

Ghost 154

Chapter 154: fourteen days

Night had barely settled when the Emperor summoned the palace healer.

The eunuch's voice echoed softly through the corridor, and within moments, the old healer arrived, his medicine box clutched tightly in both hands. Years of service had bent his back, but his eyes were still sharp—eyes that had seen too many lives slip away to illness.

The Emperor stood near the window, hands clasped behind his back.

"Fourteen days have passed," he said without turning around. His voice was calm, but the stillness around him felt heavy. "You will examine the Empress again."

The healer stiffened.

"...Your Majesty," he said carefully, lowering his head, "the plague is not an ordinary illness."

The Emperor finally turned, his gaze sharp enough to make the old man's breath hitch.

"Speak."

The healer swallowed. "In all my years, very few have survived it. And Her Majesty's condition at the time—high fever, irregular pulse, extreme weakness—those were... dangerous signs."

The Emperor's brows furrowed.

"So?" he asked.

The healer hesitated, then spoke honestly, knowing deception would cost his head.

"I cannot guarantee Her Majesty's survival. Even now, the chances are slim."

The words hung in the air like a blade.

For a brief moment, the chamber felt colder.

The Emperor did not explode in anger. He did not shout. Instead, he laughed—softly, once, without humor.

"You are wrong," he said.

The healer looked up, startled.

The Emperor stepped forward, his expression unwavering, his voice firm with a certainty that did not allow doubt.

"Nothing is going to happen to her."

The healer's lips trembled. "Your Majesty... the plague does not bow to will."

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"But she does not bow to death," he replied. "And neither do I."

He turned back toward the window, the moonlight outlining his broad shoulders.

"You will examine her tomorrow," he ordered. "You will do your duty. And you will remember this—"

His voice dropped, dangerous and resolute.

"The Empress will live."

The healer fell to his knees.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As the old man withdrew, the Emperor remained where he stood, fists clenched at his sides.

Fourteen days.

A lie had bought them time—but time was ending.

And yet, for the first time since the word plague had entered the palace, the Emperor felt no fear.

Only resolve.

Because whatever fate intended—

He would not allow it to take her.

Night wrapped the palace in quiet layers of silk and shadow. Lanterns flickered softly along the corridors as the Emperor prepared to leave his chamber. He had already changed into a lighter robe, his steps instinctively turning toward the Empress's courtyard.

He had planned to eat there.

These past days, without realizing it at first, that had become his habit. Even when work exhausted him, even when his mind was crowded with court affairs and hidden dangers, the thought of sitting across from her—watching her eat, listening to her speak—brought him a strange sense of calm.

Just as he stepped out, a familiar voice called gently from behind.

"Your Majesty."

He stopped.

Lady Chen stood at the end of the corridor, dressed elegantly, a food basket cradled in her arms. Her hair was arranged carefully, her expression warm yet cautious, as though she had rehearsed this moment many times before arriving.

"I heard you've been very busy lately," she said softly. "I haven't seen you for days. I thought... perhaps we could have dinner together."

The Emperor's gaze flickered—briefly—to the direction of the Empress's chambers.

Then back to Lady Chen.

She did not know.

She still believed the Empress lay weak, quarantined, fighting for her life. Refusing her now would raise questions. Worse—it would reveal where his priorities truly lay.

"Come in," he said at last.

Lady Chen's face brightened immediately, relief softening her eyes. She followed him into the chamber, servants quickly laying out the dishes she had brought. The scent of familiar flavors filled the room.

They sat.

They ate.

They talked about harmless things—court rumors, seasonal changes, trivial stories meant to fill the space. Lady Chen laughed lightly, as she always did, graceful and attentive.

Yet the Emperor's mind drifted.

He answered when required, nodded at the right moments, but his thoughts were elsewhere—on another table, another room, another woman.

Then Lady Chen spoke again, her tone gentler, more deliberate.

"Your Majesty," she said, lowering her gaze slightly, "we are not young anymore. The court... the ministers... they all talk. An heir is important. Perhaps it's time we think seriously about children."

Her words were careful. Polite. Expected.

But they struck something unexpected.

For a brief, unguarded second, an image flashed through his mind.

The Empress—sitting stiffly, pretending to be pregnant in the barbaric camp, pillow hidden beneath her clothes, cursing him under her breath. Her annoyed glare. Her stubborn resilience. Her strength even while acting weak.

He saw her carrying a child—not fake, not for survival, but real.

The thought startled him.

Not Lady Chen.

Her.

He set his chopsticks down.

"Wait," he said abruptly.

Lady Chen froze.

"...Wait?" she repeated softly.

"I need time," he continued, his voice firm but distant. "This is not something to be decided lightly."

Lady Chen's smile faltered.

Only for a second.

Then she forced it back into place, elegant and controlled. "Of course," she said. "I understand. You carry the weight of the entire kingdom."

But her fingers tightened around her sleeve.

The Emperor stood soon after, signaling the end of the meal. He offered polite words, formal gratitude—but none of the warmth she had hoped for.

As Lady Chen left, her steps were measured, her posture flawless.

Only once she turned the corner did her smile disappear completely.

Inside the chamber, the Emperor remained standing, staring at the untouched dishes.

His chest felt tight.

He finally understood it.

What he felt for Lady Chen was familiarity. Habit. Duty shaped by years of shared history.

But what stirred in him now—what unsettled him, pulled at him, refused to be ignored—

Belonged to the woman who had lied, fled, built an empire, fought ghosts, and dared to live without waiting for his permission.

He turned toward the Empress's courtyard once more.

Tonight, he did not go.

But the path was already carved deep into his heart.

Lady Chen returned to her chamber long after the lanterns along the corridor had dimmed. The door closed behind her with a soft click, sealing away the polite smiles she had worn all evening.

Inside, the room was warm and familiar—incense curling lazily in the air, silk curtains swaying faintly with the night breeze. Yet her heart felt heavy, restless, like a knot pulled too tight.

She sat before the mirror without calling for her maid.

Her reflection stared back at her—perfect posture, flawless skin, calm eyes that betrayed nothing to the outside world. But beneath that calm, something darker stirred.

Her father's words echoed in her mind.

Four months.

He had agreed not to send her younger sister into the palace for the next four months. Four months of grace. Four months of expectation.

"You must conceive in this time," he had said plainly, without cruelty, without warmth. "If you succeed, your position will be secured. If you fail... we will not wait forever."

Lady Chen's fingers curled slowly against the edge of the vanity.

She had thought it would be easy.

For years, she had been by the Emperor's side. Childhood companionship, shared laughter, quiet trust. She had believed that when the time came, he would naturally turn to her.

But now—

He was distant.

Distracted.

And worse than that—his attention was no longer hers alone.

Tonight had confirmed it.

When she spoke of children, she had seen it—just for a heartbeat—the way his expression changed. Not hesitation born of duty, but something else. Something personal.

Someone else.

Her lips pressed into a thin line.

The Empress.

Lady Chen let out a soft, humorless laugh.

How ironic.

That woman—cold, stubborn, ungrateful—was now the invisible wall standing between her and everything she had waited for.

But then another thought followed, smooth and poisonous in its comfort.

The Empress was sick.

Not just sick—quarantined, rumored to be dying of a plague that no one survived.

Lady Chen's gaze softened as she leaned back against the chair.

"She won't be a hindrance," she murmured to herself.

No one survived that illness. Everyone knew it. Even the Emperor believed it—despite his strange concern, despite the herbs, the healers, the endless visits to her empty courtyard.

Sooner or later, death would take its course.

And when that happened...

Lady Chen's eyes darkened.

The slap she had endured. The humiliation. The silent judgment. The way the Empress had looked at her—unafraid, unmoved.

That, Lady Chen decided, was karma.

A slow breath left her lips.

But four months were still ticking away.

And the Emperor was not ready.

Her fingers tightened.

If he would not come willingly... then she would make a choice for both of them.

The thought settled in her mind with chilling clarity.

An unorthodox method.

A temporary one.

Something mild—just enough to blur judgment, to lower restraint. She knew the palace pharmacies well. She knew which herbs dulled awareness, which mixtures passed unnoticed the next morning.

For a moment, doubt flickered.

He would be angry.

Very angry.

But anger faded.

Results remained.

"When a son is born," she whispered, her voice steady now, "he will be happy. The court will be satisfied. The Emperor will accept it."

She stood, walking slowly toward the window, gazing out at the moonlit palace.

This was not cruelty, she told herself.

This was necessity.

This was survival.

She placed a hand over her flat stomach, her expression firm, resolved.

Four months.

No matter what it took.

Behind her calm face, a dangerous decision had already been made—and somewhere else in the palace, unseen threads were tightening, ready to snap when pulled.