

Ghost 107

Chapter 107: the healer verdict

The palace was trembling with whispers.

By the time dawn had lifted its pale light across the roofs, every corridor hummed with fear. Servants avoided each other's gaze, holding their sleeves to their faces, muttering that the Empress had fallen ill with a plague.

Outside her courtyard, guards had already been stationed by the Emperor's order, their faces drawn, afraid to even glance through the half-open door.

Inside, the air was heavy — thick with the smell of herbs, sweat, and fear.

The Empress lay against the embroidered pillow, her face pale beneath the faint sheen of fever. The crimson marks across her arms and neck looked angry and fresh, blooming like cruel flowers under the skin.

The Emperor stood near the bedside, still in his morning robe, his hair unbound from training. His expression was unreadable — calm, but his eyes did not leave her once.

A soft rustle came from the door.

"The royal healer has arrived," a eunuch announced, voice low.

"Let him in," the Emperor said.

The healer entered, an elderly man with years of service carved into the lines around his eyes. His beard was white, his steps slow but firm. Behind him followed two young assistants, each carrying a lacquered box of medicine and cloths.

He bowed deeply. "Your Majesty, you summoned me?"

The Emperor gestured toward the bed. "See what has happened to the Empress. She fell ill suddenly at dawn."

The healer inclined his head, approaching carefully. But the moment his eyes met the Empress's form — the rashes, the sweat, the faint tremors — he froze mid-step.

His brows knitted sharply. "Your Majesty... this looks like..."

He didn't finish the sentence. His assistant, seeing his master's expression, quickly pulled a cloth from the medicine box and offered it to him with trembling hands.

The healer covered his mouth and nose at once. "Your Majesty, forgive me — precaution is necessary."

Rong Zhen gave a brief nod. "Do what you must."

The healer stepped closer, cautious but determined. The rustle of his robes and the faint clink of his rings filled the silence. He reached for the Empress's wrist with a piece of white gauze between his fingers.

Her skin was cold, damp with sweat. Her pulse fluttered weakly beneath his touch — slow, irregular, like a candle fighting wind.

He kept his hand there for a long time, counting each beat with grave precision.

Finally, he withdrew and bowed deeply. "Your Majesty... it is as I feared. The Empress has contracted chickenpox — a plague illness. It spreads through the air. We must act swiftly."

The Emperor's expression hardened. "What is to be done?"

"She must be kept in quarantine for fourteen days," the healer said firmly. "No one should come near her without covering their mouth. The linens, her clothes — all must be washed in boiling water. Every corner of this courtyard must be cleansed with this potion."

He turned to his assistant, who handed him a small jar of pale green liquid. "This will prevent the spread of the infection. Those who have been in contact with her must bathe with it immediately."

Before the Emperor could reply, soft footsteps approached from the doorway.

"Your Majesty!" a gentle voice called.

Princess Zhi entered, her silk robe hastily tied, her face pale with worry. Her hand rested on her rounded belly as she hurried forward. "I heard the Empress is ill... Is it true?"

The Emperor turned, frowning. "Zhi, you shouldn't be here."

But she had already seen the figure on the bed — her sister-in-law lying weak, covered in red blotches, her lips colorless. Princess Zhi's eyes filled with tears. "Heaven... she looks so weak."

"Stay back," the healer said urgently. "It's not safe for you or the child. Please."

The princess stopped instantly, clutching her sleeve to her mouth.

The healer's assistant handed him a second cloth; he tied it tightly over his nose and mouth before turning to his subordinates. "Clean this chamber at once. Prepare boiling water outside and burn wormwood incense. We must disinfect the air."

"Yes, Master," they replied, bowing before rushing off to obey.

Then the healer turned toward the Emperor again. "We must act quickly. No one is to approach the Empress except one trusted maid. She must wear a cloth over her mouth and bathe with the potion each day. After two weeks, if the fever breaks and the spots fade, we can safely declare her recovered."

The Emperor's gaze flickered toward Xiaoyu, who stood kneeling near the bed, trembling. Her head touched the floor as she spoke. "Your Majesty, please allow me. I've served Her Highness since her marriage. I will stay with her — I'll make sure no one enters."

The healer nodded approvingly. "Then follow my instructions carefully."

He handed her the jar and gave her detailed directions — one spoonful in water each morning, clean the sheets with the mixture, wash your hands after every touch.

When everything was set, he bowed to the Emperor again. "I've done what I can. Now, we must leave her to rest. Any disturbance could worsen her condition."

Rong Zhen inclined his head, his jaw tight. "You've done well. Go."

The healer and his attendants bowed and left quickly, grateful to be out of the infected room.

For a long moment after they were gone, the Emperor stood in silence, watching the woman on the bed. Her breathing was faint but steady; the false fever glowed softly on her skin.

He exhaled slowly. "Rest well, An," he murmured, voice low enough that only she could hear. "Recover soon."

Then, straightening, he turned to Xiaoyu. "I'll send tonics for her health. Make sure she drinks them. No one else is to enter this courtyard, understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," she whispered.

He looked once more at the bed — at her pale, trembling figure — then turned toward Princess Zhi, who still stood at the door, holding her sleeve against her mouth.

"You shouldn't be here," he said gently. "It's dangerous for you and the child."

Princess Zhi hesitated, her eyes full of sadness. "I only wanted to see her..."

"Your concern is enough," he interrupted softly. "Go back. Take care of yourself."

She nodded, tears threatening again. "Then please let me send her meals from my kitchen. Light food, fresh soup, and medicine."

He gave a short nod. "Do so. Have them delivered here, and instruct her maid directly."

Princess Zhi turned to Xiaoyu. "Take good care of Her Majesty. I'll send the meals myself every day."

"I will, Princess," the maid said quickly, bowing.

Satisfied, the Emperor gently took Princess Zhi's arm and led her out of the room. As they stepped into the corridor, he called to the nearest eunuch. "Seal this courtyard. Post guards. No one enters without my command."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

When they were gone, the doors shut, and silence returned.

Inside, Xiaoyu sat beside her mistress, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a damp cloth. Her heart still pounded from fear, though a faint smile tugged at her lips. The act had worked — perfectly.

Outside, the rumors began to spread.

By midday, everyone in the palace knew: the Empress was struck by a terrible illness, a plague from the heavens themselves.

No one dared step near her courtyard. Servants crossed to the other side of the gardens when they walked past. Some muttered that it was punishment from the gods — others whispered it was the curse of envy.

Far from the commotion, in another wing of the palace, Lady Zhen reclined lazily on her couch, a smirk curving her painted lips.

Her maid fanned her gently. "My Lady, have you heard? The Empress has fallen ill."

Lady Zhen's eyes gleamed. "I have. So, Heaven finally shows justice. How amusing."

She lifted her teacup and took a slow sip, satisfaction glinting in her gaze. "It seems even the gods grow tired of her holiness. Let her suffer — fourteen days, you say? Good. Perhaps she'll remember her place when she rises again."

Her laughter was soft, delicate — but behind it lay the sharp edge of triumph.

Outside, the sun climbed higher, lighting the quiet palace roofs in gold.

Inside the sealed courtyard, the Empress rested in feigned sickness — sweat glistening under the light, her body still trembling slightly from the potion's lingering heat.

And though her eyes were closed, behind her lashes, a quiet smile touched her lips.

Her plan was unfolding exactly as she'd designed.