

Ghost 64

Chapter 64: the weight of old blood

The market was alive with laughter and song.

Vendors shouted their wares from every corner — roasted chestnuts, silk ribbons, carved combs, jade bangles that caught the light like frozen fire. The air smelled of sugar and sandalwood, of burning oil lamps and steamed buns.

It was a bright, bustling day — but Lian Ruo's mind was nowhere near it.

He walked beside his cousins, arms full of parcels, face lost somewhere between a smile and silence.

Lian Hua darted ahead, dragging her sister, the Empress Lian An, toward a jewelry stall where strings of pearls swayed in the sun like droplets of rain. They were laughing, bargaining with the merchant over a set of hairpins.

And yet Lian Ruo heard none of it.

The sound of the market blurred into a distant hum — his thoughts were far away, replaying the moment in the narrow alley from the night before.

The moment she had appeared.

The moment she had run into his arms, her voice breaking with longing.

The moment he realized the cruel twist of fate:

She — the girl he loved — was Lady Chen's younger sister.

The daughter of a family that had been his own family's enemy for generations.

The Market's Noise, the Mind's Silence

A child's laughter cut through the noise, a hawker shouted about candied hawthorn, a musician plucked his lute — but Lian Ruo walked through it all as though moving inside a dream.

His cousins were glowing with joy; he was drowning in memory.

He saw her face again — the delicate tilt of her eyes, the soft quiver of her lips when she said "They'll send me to the palace."

It was like hearing a death sentence spoken in honey.

He had never believed in destiny until then. Now he felt it clutching his throat.

He barely noticed when Lian Hua pushed a sweet bun into his hand.

"You're too serious today," she teased. "Eat something before you turn into a statue."

He blinked, smiled faintly, took a bite — but his eyes were unfocused, staring at the crowd without seeing.

Lian An's quiet voice reached him, amused. "I think he's in love."

Lian Hua gasped dramatically. "He is! Look at his face! All dreamy and tragic!"

He coughed. "I'm not—!"

They laughed harder, teasing him mercilessly until he gave up and laughed too, shaking his head. But when their laughter faded into the hum of the crowd again, his heart sank back into its weight.

If only they knew who she was...

The Ghost of a Past Love

He looked at the lanterns above him — red silk swaying in the wind — and his mind drifted backward, into a story his mother once told him by the southern sea.

A story that was his own inheritance.

His father, Lian Han, was once the Duke's youngest brother — clever, restless, and reckless with his heart.

His mother, Chen Yuyan, was from the great Chen family — distant cousin to Lady Chen's line — sent to the capital to secure the family's bond with the royal court. She had been betrothed to one of the Emperor's uncles — a political marriage meant to strengthen both houses.

But fate, and love, had other plans.

Lian Han had met her during one of the summer banquets — she was graceful, poised, the kind of woman every noble admired from afar. He was bold enough to step closer.

He pursued her with shameless persistence, offering flowers, poetry, and stolen moments in the imperial gardens.

Everyone said it was impossible.

Everyone said it was madness.

And yet, she fell in love with him.

When she realized she couldn't go through with the marriage to the royal uncle, they did the unthinkable — they eloped.

The capital shook with the scandal.

The royal uncle was humiliated. The Chen elders were furious. The Duke's family was accused of treachery.

Punishment was demanded. Blood for blood.

But love has its defenders.

The Duke — Lian Han's elder brother — refused to allow an execution. Their grandparents, still living in semi-retirement, sided with love instead of politics.

They offered exile — not disgrace.

And so, one quiet dawn, his parents were sent south.

They were given the Duke's southern estate, an abandoned manor surrounded by rivers and orange groves, and enough gold to live comfortably.

They rebuilt it.

They revived its trade.

They opened businesses and earned respect in the southern provinces.

And they raised their only son — Lian Ruo — in peace.

It was a happy life.

Until now.

History Repeating

The smell of steamed buns snapped him back to the present.

Lian Hua and Lian An were laughing again, trying on small trinkets from a jewelry stall. Lian Ruo smiled at their joy, but the ache in his chest deepened.

He realized something with a cold certainty:

He was now living his father's story all over again.

Another forbidden love.

Another Chen daughter.

Another impossible choice between family and heart.

He rubbed his thumb against the handle of his sword absently, as if to ground himself.

The Chen family name was poison in the Duke's estate now.

The Emperor had just ordered the beheading of Lady Chen's uncle for treason.

The city whispered about it still.

And yet, he — the Duke's nephew — was in love with her sister.

It felt like fate was mocking him.

The Burden of Love

As they walked down the narrow lane, Lian Hua pointed excitedly at a stall selling ribbons. "Brother Ruo, this color would suit you!"

He smiled weakly. "I'll take your word for it."

"See? He's not even paying attention," Lian Hua whispered to her sister. "He's thinking about her again."

Lian An only smiled faintly, though her eyes flickered with quiet concern. "Let him be. Some thoughts are meant to hurt before they heal."

He caught her words, and they struck deep.

He wished healing were possible — but he knew love, like war, often left only ruins.

His gaze drifted toward the distant palace roofs that gleamed against the sky. If she enters there...

If she truly replaced Lady Chen...

Then she would belong to the same world of deceit and danger he despised.

He clenched his jaw. I can't let that happen.

He didn't know how yet, but he would find a way.

The Echo of His Parents' Courage

He remembered the stories of his parents' escape — how his father carried his mother across rivers in the night, how they built a new life from dust.

He had always admired their courage.

And now, standing in the same position his father once had, he understood what that courage truly cost.

He could still hear his mother's voice from years ago:

> "Love is easy, my son. The world makes it hard."

How right she had been.

He wanted to do what his father had done — to turn his back on the court, on rank, on everything — and run away with her.

But the world was not as forgiving now.

The Duke's family was no longer untouchable.

And the Emperor's court was thick with spies and traitors.

If he acted rashly, not only he — but his entire family — could fall.

The Plan That Wasn't a Plan

They reached the end of the market street. His cousins had their arms full of silks and sweets, chattering like children. Lian Hua handed him a paper bag full of candied fruits. "For you," she said. "You look like you need something sweet to fix your bad mood."

He smiled faintly. "Thank you."

But inside, his mind was racing.

He needed a plan.

He needed to protect his heart without destroying his family's honor.

He needed to protect her without condemning her to the same fate his mother once escaped.

Maybe he could appeal to the Duke quietly.

Maybe he could send her away — to the south, to his parents' old estate.

Maybe, somehow, he could hide her from the storm about to come.

He looked up at the sky.

The sunlight glimmered through a hundred fluttering banners.

The noise of the market swelled again around him.

And yet he stood still, feeling the weight of the past pressing down like a shadow.

"Brother?" Lian Hua's voice broke his reverie. "Are you all right?"

He blinked, forcing a smile. "Yes. Just... thinking."

"About her?" she teased.

He didn't deny it this time.

"Yes," he said quietly. "About her... and about what history will make of us."

A Silent Prayer

That night, when the household returned to the estate, he stood by the balcony alone.

The wind carried the faint scent of lantern smoke and the echo of festival laughter fading into distance.

He thought of his parents — their courage, their exile, their love that defied the empire.

He thought of her — the girl in the alley, trembling but brave.

And he thought of himself — trapped between two legacies, two worlds.

He looked up at the stars and whispered to the darkness,

> "Father... tell me what you would have done."

The night didn't answer.

Only the faint rustle of the trees below, and somewhere, far away, the soft toll of a temple bell.

He closed his eyes, and a single thought burned clear in his mind:

If love must repeat itself — let me be brave enough to change its ending.