

Ghost 115

Chapter 115: new beginnings

The sun had softened by the time they stepped out onto the main road again. The afternoon heat was still thick, but the shadows were longer now, giving the streets a little breath. The Empress walked beside Yao Qing, the twins skipping in small excited circles ahead of them, while Wei Jie followed behind, steady and silent as always.

But the Empress's mind was somewhere else entirely.

Her brows were slightly furrowed.

Not at Yao Qing's ramblings...

Not at the crowded street...

Not even at the fact she was walking openly, dressed like a normal town girl while the palace believed she was dying.

No.

Her worry was about her ghosts.

Li Shen. Wei Rong. Fen Yu.

Usually, they were beside her constantly—arguing, teasing, fighting, complaining, giving advice, or scolding her for doing something risky.

But since morning...

Not a glimpse.

Not even a whisper.

Her steps slowed unconsciously.

Where have they gone now? Why are they so quiet? Did they fight again? Or... are they upgrading something? Planning something? Hiding something?

She pressed her lips together. When I see them, I'll ask directly. They can't hide from me forever.

"An An!" Yao Qing called, waving a hand in front of her face. "Where did your mind run off to now?"

The Empress blinked, pulled back into reality. "Nowhere."

"Liar," Lin teased, popping her head in front of the Empress.

"Were you thinking about dumplings?" Lian added.

"No," Lian An sighed. Though dumplings would be easier to handle than three mischievous ghosts.

Yao Qing clapped her hands. "Forget that for now—let's buy decorations! The restaurant needs new life. Color! Sparkle! A little charm to impress nobles."

The Empress's lips curved. "Fine. Let's go."

Buying Decorations — The Bargaining Battle

The market was alive with fragrance and noise—vendors shouting prices, silk fluttering, lanterns swinging, herbs hanging from strings.

Yao Qing grabbed the Empress's wrist and dragged her straight to a colorful stall.

"Look at this wallpaper!"

Bright red and gold patterns shimmered across sheets of paper. The twins gasped dramatically.

"And this wall hanging!" Lin pointed to a long embroidered tapestry of cranes and clouds.

"We need lights too," Wei Jie said quietly, surprising everyone. "The ceiling looks dark at night."

"Good idea," the Empress nodded.

They spent the next hour going stall to stall—

Choosing wallpaper

Choosing hanging ornaments

Choosing new lantern lights

Choosing decorative fans for the walls

Choosing beaded curtains

And arguing fiercely with vendors.

"What do you mean forty silver? It's worth twenty!" Yao Qing snapped.

"Thirty-five!" the vendor insisted.

"Twenty-five or we walk!"

"Fine! But no less!"

The Empress laughed as the twins jumped into the argument, shouting random numbers.

"Ten silver!"

"Five silver!"

"ONE SILVER!"

The vendor nearly fainted. "Go away! You little demons!"

By the end, they spent nearly 100 silver tales, split between all of them.

The Empress paid the largest share, but the twins insisted on contributing a handful of coins. Wei Jie quietly gave more. Yao Qing added her share with pride.

When they were done, everyone was sweaty, dusty, slightly angry, and extremely happy.

The Empress wiped her forehead. "That was a battle."

"We won," Yao Qing corrected proudly. "Cheap prices. Good quality."

"And bruised vendors," Lin joked.

Everyone laughed.

But laughter faded the moment they reached the tall iron gates of the slave market.

The Slave Market

The smell hit them first.

Dust. Sweat. Sickness. Desperation.

The Empress's steps slowed.

Inside the market grounds, men and women were tied together with shackles at the wrists and ankles. Their clothes were little more than rags—some strips barely covering their bodies. Their skin was sunburnt, bruised, dry, and malnourished.

A few looked too thin to stand.

A child curled near an older woman, trembling.

The twins' eyes widened in horror. Yao Qing pressed her lips tightly. Wei Jie's fists clenched.

The Empress felt her chest tighten.

"Even animals shouldn't live like this..." she whispered.

Yao Qing nodded, voice low. "This kingdom is prosperous—but not for everyone."

For a moment, none of them moved.

Their own lives were hard—tragic in many ways—but they still had:

Food.

Water.

Beds.

Work.

Hope.

These people had nothing.

The Empress inhaled deeply. "Qing... how many are here?"

Yao Qing counted silently. "Forty."

"Forty..." Lian An murmured.

Yao Qing swallowed. "We planned to buy twenty. But... seeing this..."

The twins looked up at the Empress.

"Sister An... can we take all of them?" Lin whispered.

"They look so hungry..." Lian added, voice small.

Wei Jie nodded in agreement. "We have space. And the outlets will need more people anyway."

Yao Qing hesitated. "If we take them all... we're responsible for forty lives."

The Empress lifted her chin.

"That's why we will."

Her voice was calm, steady, resolute.

Negotiating With the Slaver

The slaver noticed them and hurried over, rubbing his hands greedily.

"Young ladies! Interested in buying workers? Strong ones? Pretty ones? Useful ones? Choose any!"

The Empress ignored his theatrics. "We want to buy all forty."

He froze. "A-All? You... want everyone?"

"Yes."

His eyes gleamed with hungry profit. "One slave is one hundred silver tales. Forty slaves—four thousand silver."

Yao Qing's breath hitched slightly, but the Empress didn't flinch.

She pulled out her money pouch.

"I will pay."

The slaver's grin widened. "A pleasure doing business!"

The Empress raised a hand. "One more thing."

"Yes?"

"I want a contract. All forty will be freed the moment I pay."

The man blinked—shocked. "Freed? Y-You want to free slaves? Why buy them then?"

"My reason is mine," the Empress said simply. "Prepare the papers."

He nodded quickly — profit made him obedient.

The contract was written. The Empress and Yao Qing read it carefully, every line confirming that all forty would be legally released.

The moment the slaver stamped it, the Empress signed her name boldly.

The shackles were unlocked.

The chains fell to the dirt.

Men and women looked at each other — confused, terrified, hopeful.

Then one man stepped forward, kneeling deeply.

"You... freed us," he whispered. "Why?"

The Empress knelt down to meet his eyes.

"Because you deserve a life. Not chains."

His eyes watered.

"If you wish," she said softly, "you may work for me. We are opening restaurants across the kingdom. If you stay, I will feed you, teach you, pay you, and protect you. If you wish to go... you are free to walk anywhere."

There was silence.

Then another voice spoke.

"You freed me... I will follow."

"I too."

"We owe you our life."

One by one, all forty bowed.

The Empress felt something warm settle in her chest.

"Then come," she said gently. "Let's start your new lives."

Water, Cleaning, and Clothes

She turned to the twins and Wei Jie.

"Take them to the Whisper Bowl. Give them water. Let them wash."

"Yes, Sister An!" the twins shouted, racing to gather buckets.

Wei Jie nodded and guided the group with steady professionalism.

The Empress and Yao Qing left for the clothing market.

Clothes vendors shouted prices from every booth—cotton robes, work trousers, linen shirts, simple skirts.

The Empress approached one experienced vendor. "We need clothes for forty people. Three sets each."

The vendor's mouth fell open. "Forty sets?!"

"Three sets for forty people," Yao Qing corrected.

"That's one hundred and twenty sets!" the vendor gasped.

"Yes," the Empress said calmly. "And we need them cheap."

The vendor thought, then nodded. "I can give one set for one silver tale. Simple, sturdy, good for kitchen work."

"And deliver them to the Whisper Bowl."

"I will."

The Empress handed over 120 silver tales.

The vendor bowed deeply. "Thank you for the biggest order of my life!"

Walking Back With Hope

As they walked back, Yao Qing exhaled deeply, rubbing her eyes.

"It's going well, An An... everything's going well."

The Empress nodded. "Now we have people. Loyal ones. And enough to send two to each outlet."

"And enough workers for our own branch too," Yao Qing added happily.

"We can close the restaurant for seven days," the Empress said. "Renovate. Train. Prepare."

Her best friend smiled brightly. "We're really building something big, aren't we?"

The Empress looked toward the Whisper Bowl, where the workers hammered the beams of the future second floor.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Something that will change everything."