

Ghost 165

Chapter 165: bitter strength quite strength

The morning sun had barely warmed the stones of Princess Zhi's courtyard when the Dowager Empress arrived.

Her footsteps were measured, deliberate, the sound of authority itself. Two maids followed behind her, each carrying lacquered boxes filled with medicinal supplements—ginseng, deer antler, rare tonics meant to nourish a woman's body after great loss.

Princess Zhi was seated near the window, wrapped in a pale shawl. Her face was calm, almost detached, as if the pain had already settled somewhere deep inside her where no one could touch it.

"Mother," she said softly, rising to bow.

The Dowager Empress waved a hand. "Sit. You are weak now. There's no need to perform etiquette."

The maids placed the boxes on the table. The Dowager glanced at them with satisfaction before turning her sharp gaze back to Princess Zhi.

"These are for your body," she said coolly. "Drink them properly. At least recover yourself. A woman who cannot even stand steadily has no place as a prince's wife."

Princess Zhi lowered her eyes. She said nothing.

The Dowager continued, her voice smooth but cutting.

"You should reflect on yourself. You were eight months pregnant, yet you fell. Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? Because of your carelessness, my son lost his heir."

Her words landed like needles.

Princess Zhi's fingers tightened slightly around the edge of her sleeve—but only for a moment.

She did not cry.

She did not argue.

She had heard these words all her life.

"I understand," she replied quietly.

The Dowager sneered. "Understanding now is useless. What's done is done. A woman's value lies in giving birth to sons. You couldn't even manage that."

Still, Princess Zhi remained silent.

Inside her chest, something had already gone numb.

She had spent years trying to please this woman—walking carefully, speaking gently, swallowing humiliation. She had learned one truth very early:

No matter what she did, it would never be enough.

So this time, she did not try.

The Dowager studied her for a moment, displeased by the lack of reaction.

"Tsk. No spirit at all."

Just then—

"Your Highness."

A clear, calm voice cut through the courtyard.

Princess Zhi looked up.

Empress Lian An stepped inside, a food tray held steadily in her hands. Her maid followed closely behind. The aroma of warm, nourishing soup drifted gently through the air.

The Dowager Empress turned, surprised—and then laughed.

"Well, look at this," she said mockingly. "The palace is truly lively these days."

Lian An bowed lightly. "Greetings, Mother."

The Dowager's smile sharpened. "What a coincidence. I was just telling Princess Zhi to take care of herself. Though..." her eyes flicked disdainfully over Zhi, "some people simply lack the ability."

Lian An set the tray down carefully on the table beside Princess Zhi.

"I made nourishing food for her," she said evenly. "Light, easy to digest. It will help her recover."

The Dowager laughed again, louder this time.

"How amusing," she said. "My two sons truly have bad karma. One married a woman with no manners—always acting improperly. The other married a woman who can't even walk properly and caused him to lose his heir."

The words were venomous.

Princess Zhi's lashes trembled, but she kept her gaze lowered.

Lian An straightened slowly.

Her eyes were calm.

Too calm.

"Mother," she said, her tone gentle but firm, "Princess Zhi has just suffered a great loss. Please be mindful of your words."

The Dowager scoffed. "Mindful? Am I wrong?"

She turned to Princess Zhi again. "If you were capable, none of this would have happened."

Princess Zhi finally lifted her head.

Her voice was soft, but steady.

"Mother is right," she said. "I was careless."

The Dowager blinked, momentarily thrown off by the lack of resistance.

Lian An glanced at Princess Zhi, her heart tightening—but she said nothing. Instead, she placed a spoon into Zhi's hand.

"Eat," she said quietly. "You need strength."

Princess Zhi nodded and took a small sip.

The warmth spread through her body, easing the tight ache in her chest.

The Dowager watched the scene, unimpressed.

"Eat all you want," she said coldly. "What's lost is lost."

She stood.

"I've delivered what I came for. Recover quickly. You still have duties."

With that, she turned and left, her robes sweeping across the stone floor.

The courtyard fell silent.

Princess Zhi stared down at the bowl in her hands. Her reflection shimmered faintly in the surface of the soup.

"I'm sorry," she whispered suddenly. "You shouldn't have had to hear that."

Lian An sat beside her without hesitation.

"You did nothing wrong," she said firmly. "And you don't need her approval."

Princess Zhi's eyes welled with tears—but this time, she did not let them fall.

"I know," she said softly. "I've finally learned."

Lian An smiled faintly.

"That's enough for today."

Outside the courtyard, unseen by human eyes, three shadows lingered—silent, watchful, furious.

Fen Yu clenched her fists.

Wei Rong's aura darkened.

Li Shen's eyes were cold.

The Dowager Empress had drawn a line.

And soon—

She would learn that some lines, once crossed, could never be erased.

After the Bitter Words — Quiet Truths

When the Dowager Empress's footsteps finally faded beyond the courtyard gates, the air seemed to loosen, as if it had been holding its breath the entire time.

Princess Zhi remained seated, the bowl still warm in her hands.

For a moment, neither woman spoke.

Then Princess Zhi lifted her spoon again, took a proper bite this time, and paused. Her eyes softened—just a little.

"...It's good," she said quietly.

Lian An looked up.

"Very good," Princess Zhi added, almost shyly. "I didn't think I could eat today, but... your cooking always does this to me."

She gave a faint, almost embarrassed smile.

"Before, when I ate food from the imperial kitchen, everything tasted bland. Even my favorite dishes felt heavy in my mouth. But this..." She took another bite. "This feels warm. Like someone actually thought about the person eating it."

Lian An felt something tighten gently in her chest.

"That's because I did," she replied softly. "Feeding you properly is my duty as your friend."

Princess Zhi looked at her for a long moment, then lowered her gaze, hiding the shimmer in her eyes.

They ate in silence for a while—peaceful, fragile, but real.

Then Lian An spoke again, carefully.

"Zhi... may I ask you something?"

Princess Zhi's spoon paused mid-air.

"Yes?"

"I recently learned that Prince Liang has a concubine," Lian An said evenly. "Shin Gu. I wanted to ask... do you know anything about her?"

The change was immediate.

Princess Zhi's shoulders stiffened almost imperceptibly. Her fingers tightened around the spoon. She lowered it, then deliberately took a large bite, chewing slowly as if buying herself time.

Lian An watched closely but said nothing.

After swallowing, Princess Zhi finally spoke.

"...The Dowager granted her to him."

Her voice was calm. Too calm.

"She said it was for the stability of the household," Princess Zhi continued. "She believes I am unworthy."

Lian An's eyes darkened slightly.

"Unworthy?"

Princess Zhi nodded faintly. "Because I am from a neighboring kingdom. Because I don't socialize much. Because I don't flatter people or attend gatherings she favors."

She gave a small, self-mocking smile.

"She never liked that I kept to myself."

Lian An clenched her fingers inside her sleeve.

"And Shin Gu?" she asked. "Why haven't I ever seen her?"

Princess Zhi hesitated, then answered honestly.

"She doesn't mingle. She stays mostly in her courtyard. The Dowager arranged it that way." She lowered her eyes. "Perhaps... to remind me of my place."

The words landed heavily between them.

Princess Zhi took another bite of food, slower now.

"I didn't resist," she said quietly. "At that time, I thought... if I endured quietly, things would remain peaceful."

Her lashes trembled.

"But now..." she stopped, then shook her head gently. "Now I don't know anymore."

Lian An reached out and placed her hand over Princess Zhi's.

"You don't have to endure alone," she said firmly. "Not anymore."

Princess Zhi looked up at her.

For the first time since waking from surgery, her eyes filled—but she did not cry.

"I'm glad you're here," she whispered.

Outside the courtyard, unseen by human eyes, three ghosts exchanged looks.

Fen Yu folded her arms, scowling.

Wei Rong's expression was stormy.

Li Shen sighed softly.

Some wounds were not made by accidents.

And some enemies hid behind titles and silence.

The soup in Princess Zhi's bowl slowly emptied—but something far more important had begun to fill the space she'd been losing herself in.

Strength.

Quiet, steady, and growing.