

## **Ghost 159**

Chapter 159: the silence after the cry

The chamber smelled sharply of medicine and iron.

Hours had passed—long, merciless hours where time seemed to stretch until breathing itself felt heavy. Outside, the lanterns had been replaced twice. Servants knelt along the corridor, heads lowered, afraid even to whisper.

At last, the doors opened.

The healer stepped out first, his robes stained, his shoulders sagging with exhaustion. He bowed deeply to the Emperor and the Empress.

"Her Highness... has been saved," he said quietly.

The Empress felt her knees weaken for a brief moment before she steadied herself. "And the child?"

The healer closed his eyes.

"It was a boy," he said. "He did not survive."

The words landed softly, yet they shattered everything.

Inside the chamber, Princess Zhi lay unconscious, her face as pale as wax, lips dry, breath shallow but steady. Clean cloth had replaced the blood-soaked sheets. Her abdomen was bound carefully, tightly, as if holding together a body that had barely survived being torn apart.

The Empress stood beside the bed for a long time, watching her chest rise and fall.

A boy.

Eight months.

Too late. Too cruel.

She turned slowly to the maid who stood trembling near the door, her eyes swollen from crying.

"Tell me," the Empress said, her voice calm in a way that frightened more than anger. "What happened?"

The maid dropped to her knees immediately.

"Your Majesty... Princess Zhi went for her usual walk after lunch. She always walks that path—every day, at the same hour."

The Empress's fingers tightened.

"And?"

The maid swallowed hard. "She slipped."

"Slipped?" The word was quiet. Sharp.

"There was oil on the floor," the maid continued, voice shaking. "Cooking oil. Near the corridor corner. She stepped on it before anyone noticed."

Oil.

The Empress's gaze darkened.

"That path," she said slowly, "is cleaned every morning. And she has walked it for months."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the maid cried. "That's why... that's why it didn't make sense. We never leave oil there. Never."

Silence stretched between them.

The Empress looked back at Princess Zhi.

An accident?

Or something placed there—quietly, deliberately—on a path walked by a pregnant woman every single day?

"Who was on duty in that corridor?" she asked.

The maid hesitated.

The Empress's eyes flicked back to her.

"Speak."

"...It was changed this morning," the maid whispered. "The usual servants were reassigned. A new pair took over."

The Empress felt a cold spread through her chest.

Rare miscarriages happened—but this wasn't one.

This was a push disguised as fate.

She gently adjusted the blanket around Princess Zhi, brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead.

"I'm here," she murmured softly, though the Princess could not hear her. "Rest. I won't let this pass quietly."

Outside, the palace remained hushed, mourning a child no one would ever meet.

But within the Empress's heart, grief was already hardening into something sharper.

Someone had spilled that oil.

And someone would answer for it.

The Empress had just turned, her lips parting to give an order, when hurried footsteps echoed down the corridor.

"Zhi—!"

Prince Liang burst into the chamber, his robes disheveled, breath uneven. The moment his eyes fell on the still figure lying on the bed, his face twisted—shock, disbelief, and something darker crashing together.

"What happened?" he demanded hoarsely.

No one answered immediately.

The maid who had knelt since earlier trembled harder. When the Prince's gaze snapped to her, sharp and unforgiving, she hurriedly spoke, repeating everything exactly as before—Princess Zhi's daily walk, the sudden slip, the oil on the floor, the blood, the panic.

The moment she finished, Prince Liang's expression hardened.

"Useless!" he snapped. "If you couldn't even take care of your mistress properly, what use are you alive for? Guards—punish this maid!"

The maid collapsed forward in terror.

"Wait."

The Empress stepped forward instinctively. "This is not her fault—"

Before she could finish, the Emperor moved.

He placed himself calmly but firmly between Prince Liang and the kneeling maid.

"Enough," the Emperor said, his voice low but commanding. "This was no accident. Oil does not appear on a clean corridor by itself. Someone set a trap."

Prince Liang let out a short, incredulous laugh.

"A trap?" he scoffed. "And who, Your Majesty, do you think would do such a thing?"

His eyes flicked sideways, sharp with meaning. Your concubine whom you are spending a lot of time.

"My concubine?" he said mockingly. "Impossible. She would never do that."

The Empress clenched her fists.

"The Princess walked that path every day," she said quietly but clearly. "Oil appeared only today. Servants were changed this morning. This is not carelessness—it is intent."

Prince Liang turned on her, irritation flashing across his face.

"This is my household," he snapped. "My wife has always been careless. Falling, tripping, causing trouble—this is her nature. I don't need interference."

The words struck like slaps.

The Empress felt something cold settle deep in her chest.

Careless?

An eight-month pregnancy.

A dead child.

And still, he refused to look deeper.

She lowered her gaze slowly, but inside her mind was already moving.

If you won't seek the truth... I will.

She would send her ghosts.

She would find out who spilled that oil.

She would give justice—to Princess Zhi, and to the child who never had a chance to cry.

Before anyone could speak again, another presence swept into the room.

The Dowager Empress arrived, Lady Chen at her side.

The Dowager took one look at the pale figure on the bed and clicked her tongue.

"So troublesome," she said coldly. "To lose a child at eight months... How incompetent must a woman be to fail even at carrying a baby?"

The Empress's eyes widened in shock.

Prince Liang bowed slightly. "Mother—"

The Dowager waved her hand dismissively. "Why did you marry such a useless girl in the first place? Can't take care of herself, can't protect a child—what good is she?"

The Empress took a step forward, unable to remain silent.

"Dowager—this was not an accident. Someone—"

The Dowager turned sharply, giving her a sideways glance filled with disdain.

"Oh?" she said. "And why are you so eager to defend her? Getting close to her now, are you? Who knows—maybe you were the one behind it."

The accusation hung in the air like poison.

For a heartbeat, no one breathed.

Then the Emperor spoke.

"That's enough," he said firmly. His gaze was steady, unyielding. "This is not the time to blame or accuse. Princess Zhi has lost her child. What she needs now is rest and support—not cruelty."

The Dowager stiffened, clearly displeased.

Lady Chen quickly stepped forward, nails digging painfully into her own palm as she forced a gentle smile.

"Yes," she said softly. "Your Majesty is right. Princess Zhi has suffered greatly. We should support her."

The Dowager huffed, turning away. "You're always too kind, Chen'er. Come. We'll return later."

She swept out of the chamber, Lady Chen following—her lowered eyes hiding something far darker than sympathy.

The room fell silent once more.

Princess Zhi lay unconscious, unaware of the words spoken above her, unaware of the blame, the dismissal, the buried truth.

The Empress stood beside the bed, her expression calm—but her resolve iron-hard.

I will find the truth, she vowed silently.

And when I do... no one will escape it.

The Empress took a step forward, her eyes fixed on the pale figure lying beyond the curtain.

"I want to see Zhi," she said quietly. "Just for a moment."

Before she could move another inch, a shadow blocked her path.

Prince Liang stepped in front of the doorway, his back straight, his expression cold and twisted with grief that had nowhere to settle.

"You're not welcome here," he said harshly.

The words hit harder than a slap.

The Empress froze, disbelief flickering across her face. "What did you say?"

Prince Liang's jaw tightened. His eyes were red, but not with tears—only anger.

"Because of you," he said bitterly, "my child is dead. I warned her. I told my wife not to befriend you. And look what happened." His voice rose. "Maybe your enemies came for you and took my son instead."

The accusation was sharp, reckless, and cruel.

For a heartbeat, the room seemed to stop breathing.

Then—

"Enough."

The Emperor's voice cut through the air like a blade.

He stepped forward, his gaze dark, commanding, dangerous. "Prince Liang, shut up."

Prince Liang turned, shocked. "Your Majesty—"

"I said shut up," the Emperor repeated coldly. "Grief does not give you the right to spew nonsense. No one here has the right to accuse the Empress."

The Prince clenched his fists, breathing hard, but he did not argue further.

The Empress slowly lifted her head.

Her expression was calm—too calm.

"If you think blaming me will bring your child back," she said evenly, "then blame me all you want. I won't stop you."

She paused, her eyes hardening.

"But listen carefully."

She looked directly at Prince Liang.

"I will find out who spilled that oil. I will find who set the trap. I will find who dared to take a life that wasn't theirs to take."

Her voice lowered, steady and unshaking.

"And when I do... justice will be served."

The room fell into a heavy silence.

The Emperor glanced at her, something unreadable passing through his eyes—respect, worry, and a quiet, fierce trust.

Prince Liang said nothing.

The Empress turned away from the blocked doorway, her steps slow but resolute.

Inside the room, Princess Zhi slept on, unaware that outside her door, a vow had been made—

one that would not be broken.