

Ghost 222

Chapter 222: fragrance of consolation

Night pressed heavily over Prince Liang's residence.

Inside a side chamber lit by a single trembling lamp, Prince Liang sat alone. His robe was loosened, his hair slightly disheveled, and an untouched decanter of wine stood beside him—until he poured another cup with an unsteady hand.

His son.

The word echoed in his chest like a wound that refused to close.

He drank, the bitterness burning down his throat, but it did nothing to dull the ache. The room felt too large, too empty. Every corner reminded him of what he had lost before he had even held it.

A soft sound broke the silence.

Footsteps.

Prince Liang did not look up.

"Go back," he said hoarsely. "Not tonight. We will speak tomorrow."

But the footsteps did not retreat.

Instead, a familiar fragrance filled the air—light, floral, deliberate.

Shin Gu.

Prince Liang's concubine stepped into the lamplight. She wore pale silk, her hair loosely tied, her expression gentle yet calculating. She closed the door behind her quietly, as if sealing the night away from the world.

She said nothing at first.

She walked behind him, placing her hands on his shoulders, her fingers warm against the tense muscles of his neck.

Prince Liang stiffened. "I said—"

"I know," Shin Gu whispered softly. "You are grieving."

Her hands moved slowly, kneading the tightness from his shoulders, her touch practiced and soothing. The weight in his chest did not lift, but his body responded despite himself.

"You don't have to carry it alone," she murmured, leaning closer. "You've been so tired... so lonely."

He closed his eyes.

The wine, the grief, the exhaustion—all tangled together.

Shin Gu bent closer, her lips near his ear, her voice low and intimate. "I know you miss your son," she said gently. "But... I can give you another. I can give you a child."

Her words slid into his mind like warm honey.

"I miss you," she added. "Let me stay tonight."

For a moment, Prince Liang hesitated.

But sorrow weakens even the strongest resolve.

He reached up, gripping her wrist, then pulled her forward. Shin Gu gasped softly as she stumbled into his arms. He held her tightly, as if anchoring himself to something solid in a world that had begun to crumble.

The lamp flickered.

Silk rustled.

The night closed around them, heavy with grief, desire, and unspoken intentions.

Outside, the palace remained silent—unaware that in this quiet room, a new thread of fate was being woven, one born not of love, but of loss.

Dawn had not yet arrived when Prince Liang opened his eyes.

The chamber was dim, heavy with the lingering scent of incense and silk. Beside him, Shin Gu slept soundly, her breathing steady, her face calm and flawless in the low light. She was beautiful—there was no denying that. Elegant features, delicate lips, smooth skin that caught even the faintest glow of the lamp.

Yet as he looked at her, his heart did not stir.

Instead, a strange unease crept up his spine.

She is pretty... but—

His thoughts halted.

Princess Zhi's face surfaced in his mind without warning. Pale, fragile, yet stubbornly gentle. Her quiet smiles. The way her eyes always searched for warmth even when the world treated her cruelly.

More beautiful, his heart whispered.

Prince Liang clenched his jaw.

There was something about Shin Gu that unsettled him—not her appearance, but the way his body responded to her against his own will. As if a fog had wrapped around his senses, dulling his judgment, pulling him toward her when his heart clearly leaned elsewhere.

Enchanted.

The word frightened him.

Carefully, he shifted, removing her arm from his chest. Shin Gu stirred slightly, but he did not look back. He rose, dressed himself in silence, and stepped out of the chamber without a single glance behind him.

Behind him, Shin Gu's eyes opened.

In the darkness, something cold flickered within them.

So... you still went to her.

Her lips curved into a faint, unreadable smile as she turned over and closed her eyes again, pretending to sleep.

Prince Liang walked swiftly through the corridors, his steps echoing softly. His chest felt tight, his mind restless. Without realizing it, his feet carried him to the place he had avoided since the tragedy.

Princess Zhi's chamber.

The door was ajar.

Inside, a single lamp burned low. Princess Zhi lay on the bed, her face pale, her body thin beneath the covers. She looked smaller than before, as if part of her had been taken away along with the child she had lost.

Prince Liang stopped at the doorway.

He did not step closer.

He only watched.

Perhaps it was instinct—perhaps the weight of his gaze—but Princess Zhi stirred. Her lashes fluttered, and slowly, she opened her eyes.

Their gazes met.

No words were spoken.

But everything was said.

Regret. Guilt. Longing. Pain. Love that had been twisted by fear and control.

Princess Zhi did not turn away.

Neither did he.

For a long moment, the world held its breath.

Then Prince Liang finally spoke, his voice low and restrained.

"Go back to sleep," he said softly. "Rest. You need to heal your body."

Princess Zhi did not answer.

She only watched him, her eyes shining faintly in the lamplight—tired, wounded, but still gentle.

Prince Liang stood there a moment longer, then turned away, his shoulders heavy.

As he left the chamber, he knew one thing with painful clarity:

The distance between them had never been greater—

and yet, his heart had never been closer.

Chapter — Warm Sun, Gentle Hunger

Morning light slipped quietly into Princess Zhi's courtyard, soft and pale, carrying with it the faint warmth of a new day. The night's heaviness had not fully lifted, but the darkness no longer pressed as hard against her chest.

Princess Zhi sat wrapped in a light shawl, a low chair placed carefully where the sun could reach her. The warmth settled against her skin, slow and comforting, like a hand resting gently on her back. She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the light soak into her bones.

The courtyard was calm.

A servant from the kitchen arrived as usual, bowing respectfully before setting down the breakfast tray. The dishes were familiar—carefully prepared, balanced, nourishing. The same food she used to love.

Yet when the lids were lifted, Princess Zhi felt nothing.

No anticipation. No comfort. No desire.

She looked at the food for a long moment, then turned her gaze away.

"I have no appetite," she said softly.

The maid hesitated. "Your Highness, please eat a little. You need strength."

Princess Zhi nodded politely, but the smell alone made her chest feel tight. The dishes seemed heavy, tasteless, almost foreign. She pushed the tray aside without touching it.

Before, she used to wait for meals. Before, she used to smile at the first bite.

Now... even swallowing felt difficult.

The maid quietly cleared the tray and left, worry etched across her face.

Princess Zhi remained seated, eyes unfocused, hands resting lightly in her lap. The sun warmed her face, but inside, everything felt cold.

Then, faint footsteps sounded at the entrance.

Another maid entered—this one familiar. She carried a smaller tray, covered with a simple cloth, steam escaping gently from the edges.

"Your Highness," the maid said gently, "the Empress sent this."

Princess Zhi's fingers twitched.

The Empress.

Before she could stop herself, her stomach stirred—a soft, unexpected sound breaking the stillness.

She froze.

The maid noticed and smiled faintly. "Shall I set it down?"

Princess Zhi nodded slowly. "Yes... please."

The tray was placed before her. The maid lifted the cloth.

The aroma rose instantly—light, warm, soothing. Not overwhelming. Not heavy. Just... comforting.

Princess Zhi's throat tightened.

Her stomach growled again, louder this time.

"...Give it to me," she said quietly.

The maid handed her the bowl.

Princess Zhi took the spoon with trembling fingers and lifted the first bite. The moment it touched her tongue, something shifted.

Warmth spread through her chest. Gentle. Familiar.

Her brows knit slightly in surprise.

She took another bite.

And another.

The taste was balanced, soft, nourishing—crafted carefully, as if someone understood exactly what her body and heart needed. Without realizing it, she kept eating, slow but steady.

"This..." she whispered, voice barely audible. "It tastes good."

The maid smiled with relief. "Her Majesty prepared it specially for you. She said you might find this easier to eat."

Princess Zhi lowered her gaze to the bowl, her vision blurring slightly.

The Empress.

Even now. Even when burdened with her own troubles. She still thought of her.

Princess Zhi finished the bowl completely.

When she set the spoon down, her chest felt lighter than it had in days. The ache was still there—but softer, dulled by warmth and care.

"Thank her," Princess Zhi said quietly. "Please... thank her for me."

The maid bowed deeply. "I will."

As the maid left, Princess Zhi remained in the sunlight, hands folded over her abdomen, breathing slowly.

For the first time since she woke from the nightmare, she felt hunger—not just for food, but for life again.

And somewhere within her fragile heart, a small flame flickered back to life.