued. "I'll investigate this personally. Whoever caused this miscarriage won't escape. I don't want to see another woman bleeding on palace floors, another life lost in silence."

Lian An exhaled shakily. The weight in her chest didn't disappear, but it eased—just a little.

She nodded.

"Then we'll find the truth," she said. "For Princess Zhi... and for the child who never got a chance."

Side by side, they stood in the quiet corridor, bound not by politics or duty in that moment, but by a shared determination—

that this loss would not be meaningless.

The Order Given to the Dead

The Emperor left the palace without looking back.

His robe vanished beyond the corridor, his footsteps sharp, controlled—already hunting answers among the living.

The Empress stood still for a moment longer, then turned and walked back to her own chamber.

The moment the door shut, the calm shattered.

On the couch near the window, three familiar figures were sprawled in the most undignified way possible.

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, was half-lying with an open book resting on his chest, one leg hanging off the side.

Wei Rong, the general, sat against the wall, arms crossed, pretending to meditate but clearly asleep.

Fen Yu was curled up on a cushion, hugging a pillow, snoring softly.

Lian An's eyes narrowed.

Without hesitation, she lifted her foot and kicked Wei Rong's shin.

"GET UP."

The general ghost yelped, springing upright. "Enemy attack?!"

Before Li Shen could even open his eyes, she kicked the couch.

The book flew, hitting his face.

"Ow—Your Majesty?!" he shouted, scrambling to sit.

Fen Yu was next.

The Empress grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard.

"WAKE UP."

Fen Yu screamed. "I DIDN'T STEAL ANYTHING—!"

All three ghosts stared at her, stunned, half-awake, half-panicked.

"What happened?" Wei Rong demanded.

"Why are you murderous?" Li Shen asked, rubbing his nose.

Fen Yu clutched her pillow defensively. "If this is about the ring again—"

Lian An's voice cut through them, sharp and cold.

"Princess Zhi lost her baby."

Silence fell instantly.

The playful air vanished.

Fen Yu's mouth fell open. "What...?"

"She slipped," the Empress said, her hands clenched. "Oil on the floor. Eighth month. The child didn't survive."

The three ghosts exchanged looks.

Wei Rong's expression darkened. "That's no accident."

Li Shen frowned deeply. "Too precise."

Fen Yu swallowed, her usual mischief gone. "She was kind... she always sent you food."

The Empress's jaw tightened.

"She treated me better than most living people in that palace," she said quietly. "And now her child is gone."

Fen Yu's eyes glistened. "That's cruel."

Wei Rong slammed his fist into his palm. "Tell us what to do."

Lian An stepped closer, her gaze burning.

"I want answers," she said. "I don't care if they come from whispers, shadows, or graves."

She looked at each of them in turn.

"Go out. Investigate. Search. Ask every ghost lurking in the palace, in the corridors, in the wells, in the corners no one looks at."

Li Shen nodded immediately. "If oil was placed deliberately, some spirit saw it."

Wei Rong cracked his neck. "Anyone who did this won't hide from the dead."

Fen Yu wiped her eyes, anger replacing sadness. "I'll make them talk. Every single one."

The Empress straightened, authority radiating from her.

"I want the truth," she said. "Who did it. Why. And for whom."

The ghosts bowed instinctively.

"As you command," Li Shen said.

Wei Rong vanished into mist.

Fen Yu lingered for half a second, then looked back. "That baby... won't be forgotten."

Then she disappeared too.

The chamber fell silent again.

The Empress sat down slowly, her hands trembling just slightly.

This time, she wouldn't let the truth be buried.

Not in this palace.

Not in this lifetime.