

Ghost 106

Chapter 106: fake plague

The night was still deep when Lian An opened her eyes.

The room was dim — only the soft flicker of a nearly spent candle cast shadows across the walls. The silence inside The Whisper Bowl was peaceful; outside, the faint chirp of insects sang against the coming dawn.

She sat up slowly, glancing around. Yao Qing and the twins had long gone to bed. Even the tall man, the new helper, was asleep somewhere near the kitchen. For a moment, Lian An simply watched the sleeping restaurant — the tables neatly stacked, the faint scent of tea and sesame drifting in the air — and felt a quiet satisfaction.

Then she remembered what had to be done.

She drew out a sheet of paper from the drawer, dipped her brush in ink, and wrote by the thin light:

> Qing, I'll return in a few hours. There's something I must settle before morning. Don't worry. Keep the place running and rest well.

— Lian An

She placed the letter neatly on the table and pressed a small jade bead over it as weight.

Then, standing, she wrapped her hair under the cap, pulled on the same gray guard uniform she had worn to sneak out the night before, and slipped into her boots. The cloth was still faintly damp from the rain, but there was no time to care.

When she stepped outside, the world was heavy with mist.

The market streets lay empty, the cobblestones glistening pale in the half-light. The smell of morning — damp earth and distant smoke — clung to the air. She moved quickly, her steps soundless.

Wei Rong drifted at her side like a shadow, alert as always.

Li Shen floated behind, muttering about timing.

Fen Yu hummed softly, pretending the journey was a midnight stroll.

Within an hour, the palace gates loomed ahead — tall, silent, cold. The guards at the outer posts barely stirred; dawn duty was dull, and their eyes drooped from sleeplessness.

The Empress waited until they looked away, then slipped through a narrow side passage known only to servants and night runners. Her ghosts distracted the nearby sentries — a flick of shadow here, a faint whisper there — long enough for her to pass.

By the time the first hint of light touched the sky, she had reached her own courtyard.

The garden within was still dark, only a few fireflies drifting over the pond. The fragrance of night lilies lingered faintly.

Her maid, Xiaoyu, appeared the instant she stepped through the inner gate. Her eyes widened, then softened with relief. "Your Majesty! You're back—"

Lian An raised a finger to her lips. "Quiet. Did anyone come?"

"No one," Xiaoyu whispered. "The Dowager's servants passed by once in the night, but they didn't stop."

"Good," Lian An said, walking inside. She could already feel exhaustion creeping into her bones. "I need to do something before dawn breaks. Listen carefully."

The maid followed, worry etched on her face. "What is it?"

"I'm going to fall sick."

Xiaoyu blinked, confused. "What?"

"Not truly," the Empress said, lowering her voice. "It's an act. I must leave the palace for a few days — but no one can know. If I vanish, there'll be panic. If I'm sick, no one will come near. Especially if it's something contagious."

The maid paled. "You mean—"

Lian An smiled faintly. "Chickenpox. Or something that looks like it."

Xiaoyu stared for a moment, then nodded quickly. "If it's for you, I'll help. Whatever you say, Your Majesty."

Lian An's gaze softened. "Good girl. Go rest now. At dawn, you'll know what to do."

She dismissed the maid with a gentle wave and closed the door behind her.

The room was silent again, bathed in faint moonlight.

Moments later, her ghosts drifted through the wall — Li Shen holding the blue-glass bottle carefully in his hands.

"The potion," he said, presenting it with pride. "One drop is enough."

"Will it hurt?" she asked lightly.

Wei Rong frowned. "A little. It will mimic fever, rash, chills — everything needed to convince the physicians. It will fade after two hours."

"Perfect."

Lian An took the bottle. The glass was cool against her palm, the liquid inside glowing faintly under the lamplight. She removed the cap and inhaled — a sharp herbal scent mixed with something bitter and metallic.

Without hesitation, she tipped a drop onto her tongue.

It burned — not painfully, but sharply, like fire spreading beneath her skin. She closed her eyes, gripping the table as a rush of warmth traveled down her neck, through her arms, into her chest.

Fen Yu gasped. "She's changing!"

Li Shen leaned forward, analytical even in crisis. "The rash is starting — right on schedule."

Within minutes, faint red marks bloomed across the Empress's hands and arms. Her skin flushed, sweat beaded on her forehead, and her breath grew uneven. She felt her pulse quicken — a fevered rhythm, just enough to fool any healer's fingers.

"It's working," she whispered, her voice trembling from the heat rising within her.

Li Shen nodded approvingly. "Two hours of authenticity. After that, you'll be fine."

"Good," she murmured. "Now go — help Xiaoyu with the next part."

The ghosts vanished like wind through the paper screens.

Outside, the first bell of dawn sounded — deep, echoing through the palace courtyards.

Moments later, chaos erupted.

From the Empress's courtyard came the sound of shattering porcelain — a teapot, flung to the ground. The maid's voice followed, loud and trembling with well-practiced terror. "Help! The Empress— Her Majesty is burning with fever!"

The ghosts made sure to enhance the scene. Fen Yu knocked over a chair; Li Shen rattled the medicine cabinet for added noise. Wei Rong sent a gust of wind through the corridor, slamming a door open.

Servants rushed from the neighboring quarters. "What happened?" one cried.

"Her Majesty's ill!" Xiaoyu wailed, tears streaking her face as she clutched her sleeves. "She woke covered in red spots — her body's burning! I think— I think it's plague!"

The word hit like thunder.

"Plague?!" someone repeated, horrified.

"Chickenpox— maybe worse—"

Within moments, panic spread like wildfire. Servants stumbled over one another, calling for eunuchs, guards, anyone who could help.

The commotion reached the far courtyard — the Emperor's training hall — just as the second bell rang.

Rong Zhen was finishing his early sword drills when he heard the distant cries. He lowered his blade sharply, sweat glinting across his temples.

"What's that noise?" he demanded.

A nearby eunuch ran forward, pale. "Your Majesty— from the Empress's courtyard! Her maid is crying something about sickness—"

Before the man could finish, another maid came sprinting across the stone path, hair disheveled, face streaked with tears. She dropped to her knees before the Emperor, sobbing.

"Your Majesty! The Empress— something has happened! She's— she's burning with fever! Covered in spots— we don't know what it is!"

The Emperor froze for half a second, disbelief flickering in his eyes.

Then his expression hardened. "Take me there. Now."

The guards and eunuchs followed as he strode through the corridors, his pace sharp, each step echoing against the stone. Servants pressed themselves against the walls as he passed, whispering prayers.

When they reached the Empress's courtyard, a crowd had gathered outside, too afraid to enter. The air was thick with fear — that old, primal dread of contagion.

"Move," the Emperor ordered, his voice cutting through the noise.

The servants parted instantly.

Inside, the curtains of the Empress's room were drawn halfway, letting in only a slice of dawn light. The scent of herbs and sweat filled the air.

Lian An lay on the bed, her face pale beneath a sheen of perspiration, crimson rashes blooming across her neck and arms. Her body trembled with feigned fever. Even her breathing had slowed to a weak, uneven rhythm.

When Rong Zhen stepped closer, his breath caught.

"...An," he said quietly, disbelief threading through his voice.

She didn't answer. Her eyes were half-closed, her lashes trembling faintly — the picture of a woman caught between consciousness and fevered dreams.

The Emperor turned sharply to his attendants. "Call the royal healer! Now!"

Eunuchs scattered at once, their hurried footsteps echoing down the corridors.

He stood beside her, fists clenched, eyes dark as storm clouds. The sight of her — helpless, sweating, trembling — struck something deep in his chest.

The crowd outside whispered, fear lacing every word.

"She's infected..."

"Should we stay?"

"The Emperor's inside—"

None of them dared move.

Inside the room, the ghosts hovered unseen — silent, watchful, proud of their perfect performance.

And on the bed, beneath the crimson glow of dawn, the Empress's lips curved ever so slightly — just enough to betray a secret the world would never guess.

Her plan had worked.

By sunrise, she would be officially "sick."

By noon, she would be untouchable.

And by tomorrow, the palace would believe she was quarantined — while the real Lian An walked free beyond its walls.