

Ghost 161

Chapter 161: she woke up emptiness

Princess Zhi woke slowly, as if dragged back from deep water.

For a moment, she did not know where she was. The curtains above her bed were unfamiliar, pale blue instead of the warm colors she liked. The air smelled of bitter medicine and blood, sharp enough to sting her nose.

Her throat felt dry.

She shifted slightly—

and pain exploded through her lower body.

A broken gasp escaped her lips.

"Ah...!"

Her hand flew instinctively to her stomach.

Flat.

Too flat.

Her heart skipped violently.

"No..." she whispered.

The door creaked open at the sound of movement. Her personal maid rushed in, eyes swollen and red, clearly having cried for a long time.

"Your Highness!" the maid exclaimed, hurrying to her bedside. "Please don't move, please—"

Princess Zhi grabbed her wrist weakly. "What... happened?" Her voice trembled. "I was walking... and then..."

Her fingers pressed harder against her abdomen, panic rising like a tide. "The baby—why can't I feel him?"

The maid's lips quivered.

She picked up a cup of warm water with shaking hands and gently supported Princess Zhi's head. "Drink first, Your Highness. Slowly."

Princess Zhi swallowed a few mouthfuls, but the water tasted like ash.

Her eyes never left the maid's face.

"Tell me," she said hoarsely. "What happened to my child?"

The maid's composure shattered.

Tears streamed down her face as she dropped to her knees beside the bed.

"Your Highness..." she sobbed. "You slipped. There was oil on the floor. We didn't see it in time. By the time the healer arrived... the baby..."

Her words dissolved into crying.

Princess Zhi stared at the ceiling.

The world went silent.

Her ears rang as if something inside her had burst.

"The baby... died?" she asked softly.

The maid covered her mouth, nodding again and again. "I'm so sorry, Your Highness... I'm so sorry..."

A sharp, suffocating pain crushed Princess Zhi's chest.

It felt as if someone had driven a knife straight through her heart and twisted it.

Her baby.

The one thing she had held onto in this palace.

The one bright hope that made the long, lonely nights bearable.

She had spoken to him every night, told him stories, promised him she would protect him better than anyone had protected her.

Gone.

A thin, broken sound escaped her throat—half sob, half scream—but no tears came. Her body shook violently, breath coming in short, painful gasps.

"It hurts..." she whispered. "It hurts so much..."

The maid crawled closer, clutching her sleeve. "Please, Your Highness, don't cry like this. You can conceive again. Next time we'll be more careful. Everyone will protect you better—"

Princess Zhi laughed weakly.

A hollow, cracked sound.

"Next time?" she murmured. "Do you know how long I waited for this one?"

Her hand trembled as she pressed it against her chest. "He was alive inside me. He kicked when I talked to him. He listened..."

Her voice broke completely.

The maid could only bow her head, crying silently.

After a long while, Princess Zhi whispered, almost as an afterthought, "Who came... after I fell?"

The maid wiped her tears hurriedly. "The Empress and His Majesty rushed here immediately when they heard. The Empress stayed by your side. She held your hand, spoke to you, even when you were unconscious."

Princess Zhi's lashes trembled.

"The Empress..." she murmured.

"Yes," the maid continued softly. "She didn't leave. She was there when the healer spoke. She was furious... and heartbroken."

A pause.

"But when Prince Liang arrived..." the maid hesitated.

Princess Zhi's fingers curled slightly. "Go on."

"He stopped the Empress at the door," the maid said, voice shaking. "He wouldn't allow her to enter again. He said... cruel things."

Princess Zhi closed her eyes.

A single tear finally slipped out, sliding down her temple into her hair.

So even in her pain...

even when her child was dying...

The one person who truly cared had been pushed away.

Her chest felt unbearably heavy.

"Leave me alone for a while," Princess Zhi said quietly.

The maid wanted to protest but stopped when she saw her mistress's expression—empty, exhausted, utterly broken.

"Yes, Your Highness," she whispered, bowing deeply.

When the door closed, silence wrapped around the room.

Princess Zhi stared at nothing, one hand resting on the place where life had once grown.

Her baby was gone.

And with him, something inside her had died too.

The kitchen fire burned low and steady, just as the Empress liked it.

Lian An stood before the stove with her sleeves tied back, movements calm and practiced. The palace kitchens were large and grand, but today she had chosen a small, quiet corner—one that felt closer to home.

She was cooking for Princess Zhi.

Into the pot went carefully washed herbs meant to nourish blood and restore strength. She added soft rice grains, simmered until they almost melted, then a light broth—clear, gentle, and warm to the stomach. No heavy spices, no strong oils. Everything was chosen with care: food that would not burden a wounded body, food that would heal.

"This will help with the blood loss," she murmured softly, stirring slowly. "And it won't hurt her stomach."

The maid standing beside her nodded quickly, eyes red from crying since morning. "Thank you, Your Majesty. Princess Zhi hasn't eaten anything."

Lian An didn't answer. Her jaw was set, eyes steady but cold.

When the food was ready, she arranged it neatly on a tray—porridge, a small bowl of steamed egg custard, and a cup of warm herbal tea. She handed the tray to the maid.

"Hold this," she said. "And follow me."

They walked quietly to Princess Zhi's courtyard.

The atmosphere there was heavy, as if grief itself hung in the air. A maid stood outside the chamber door, head lowered. The door was shut tight.

Lian An paused for a moment, then knocked gently.

No answer.

She pushed the door open herself.

Inside, Princess Zhi sat on the bed, knees drawn close, staring blankly at the wall. Her face was pale, lips colorless, eyes empty—like someone who had lost the will to cry.

"Leave us," Lian An said softly.

The maid hesitated, then bowed and stepped outside, closing the door behind her.

The Empress took the tray, placed it on the table, and walked straight to the bed.

She sat down beside Princess Zhi and gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

Princess Zhi flinched at first—then slowly turned her head.

The moment she saw Lian An, her restraint shattered.

Tears burst from her eyes, and she broke down completely, sobbing like a child who had lost everything.

"Why..." Princess Zhi cried, clutching the Empress's sleeve. "Why did this happen to me...?"

Lian An pulled her into an embrace without hesitation, one arm firm and protective around her back.

"Shh," she whispered, stroking Princess Zhi's hair gently. "Cry if you need to. I'm here."

Princess Zhi's sobs grew louder, her body shaking violently. All the pain she had been holding back poured out at once—grief, fear, helplessness.

Lian An let her cry.

When the sobs finally slowed, she spoke again, her voice low and steady, carrying quiet strength.

"Listen to me," she said, lifting Princess Zhi's chin so she had to meet her eyes. "What happened to you was not an accident."

Princess Zhi's breathing hitched.

"I will find out who did this," the Empress continued, her gaze sharp and unwavering. "I promise you. Whoever dared to harm you and your child will pay. I will give you justice."

Princess Zhi trembled. "You... you really will?"

"I swear it," Lian An said firmly. "But for now, you must live. You must heal. Only then can you see justice with your own eyes."

She reached for the tray and picked up the bowl of porridge, holding it carefully.

"Eat," she said gently. "This will help your body recover. You need strength."

Princess Zhi hesitated, tears still clinging to her lashes. Then, slowly, she nodded.

She took the bowl with trembling hands.

The first spoonful was difficult, but the warmth spread through her chest, easing the tight knot just a little.

Lian An stayed beside her, watching silently, her expression calm—but inside, her resolve hardened like steel.

No matter who was behind this.

No matter how deep the rot went.

She would not let this end quietly.

On the other side of the palace, far from the quiet sorrow of Princess Zhi's chamber, rage exploded like a storm.

Prince Liang stood in the punishment courtyard, his robes dark against the torchlight. Before him, several secret guards were bound to wooden posts. Their upper garments had been stripped away, backs exposed, skin already torn and bleeding from the lashes they had received.

The crack of the whip echoed again.

A guard cried out, knees buckling.

Prince Liang did not look away.

"I told you," he said coldly, his voice sharp as steel, "to guard Princess Zhi with your lives."

Another lash fell.

"I told you to protect her," he continued, stepping closer, eyes blazing. "I told you to protect the child."

The guards trembled, blood running down their backs.

"How," Prince Liang demanded, "did oil appear on the path she walks every single day?"

Silence.

His hand clenched into a fist.

"How?" he repeated, louder.

One guard, barely standing, forced himself to speak through gritted teeth. "Y-Your Highness... we checked the path before Her Highness went for her walk. There was no oil. We swear it."

Prince Liang froze.

"No oil?" he echoed.

The guard nodded desperately. "It... it happened in moments. We were watching the path. It was clean. Then she slipped—"

Prince Liang burst out laughing.

The sound was harsh, broken, and unhinged. It echoed across the courtyard, making even the executioner pause mid-swing.

"Hah... hahahaha..."

He pressed a hand to his face, shoulders shaking.

"I am a fool," he said hoarsely, laughter twisting into something dangerous. "A complete fool."

The guards stared at him in terror.

"To think this was an accident," Prince Liang muttered. "To think it was carelessness."

His laughter stopped abruptly.

His eyes were cold now. Clear.

"This was done in seconds," he said slowly. "Right under your watch."

He turned away, his cloak snapping behind him.

"Double the guard around Princess Zhi," he ordered. "No one enters her courtyard without my approval. Not a single soul."

He paused, then added quietly, deadly calm replacing rage.

"And if I find out who poured that oil..."

The sentence remained unfinished.

But everyone there understood what it meant.

The lashes resumed behind him.

Prince Liang walked away into the shadows, laughter gone, grief and fury burning together in his chest.