

Ghost 156

Chapter 156: announcement

The healer bowed once more and stepped out of the chamber, his footsteps echoing softly down the corridor. The Emperor followed, stopping just outside the Empress's courtyard. For a moment, he stood there, gaze fixed on the closed doors behind him, as if confirming for himself that what he had heard was real.

She survived.

No—more than that. She was safe.

He exhaled slowly, a breath he felt he had been holding fake plague for fourteen long days.

Turning sharply, he looked at his chief eunuch, who had been waiting with head lowered, nerves stretched tight these past weeks.

"Make an announcement," the Emperor said, voice firm, carrying authority that brooked no delay.

The eunuch straightened instantly. "Yes, Your Majesty."

The Emperor continued, each word deliberate. "Announce to the entire palace that the Empress has recovered. She is out of danger as of today. The plague has passed."

The eunuch's eyes widened with relief before he quickly bowed again. "This servant obeys."

"And," the Emperor added after a brief pause, his tone shifting—lighter, decisive, unmistakably pleased, "today, the palace will hold a non-vegetarian feast. All halls. All departments. Let everyone celebrate."

The eunuch nearly stumbled in his eagerness. "A feast? For everyone?"

"Yes," the Emperor said. "Tell the kitchens to prepare properly. No shortages. No excuses."

Joy burst across the eunuch's face. "This servant will see to it personally!"

He hurried away, robes swishing as he half-ran down the stone path.

Within moments, bells rang.

Clear, ringing chimes echoed through the palace—an announcement bell, long unused for good news.

Servants paused mid-step. Maids looked up from their work. Guards straightened.

Then the eunuch's voice rang out, amplified by trained callers stationed throughout the palace.

"Hear this! By Imperial decree—Her Majesty the Empress has recovered and is no longer in danger!"

Gasps rippled through courtyards.

"She survived?" "The Empress lived?" "Truly?!"

The announcement continued, joy rising with every word.

"Today, in celebration of Her Majesty's recovery, His Majesty the Emperor bestows a palace-wide feast! Meat and wine will be served to all!"

For a heartbeat, there was silence.

Then—cheers.

Not loud, not unruly—but full of relief and gratitude.

In the servants' quarters, people clasped hands and whispered prayers of thanks. In the kitchens, cooks immediately sprang into action, fires roaring to life as meat was hauled out and orders shouted. Even the guards exchanged smiles, the tension of the past two weeks finally easing.

Back in the quiet corridor, the Emperor stood alone.

The weight on his chest felt lighter.

He turned once more toward the Empress's chamber, eyes softening despite himself.

"She's really back," he murmured under his breath.

Inside, unaware of the announcement sweeping through the palace, the Empress lay quietly with her cats curled beside her—one purring softly, the other flicking its tail.

The lie had ended.

The danger had passed.

And from this moment on, nothing in the palace would be the same again.

The announcement swept through the palace like a sudden summer storm.

At first, there was disbelief.

"She... survived?" "But the plague—no one survives it." "The healer himself said her chances were slim..."

Whispers followed footsteps through corridors, slipped behind curtains, and curled around pillars like incense smoke. Shock slowly transformed into awe.

"She must have great virtue." "Heaven protected her." "The Empress's goodwill moved the gods."

Some servants clasped their hands and bowed instinctively toward the Empress's courtyard. Others murmured prayers, convinced they had witnessed a miracle. To many, it was no longer medicine or fate—it was divine protection.

But not everyone felt relief.

Lady Chen's Courtyard

The atmosphere at breakfast was stiff.

Dowager Empress sat upright, her porcelain spoon paused mid-air, eyes narrowed as the announcement echoed faintly through the halls. Across from her, Lady Chen froze, tea cup trembling slightly in her fingers.

"What did they say?" the Dowager asked coldly.

Lady Chen swallowed. "They... they said Her Majesty has recovered. She is out of danger."

Silence fell.

The Dowager placed her spoon down with a sharp clink. Her expression darkened, displeasure plain. "Recovered?" she repeated slowly. "From the plague?"

Lady Chen's lips tightened. "Yes, Mother Empress."

For a moment, neither spoke. The incense smoke curled lazily upward, thick and oppressive.

The Dowager let out a short, humorless laugh. "How interesting. So many before her died, yet she walks out untouched."

Lady Chen lowered her gaze, her fingers curling into her sleeve. "People are already calling it a miracle," she said softly. "They say Heaven favors her."

"A miracle?" the Dowager scoffed. "Or a curse."

Lady Chen hesitated, then nodded slightly, bitterness leaking into her tone. "She has always been... strange. Ever since entering the palace, misfortune follows. Now she survives something no one else does—it unsettles people."

"She has no manners," the Dowager said sharply. "No reverence. No obedience. Yet she lives."

Her eyes narrowed further. "A jinx who refuses to die."

Lady Chen forced a small smile, though her mood had sunk like a stone. "Perhaps... she was simply lucky."

"Luck does not last forever," the Dowager replied coldly. "And Heaven does not protect those who forget their place."

Lady Chen nodded, but inside, her thoughts churned.

Alive.

The Empress was alive.

The plague that was supposed to remove her... failed.

She lowered her head, hiding the tightening of her jaw.

This changes things, she thought darkly.

Very much so.

The Empress sat quietly in the courtyard, letting the winter sun warm her skin. A small table had been set beside her, piled with fresh fruit—cut pears, grapes still cool from the shade, and slices of melon glistening with juice. One cat lay sprawled across her lap like royalty, while the other sat proudly at her feet, tail flicking with lazy authority.

For the first time in days, the courtyard felt alive again.

Soft footsteps suddenly broke the calm.

"Empress—!"

Before the Empress could even turn, a familiar figure rushed in, skirts gathered awkwardly around her swollen belly.

Princess Zhi.

Eight months pregnant, breathing a little fast, her face pale with worry and relief tangled together.

"Zhi—slowly!" the Empress exclaimed, already rising.

Princess Zhi ignored everything else and threw her arms around her, holding on tightly as if afraid the Empress might disappear again.

"Thank Heaven... thank Heaven you're alive," she whispered, voice trembling. "I prayed every day. Every single day."

The Empress froze for a heartbeat—then gently wrapped her arms around her in return, careful of her belly.

"I'm fine," she said softly. "See? Sitting, eating, stealing sunlight like a cat."

Princess Zhi pulled back just enough to look at her properly. Her eyes scanned the Empress's face, her color, her posture.

"You look... healthy," she breathed out, tears finally spilling. "When I heard the announcement, my knees nearly gave out."

She placed a hand over her chest. "My heart finally feels settled."

The Empress guided her to sit beside her, pressing a cushion behind her back. "I should be the one thanking you," she said sincerely. "Your letters... and the food you sent. During quarantine, when no one could visit... they mattered more than you know."

Princess Zhi smiled weakly. "I was afraid you wouldn't even receive them."

"I did," the Empress said. "Every one."

The two women sat together under the sun, the cats now curled contentedly between them. For a moment, there was only warmth—quiet laughter as one cat attempted to steal fruit and failed miserably.

Princess Zhi laughed, truly laughed, but the sound faded too quickly.

The Empress noticed.

Her smile lingered, but her eyes... were sad.

"You're forcing it," the Empress said gently. "What's wrong?"

Princess Zhi hesitated. Her fingers twisted together in her lap.

"My husband," she finally said. "He spends most of his time with the concubine now."

The words came out flat, exhausted.

"I don't shout. I don't cry anymore," she continued quietly. "I just... wait. Every day."

The Empress felt something tighten in her chest.

"I'm lonely," Princess Zhi admitted, voice barely above a whisper. "The palace is full, but I feel like I'm alone in it."

She glanced sideways at the Empress. "You're the only one who ever truly cared about me. Who asked how I was doing—not as a duty, but because you wanted to know."

The Empress reached out and took her hand, squeezing it firmly.

"You're not alone," she said. "Not while I'm here."

Princess Zhi's eyes welled up again. "I was so afraid of losing you too."

"I'm still here," the Empress said softly. "And I'm not going anywhere."

The sun continued to shine, warm and steady, as two women—both trapped in different kinds of cages—sat together, finding comfort not in titles or duties, but in shared understanding.

For that moment, at least, the palace felt less cruel.