

Ghost 152

Chapter 152: the quite ride back

The carriage rolled forward with a steady rhythm, the sound of hooves muffled against the stone road as the city slowly slipped away behind them. Lantern light flickered through the small window, painting soft shadows across the inside of the carriage.

Lian An sat upright, hands folded neatly in her lap.

Across from her, the Emperor watched in silence.

Not the sharp, assessing gaze he used in court. Not the cold, distant look of a ruler weighing gain and loss. This was something else—quiet, unguarded, almost curious.

Fen Yu noticed first.

"Ohhh," the female ghost whispered dramatically, floating upside down near the carriage ceiling. "He's staring again."

Lian An ignored her.

Li Shen chuckled softly.

"He's been doing that since you sat down."

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

"If this continues, he'll wear a hole in her face."

Lian An shifted slightly, uncomfortable. Finally, she lifted her chin and looked directly at the Emperor.

"...Is there something on my face?"

Fen Yu snorted.

"Yes. Trouble."

The Emperor blinked, as if pulled out of his thoughts. Then, without hesitation, he said calmly,

"Yes."

Lian An stiffened.

He continued, voice even, almost thoughtful.

"Beauty."

The carriage went very, very quiet.

Fen Yu let out a shriek of laughter.

"OH—DID YOU HEAR THAT?"

Li Shen raised a brow, impressed.

"Straightforward. Bold."

Wei Rong smirked.

"Dangerous."

Lian An felt heat rush to her cheeks before she could stop it.

"...What nonsense are you saying?" she muttered.

What is wrong with him today?

She turned her head slightly, pretending to adjust her hair, trying to hide the sudden warmth creeping up her neck.

"I know I'm pretty," she said, attempting indifference. "This world already knows."

She flicked her hair back with practiced ease.

Fen Yu clapped.

"Yes, yes. Confidence restored."

The Emperor laughed.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't sharp.

It was warm.

"I can see that," he said. "You don't lack awareness."

Lian An shot him a sideways glance.

"You're unusually talkative."

"Am I?" he replied mildly. "Perhaps I've been too silent before."

Fen Yu leaned close to Lian An's ear.

"He's trying. Poor thing."

Lian An clenched her jaw.

The carriage slowed slightly as the surroundings changed. The familiar noise of the city faded, replaced by a deeper stillness.

The Emperor's expression shifted—focused now.

"We're entering the palace soon," he said. "But not through the main gates."

She looked up.

"Then how?"

"There's a secret passage," he explained. "It connects directly to my chambers. Only a handful of people know it exists."

Fen Yu whistled.

"Straight to the bedroom. Bold."

Li Shen sighed.

"She means security, not seduction."

Wei Rong nodded.

"Unfortunately."

Lian An ignored all of them and frowned slightly.

"Is it safe?"

"Yes," the Emperor said. "No one will see you. Given your... condition, it's better this way."

She glanced down instinctively at the pregnancy pillow hidden beneath her robe and scowled.

Fen Yu giggled.

"I still can't believe this is happening."

The carriage turned sharply. Stone walls closed in, lanterns dimmed, and the air grew cool.

Lian An felt it—the shift from the open world into the heart of power.

The Emperor watched her again, quieter this time.

"Once we arrive," he said, "things may feel restrictive. But you won't be alone."

She didn't respond right away.

Outside, the hidden doors of the palace opened soundlessly.

Inside the carriage, four ghosts hovered, alert and amused.

And between an emperor and an empress—both pretending, both hiding truths—the distance felt thinner than before.

The carriage slipped into darkness.

Toward the palace.

The carriage slowed further, the wheels barely making a sound now as they entered the hidden passage. The air turned cooler, carrying the faint scent of stone and old incense.

The Emperor broke the silence again, his tone casual—too casual.

"Also," he said, as if remembering something trivial, "don't forget your promise."

Lian An's spine straightened.

"...What promise?"

Fen Yu burst out laughing before he could answer.

"Oh, this one. THIS one."

The Emperor looked at her calmly.

"Three meals a day. Cooked by you."

Her eye twitched.

"You said you'd do whatever I asked," he continued evenly. "In exchange for my silence."

Li Shen leaned back in the air.

"Ah. Contracts. Humans love those."

Wei Rong nodded.

"And rulers never forget them."

Lian An crossed her arms.

"You're really not letting this go?"

"No," he replied simply.

Then, as if adding salt to the wound, he continued,

"And I may eat them in your chamber."

The carriage jolted slightly—pure coincidence, but it perfectly matched Lian An's shock.

"My chamber?" she repeated slowly.

Fen Yu clutched her ghostly chest.

"Ohhh, listen to him! No shame at all!"

The Emperor glanced at the ceiling.

"I'm speaking to my wife."

Lian An's face heated again, this time with pure irritation.

"You are doing this on purpose."

He smiled—small, infuriating, satisfied.

"Of course."

She stared at him for a long moment, then exhaled sharply.

"...Fine," she said stiffly. "Three meals. And you can eat there."

Fen Yu gasped.

"She agreed!"

"But," Lian An added, narrowing her eyes, "don't complain. If you do, I'll poison the soup."

The Emperor chuckled softly.

"I look forward to it."

The carriage came to a final stop.

Hidden doors opened soundlessly ahead.

The ghosts exchanged looks—half amused, half intrigued.

This fake plague, fake pregnancy, fake peace...

was starting to feel dangerously real.

The carriage rolled to a complete stop, the soft clatter of wheels fading into silence. Lantern light spilled through the narrow stone passage, revealing the hidden entrance that led straight into the Emperor's private quarters.

Just as Lian An was preparing herself to step down, the Emperor spoke again.

His voice this time was lower. Serious.

"There's one more thing."

She paused, fingers tightening slightly around the edge of her cloak.

"What now?"

He turned to face her fully, his earlier teasing gone. The smile that usually lingered at the corner of his lips had vanished, replaced by the calm, calculating expression of a ruler.

"It's been fourteen days," he said. "Exactly."

Her heart sank—just a little.

"The plague story ends now."

Fen Yu stopped mid-air.

"Oh."

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

"Here it comes."

Li Shen sighed.

"I was wondering when this would be addressed."

Lian An met the Emperor's gaze.

"You promised you wouldn't expose me."

"I won't," he said immediately. "Not to the court. Not to the ministers."

Then he continued, unhurried but firm.

"But the palace physician will be sent again. Officially. Publicly."

Her brows drew together.

"And if he finds out?"

"He won't," the Emperor replied calmly. "Because I will make sure he sees what he needs to see."

She stared at him.

"You planned this."

"Yes."

He leaned back slightly, hands folded, tone steady as if explaining state policy rather than her personal deception.

"The palace has already endured fourteen days of panic. Ministers whisper. Noble families are restless. If the Empress remains 'ill' any longer, it will invite suspicion, power struggles, and unnecessary chaos."

Fen Yu muttered,

"Humans are exhausting."

"The physician will check your pulse," the Emperor continued. "He will report that the plague has passed, your strength is returning, and you require rest—but no isolation."

Lian An swallowed.

"And what do I do?"

"You lie in bed," he said simply. "You look tired. You cough once or twice. You allow him to diagnose recovery."

She let out a slow breath.

"You're asking me to act."

He raised an eyebrow.

"You've been doing that very well."

She shot him a look.

"This ends after that," he added. "No more fake illness. No more disappearing acts. From tomorrow onward, you will 'recover' in stages."

Fen Yu floated closer, whispering loudly,

"See? He wants her back in the palace."

Wei Rong nodded.

"Very much so."

Lian An ignored them.

"And the restaurant?" she asked.

His gaze flickered—just for a moment.

"You may continue visiting. Publicly. As a charitable interest."

She scoffed softly.

"How generous."

"I am not being generous," he said quietly. "I am being realistic."

Then, softer—almost reluctant—

"The court has seen enough instability. And... so have I."

For a heartbeat, neither spoke.

Finally, she nodded.

"Fine," she said. "Send the doctor."

He studied her face, as if checking something unseen.

"You're really not afraid?"

She smiled faintly.

"No. I've survived worse than gossip."

Fen Yu grinned.

"That's our Empress."

The Emperor exhaled, some invisible tension easing from his shoulders.

"Good," he said. "Because after tomorrow..."

He opened the carriage door and extended a hand.

"...you return as Empress Lian An. Fully."

She hesitated only a second before placing her hand in his.

As they stepped into the palace shadows together, the ghosts exchanged knowing looks.

The fake plague was ending.

But something far more dangerous was beginning.