

Ghost 155

Chapter 155: ending fake illness

Morning light slipped gently into the Empress's courtyard, pale gold brushing the tiled roofs and dew-wet leaves. The air was calm, almost deceptively peaceful.

Inside her chamber, Empress Lian An sat cross-legged on the low couch, a thin blanket draped loosely over her lap. Two cats—round, sleek, and shamelessly spoiled—were fully occupying her.

"One at a time," she murmured, trying unsuccessfully to keep them from climbing her shoulders.

One cat pawed at her sleeve with great seriousness, while the other had claimed her lap as royal territory, purring so loudly it vibrated against her ribs.

"You two live better than ministers," she said dryly, scratching behind an ear.

Just as she leaned forward to scoop the second cat closer, hurried footsteps sounded outside.

The curtain rustled.

Her maid entered, breath slightly uneven, expression careful—too careful.

"Your Majesty," she said softly, bowing, "a message from His Majesty."

Lian An's hand stilled mid-scratch.

The cat in her lap meowed in protest.

"...Say it," she replied, already guessing.

The maid swallowed.

"His Majesty sent word that he will come to the Empress's courtyard shortly—with the imperial healer."

The room went very quiet.

"How shortly?" Lian An asked.

The maid hesitated, then answered honestly.

"Within half an hour."

One of the cats sensed the change and hopped down, tail flicking. The other stared at Lian An with wide, unblinking eyes, as if judging her life choices.

Lian An exhaled slowly.

"So," she said, tone light but eyes sharp, "the curtain finally falls."

Her maid looked nervous.

"Your Majesty... should I—should I prepare anything?"

"Yes," Lian An replied calmly. "Prepare my illness."

She gently set the remaining cat aside and stood, rolling her shoulders once like a general before battle.

"Bring the unused tonic bowls closer to the bed. Scatter a few scrolls—make it look like I tried to read but lacked strength. Dim the windows. And—" she glanced at the cats "—keep them away from the door."

The cats, insulted, flicked their tails again.

Her maid hurried to obey, hands shaking just slightly.

Lian An moved to the mirror.

Her reflection stared back—skin too healthy, eyes too clear.

"Troublesome," she muttered.

She reached for a small jade box, tapping a trace of powder beneath her eyes, pressing gently until faint shadows bloomed. Then she loosened her hair, tugged a few strands free, and slowed her breathing until her shoulders drooped just enough.

Not weak.

Just... recovering.

As she lowered herself onto the bed, she could already picture it:

The Emperor arriving, unreadable expression. The healer's frown. The pulse check. The waiting silence.

She smiled faintly.

"Half an hour," she murmured to herself. "Plenty of time."

From the corner of the room, unseen by anyone else, three familiar presences stirred.

Fen Yu hovered closer, arms crossed.

"He really brought the healer," she whispered dramatically. "Men are heartless."

Li Shen sighed.

"Or cautious."

Wei Rong cracked his knuckles.

"If he dares poke too much—"

Lian An lifted a finger without opening her eyes.

"Don't," she said quietly. "No interference."

The ghosts fell silent.

Outside, the courtyard remained serene, birds chirping as if nothing momentous was approaching.

But inside the Empress's chamber, the air tightened—waiting for the knock that would decide whether this carefully woven lie would finally unravel... or deepen even further.

The Empress lay back against the pillows, hands folded neatly over the blanket, breathing slow and shallow—exactly as she had practiced.

Patience, she reminded herself. Acting sick was not about looking weak. It was about looking tired.

The room had been dimmed just enough. Curtains half-drawn. Incense burned faintly, not strong enough to offend the healer's nose, only enough to suggest long, restless hours. Beside the bed, the

bowls of tonic sat untouched, their surfaces dulled by time. A few medicine scrolls lay crooked on the table, as if she had tried to read and failed.

Perfect.

She closed her eyes, lashes lowering, but her mind stayed sharp.

Outside, footsteps echoed—measured, familiar. Not hurried. Controlled.

He's coming.

The cats sensed it before anyone else. One lifted its head, ears twitching, then hopped silently onto the window ledge. The other curled tighter at the foot of the bed, pretending to sleep but clearly listening.

In the shadows near the beam, Fen Yu hovered anxiously, tugging at her sleeve.

"Are you nervous?" the ghost whispered.

"No," Lian An replied silently, without moving her lips. "Annoyed."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves, expression calm but alert.

"The healer will check your pulse. Do not rush your breathing."

Wei Rong stood like a statue near the wall, arms crossed.

"If anything goes wrong—"

"It won't," she cut in softly. "Stay still. All of you."

The footsteps stopped outside her chamber.

A pause.

Then the curtain rustled.

"Your Majesty," her maid announced quietly, voice respectful but tense, "His Majesty has arrived. The imperial healer is with him."

Lian An did not open her eyes immediately.

She let two heartbeats pass.

Then three.

Only then did she stir faintly, turning her face slightly toward the sound, as if waking from shallow rest.

"Let them in," she murmured, voice hoarse but steady.

The curtain drew back.

The Emperor entered first.

He wore his formal robe, dark and immaculate, but his gaze was fixed entirely on the bed. For a fraction of a second—so brief no one else noticed—his steps slowed.

Behind him followed the healer, carrying his case, expression grave and cautious.

Lian An felt it then.

That weight.

That pull of his attention.

She kept her eyes half-open, lashes lowered, her breathing shallow but even. When she finally looked at him, she did not smile.

She simply looked... present.

Alive.

The Emperor stopped beside her bed.

For a moment, no one spoke.

The silence stretched.

Then, quietly, he said, "You look... thinner."

Lian An almost laughed.

Instead, she answered softly, "Recovery takes time."

His jaw tightened—just slightly.

He stepped aside, gesturing to the healer.

"Check her."

The healer bowed and approached, careful, reverent. He placed two fingers at her wrist.

Lian An let her mind empty, her body sink, slowing her pulse just enough—weak, but not alarming. Tired, but steady.

Inside her chest, her heart beat calmly.

Outside, everyone waited.

The cats did not move.

The ghosts held their breath.

And the Emperor stood watching, eyes never leaving her face, as the healer began counting—unaware that the woman before him had already decided how this scene would end..

The healer's fingers remained at the Empress's wrist longer than before.

Too long.

The Emperor noticed it instantly.

"Well?" he asked, voice calm but edged with command.

The healer blinked, as if coming out of deep calculation. He withdrew his hand slowly, eyes narrowing—not in suspicion, but in disbelief.

"...Remarkable," he murmured.

Lian An kept her gaze lowered, lashes resting against pale skin. She let a faint crease form between her brows, just enough to look weak.

The healer cleared his throat. "Your Majesty," he said to the Emperor, "Her pulse is steady. Weak, yes—but no longer chaotic. The fever has subsided completely."

The Emperor's shoulders loosened a fraction.

The healer turned to the Empress. "Your Majesty, tell me—do you feel pain in your chest? Dizziness? Sudden chills?"

She shook her head slowly. "No pain," she said softly. "Only... weakness. As if my body has been drained."

The healer nodded. "That is expected. After such an illness, the body takes time to recover."

He straightened, face full of awe. "This is nothing short of a miracle. Very few survive once the symptoms reach that stage. Yet Her Majesty has not only survived—she is out of danger."

The room seemed to exhale.

The Emperor closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again, relief flickering through his gaze before being carefully buried.

"She will recover fully?" he asked.

"Yes," the healer answered firmly. "With rest, nourishing food, and gentle tonics, Her Majesty will regain her strength. No more quarantine is required. The danger has passed."

At that—

The maid who had been standing rigidly near the bed suddenly dropped to her knees.

Thud.

Her forehead hit the floor as she bowed deeply, hands trembling.

"Thank Heaven! Thank Heaven!" she cried. "Thank you, Imperial Healer! Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Tears streamed down her face. "This servant begged the gods every night. Please—please continue to protect Her Majesty, let her become healthy and strong again!"

The Emperor looked at the kneeling maid, then back at the Empress.

For the first time in days, his voice softened completely.

"Get up," he said. "She will be fine."

The maid sobbed harder, bowing again before rising shakily.

The healer packed his tools, still shaking his head in wonder. "I will adjust Her Majesty's medicine. Lighter tonics now—no harsh herbs. Strengthening, not purging."

"Do so," the Emperor said. "Personally oversee it."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As the healer withdrew, the Emperor remained beside the bed.

He looked at her—really looked at her.

Alive. Breathing. Calm.

Not fading.

"You scared everyone," he said quietly.

Lian An met his eyes at last. "I didn't intend to."

His lips curved—barely. "Rest," he said. "You don't need to pretend anymore."

If only you knew, she thought.

Outwardly, she nodded obediently.

The cats chose that moment to jump onto the bed—one curling near her arm, the other rubbing its head against the Emperor's sleeve without fear.

He didn't push it away.

For once, the room felt warm.

Safe.

And for the first time since the lie began, the Empress knew—

This Chapter of the act was truly over.