

Ghost 82

Chapter 82: the gift

But in her heart, something shifted—a tiny, frightened resolve. If kindness could live in the Empress even under punishment, then perhaps courage could live quietly in her too. Lian An studied her, the shape of small saving graces in a palace built on cruelties. She felt the hot sting of humiliation flare into a colder flame—memory of injustice receding into something far more deliberate: resolve.

If the Dowager thought she had snuffed out something in her by kneeling through those hours, she was wrong. The hours had not been wasted but tempered something in Lian An's chest like a smith heating steel. It would redouble her focus, not diminish it. She would survive. She would endure. She would remember how to be ruthlessly patient until the moment when patience could be sold not as weakness but as strategy.

There would be a reckoning in time; that much the palace could not avoid. For now, she let the healers apply their poultices, let her ghosts hover like ungainly angels, and let Princess Zhi stand by her side like a fragile, fierce banner against the wind.

When the healer had finished and the maids tucked her into the narrow, silk-lined bed, Lian An found the strength for a small, conspiratorial smile. "Thank you," she breathed, and the note of gratitude carried more weight than the Dowager's decree ever had.

Princess Zhi only nodded, chin trembling. "This place... it eats people," she said, voice barely a whisper. "I will not forget. No one should be made to kneel like you did."

Lian An's eyes, for a moment, softened into a tired warmth. "Then do not forget," she answered. "And learn to be kinder than we were taught."

Outside, beyond the latticed window, the lamps of the palace glowed like a string of tiny stars. Inside, Lian An closed her eyes and let sleep take her at last, a sleep stabilised by the small mercy of healing herbs and a woman's quiet courage. The palace could watch and scold and punish, but it could not steal that small light. Not yet.

And when she woke—bruised but not broken—she would begin to plot her own designs: small kitchens and secret ledgers, a whisper that would grow into something no Dowager's hand could crush. The

corridor outside the princess's rooms was almost silent. Only the faint ring of her hair ornaments marked each step. Princess Zhi's heart was still heavy from what she had seen—Lian An half-fainting, her face drained of color, the servants whispering as if punishment were a form of entertainment. The image would not leave her mind.

How could kindness be punished so harshly? she thought. How can this palace call itself holy when it feeds on its own?

When she reached her doors, the guards straightened and opened them. A breath of sandalwood met her, sharp and cool. Inside, the lamplight was dim.

Prince Li sat in his armchair by the low table, the picture of composure. A scroll lay across his knees, a cup of tea balanced on his fingers. The quiet around him was not peace; it was the hush before thunder.

He lifted his eyes. "Come here."

The words were mild, but they froze her mid-step. She bowed quickly, moving forward as though crossing thin ice.

He set the cup down, rose, and took her wrist. His grip was not hard enough to bruise yet—it was the restraint in it that frightened her most.

"You were seen leaving the inner court," he said evenly. "And again, near the Empress's quarters."

"I..." Her voice broke before it could form an excuse. "I only wished to make sure she was—"

"Alive?" he interrupted, the faintest smile touching his lips. "And if she were dead, would that bring you peace?"

She shook her head, terrified of saying anything wrong.

He leaned closer, his tone soft, almost affectionate. "I told you once, my dear, not to wander. No allies in this palace, remember? Every whisper can be a blade."

The grip on her wrist tightened just enough to make her gasp. His eyes stayed calm, unreadable. "Do not make me repeat myself."

When she winced, he released her at once and brushed his thumb across the red mark. The sudden gentleness made her stomach twist.

"There now," he murmured, helping her sit at the table. "I don't want to hurt you. I only want to keep you and our child safe."

He poured more tea, his movements precise. "My mother—the Dowager—has never favored me. She will favor the Emperor's line and destroy mine if given the chance. Do you think I can allow that? The Emperor has no heirs. Do you understand what that means?"

Zhi's voice trembled. "You believe she would harm your son?"

He smiled thinly. "She would call it fate. I call it murder dressed in virtue."

The fear in her chest grew heavier, yet she nodded because that was what he expected.

He set the cup down, touching her shoulder almost tenderly. "Rest. Stay in these rooms until I say otherwise. Promise me."

"I promise," she whispered.

"Good girl."

He straightened his robes, collected his papers, and moved toward the door. "I have matters to attend. Sleep. Do not trouble yourself with other people's misfortunes."

When the doors closed behind him, the silence returned.

Zhi sat where he had left her, hands trembling in her lap. The mark on her wrist throbbed faintly. For a long time she simply stared at the untouched tea before her, watching the steam fade.

She had once thought marriage would be safety. Her stepmother had promised her that being a prince's wife meant power, protection, respect. Yet all it had given her was the echo of commands and a love that bruised even when it spoke softly.

Tears spilled before she could stop them. She pressed her palms to her eyes, ashamed of the sound. Outside, the wind scraped along the lattice like fingernails.

In another corner of the palace, someone might have heard her crying and mistaken it for the song of the night insects.

Princess Zhi sat long after the lamps had burned low, staring at the doorway where her husband had disappeared. The palace was silent, yet her mind refused to rest. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Lian An kneeling on the cold marble floor, copying scriptures until her hands bled. The image pierced her deeper than her husband's words ever could.

Her maid, Yun'er, entered softly. "Your Highness, the physicians report the Empress is resting now. The fever has gone down."

Zhi exhaled shakily, relief flooding her chest. "She's better?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Her servants said she has taken medicine and will recover soon."

Zhi nodded slowly, eyes glimmering. "Good... That's good." She hesitated a long moment before saying quietly, "Yun'er, prepare a box of the tonics I keep for my own health—ginseng, lotus seeds, and dried red dates. And the pearl powder too. Send them to the Empress's quarters. No names, no marks. Just say they were misplaced from the infirmary stock."

The maid's eyes widened. "But, Your Highness—if the Prince finds out—"

"He won't," Zhi interrupted gently but firmly. "No one will. Deliver them before dawn, then return as if nothing happened."

Yun'er bowed deeply, understanding the risk, and left without another word.

When she was alone again, Zhi looked down at her hands, still faintly red where her husband had gripped her. She pressed her palms together and whispered, "She will not suffer alone again... Not while I still have breath."

That night, for the first time since her marriage, Princess Zhi did not cry herself to sleep. Her heart still hurt, her wrist still ached—but she felt a fragile peace settle over her. Somewhere in the vast palace, a woman she admired was alive and healing, and she had helped in a small, secret way.

It was not much, but in a palace built on fear and silence, even a whisper of kindness could sound like rebellion.

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