

Ghost 109

Chapter 109: letter to the calm

The first light of morning broke over the rooftops like spilled gold.

Mist coiled through the narrow streets of the capital as the world slowly woke — merchants pulling up their shutters, farmers guiding carts laden with vegetables, and the smell of boiling soy and steaming bread drifting through the air.

In that restless morning crowd, four shadows moved together.

One walked in boots and uniform — the Empress disguised as a palace guard.

Three floated just beyond the light — her loyal ghosts.

The city was alive with rumor.

"Did you hear? The Empress has caught the plague!"

"They say it's Heaven's punishment!"

"No, no — she fainted during prayer, that's what my cousin in the palace told me!"

"Fainted? My nephew says she's already half-dead!"

Every whisper grew larger by the street, until the gossip itself seemed to fill the air like smoke.

Fen Yu, the mischievous female ghost, covered her mouth and giggled. "Oh no, Your Majesty, you've died and they forgot to bury you!"

Lian An gave her a sharp look. "Keep laughing, and you'll join the rumor for real."

Wei Rong, the ghostly general, grunted. "Let them talk. Fear makes good cover."

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, adjusted his translucent sleeves. "Ignorance spreads faster than ink. We should be thankful for once — everyone's too busy pitying you to look twice."

The Empress smiled faintly beneath the shadow of her cap. "Exactly."

The streets smelled of rain, horse dung, and fresh scallions. Her boots brushed against puddles as they turned the corner toward the familiar lane behind the spice market. A thin breeze brushed her cheek, bringing with it the faintest trace of sesame oil — the scent she'd always associated with home.

Then she saw it.

The Whisper Bowl stood ahead, unrecognizable in its new glory.

Red silk banners fluttered proudly. The wooden pillars gleamed under a fresh coat of varnish. New curtains embroidered with golden phoenixes rippled gently in the wind. From the open windows came the faint clinking of bowls, the warm smell of fried lotus and tea — and the sound of her friend Yao Qing's voice, sharp as ever.

Inside, Yao Qing was pacing like a storm contained in one room. Her brow was furrowed, her sleeves rolled up, her lips moving in a worried mutter. The twins, Lin and Lian, dozed at a table, trying and failing to polish spoons.

When the Empress pushed open the door, the small bell above it chimed softly.

"THIEF!" Yao Qing shouted automatically, snatching the nearest tray.

Lian An froze, halfway through the door. "It's me!"

Yao Qing's eyes widened. "Lian An?!"

The tray dropped with a loud clang as she rushed forward, seizing her friend's arm. "You— you— you're alive!"

The Empress laughed quietly. "Was there any doubt?"

"Half the city's lighting incense for you!" Yao Qing snapped, half scolding, half crying. "They said you were dying from plague! Do you have any idea how terrified I was?"

"It's only an act," Lian An said softly, taking off her guard's cap. "I needed an excuse to come here."

Yao Qing stared at her, then burst out laughing in disbelief. "You faked the plague just to sneak out of the palace?"

"Would you rather I faked my death instead?"

"Don't you dare!"

They both laughed, the sound breaking through the tension like sunlight through clouds.

The twins had jolted awake by now, blinking sleepily. When they saw the Empress, their eyes went wide. "Sister An!" they cried together, scrambling toward her.

"I missed you too," Lian An said, pulling them both into a quick embrace.

The kitchen door opened, and a tall man — the new helper Wei Jie — stepped out, broom in hand. He froze when he saw the disguised figure surrounded by laughter. "Manager, who's—"

"It's fine," Yao Qing interrupted, grinning. "It's the Lian An."

Understanding dawned. Wei Jie bowed quickly. "My lady."

"No titles," the Empress said gently. "Just An tonight."

The twins giggled. "Big Sister An sounds nicer anyway!"

Wei Rong lingered near the window, invisible but watchful. Li Shen floated over the tables, inspecting the neatly stacked coins in the till. Fen Yu hovered upside down from a beam, trying to lick a ghostly bowl of soup she couldn't actually touch.

Yao Qing ushered her friend to a seat. "Sit, sit. You're pale."

"I've been pretending to die for hours," the Empress said, smiling. "It's tiring."

"Hopeless," Yao Qing sighed, shaking her head — but her eyes shone with warmth.

The Duke's Mansion

Far from the city's laughter, the Duke's mansion had sunk into quiet chaos.

The Duchess sat trembling, her silk handkerchief soaked through with tears. Her normally composed face was streaked with worry. "My child... my poor An'er..."

"Stop," the Duke said gruffly, pacing. "You'll make yourself sick."

"How can I not worry?" she snapped, voice cracking. "She's alone in that palace full of wolves! They'll let her die before lifting a finger."

Her daughter's younger sister clutched her hand. "Mother, please..."

At the window stood Lian Rou, the Duchess's nephew — tall, broad-shouldered, calm even in the storm. He had grown up in the Duke's household like a son. To Lian An, he was not just cousin but elder brother — her teacher in childhood, her defender in youth.

Now his jaw was tight, his eyes dark. "We don't even know if the rumor is true," he said quietly.

A younger cousin argued, "Then we go to the palace and see!"

Lian Rou shook his head. "If it truly is plague, we'll endanger everyone. And if it's not... we'll expose her if she's hiding for a reason."

Before the debate could grow, a servant rushed in, breathless. "My Lord! A letter — from the Empress!"

The hall fell still.

The Duke turned sharply. "From my daughter?"

The servant bowed deeply, holding out the sealed letter. "Delivered by her own courier, sir."

The wax seal gleamed under the lantern — the phoenix emblem of the imperial house.

The Duke broke it with trembling hands and began to read.

> Father, Mother,

Please do not worry. I am safe. The sickness is an act — a small lie to gain rest. After the treaty, I was too tired to continue without peace. No one in the palace would allow it, so I found my own way.

Do not reveal this. I will visit soon within ten or twelve days.

— Lian An

He read it twice, voice lowering at the end.

The Duchess froze, staring at him. "An act?"

Her younger daughter gasped. "She pretended?"

Lian Rou moved closer, scanning the paper. "The seal's real. And this—" he tapped the last line "—she only signs her name that way in personal letters."

The Duke nodded. "It's hers. No one could forge that tone."

But the Duchess pressed a shaking hand to her lips. "It's too strange... Why would she do this?"

Lian Rou met her gaze evenly. "Because she's clever — and tired. If she's pretending, there's a reason."

"But what if she's forced to write this?" the Duchess whispered.

"She wouldn't risk our lives by sending a lie," the Duke said quietly. "If she says she's well, I'll believe her."

Lian Rou folded the letter neatly. "We keep it hidden. If word spreads she's healthy, someone might use it to attack her. We'll wait, as she asked."

The Duchess's eyes glistened. "I can't wait, Rou'er. She's my child."

He hesitated, then knelt beside her chair. "Auntie... you raised her to be strong. Trust her once more. If she promised to come, she will."

For a moment, silence filled the great hall — heavy, full of love and fear.

At last, the Duchess nodded slowly. "All right. We'll wait."

The Duke exhaled, shoulders easing slightly. "Then it's settled."

But as the night deepened, each of them kept glancing toward the sealed letter lying on the table, like a fragile thread connecting them to the unseen world beyond the palace walls.

Back at The Whisper Bowl

Sunlight had fully spilled into the restaurant now, lighting every table in gold. The twins ran between customers, carrying trays. Yao Qing leaned against the counter, looking calmer now that her friend was safe.

The Empress sat by the window, sipping tea, watching the street bustle below. Merchants shouted prices, donkeys brayed, a flute played somewhere nearby.

Fen Yu hung lazily from the rafters. "Everyone's panicking about your plague while you're drinking tea. You're wicked, Your Majesty."

Lian An smirked. "And you're talking too much for a ghost."

Li Shen looked thoughtful. "Technically, this is the perfect strategy. Disguise sickness as absence. You'll have ten days without interruption."

Wei Rong nodded approvingly. "A soldier's move — misdirect, vanish, strike later."

Yao Qing appeared again with a bowl of noodles. "Stop whispering to the air," she scolded without looking up. "People will think you've actually gone mad."

The Empress laughed softly. "Too late for that, I think."

They ate together, warmth filling the air like an invisible comfort.

Lian An rested her chin on her hand. "Business looks good," she remarked.

"It's booming," Yao Qing said proudly. "After the Duchess's banquet, everyone came. They said, 'If the Empress dines here, it must be divine.' I could kiss your title sometimes."

The twins giggled, shouting from the kitchen, "We're famous!"

Fen Yu mimed applause in the corner.

Yao Qing leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Honestly, if you ever decide to give up the crown, I could make you a fortune with those recipes."

The Empress smiled faintly, eyes distant. "Sometimes I wonder."

Yao Qing softened. "You deserve peace, Lian An."

The Empress looked at her — truly looked — and smiled. "Maybe one day."

For now, the laughter of her ghosts, the clatter of bowls, the smell of broth and ginger — all of it wove around her like a safe cocoon.

In another corner of the city, her family held her letter close; in the palace, ministers whispered of her doom.

But here — for one fragile, stolen morning — she was free.