

Ghost 170

Chapter 170: working as a model

The night market breathed.

That was the only way the Empress could describe it.

Lanterns swayed gently in the evening breeze, their warm amber light spilling over cobblestone streets like liquid gold. The air was thick with the scent of roasted chestnuts, sizzling meat skewers, sweet pastries, and freshly brewed tea. Voices overlapped—vendors shouting prices, children laughing, musicians plucking strings, lovers whispering secrets beneath the glow of paper lamps.

It was alive.

And for the first time in a very long while, the Empress felt... alive too.

She walked beside the Emperor, her steps light, eyes wide with curiosity. In commoner clothes, with her hair loosely tied and no crown weighing on her head, she looked nothing like the woman feared in the palace. She looked young. Curious. Free.

She stopped suddenly.

"Oh—look at that!"

The Emperor turned to see her pointing excitedly at a stall filled with delicate glass lamps shaped like lotus flowers. When candles were lit inside, the petals glowed softly, shifting colors like moonlight on water.

"They're beautiful," she whispered.

He watched her face more than the lamps.

The way her eyes sparkled.

The way her lips curved into an unguarded smile.

The way she leaned forward slightly, as if the world itself had pulled her closer.

"They suit you," he said without thinking.

She blinked. "What?"

"The lamps," he corrected quickly, then added more quietly, "They suit you."

Her cheeks warmed.

She reached out, fingers hovering just above the glass, then slowly pulled her hand back.

"...Let's go," she said, forcing a casual tone. "We're just looking."

He knew what that meant.

She wants it—but won't say it.

They moved on, weaving through the crowd. She admired silk ribbons, wooden hairpins carved with cranes, embroidered shoes, painted fans. At every stall, she lingered just a heartbeat too long, then walked away.

And each time, the Emperor noticed.

Finally, they stopped in front of a jewelry stall.

Silver bracelets lay neatly arranged, some simple, others engraved with tiny symbols meant to ward off misfortune. One bracelet caught her eye—a thin silver band with a small charm shaped like a crescent moon.

She stared.

Just stared.

The vendor smiled knowingly. "Good taste, miss. That one's popular."

She swallowed. "It's... lovely."

Her fingers twitched, but she didn't reach for it.

The Emperor followed her gaze, then glanced at the bracelet's price.

Four fifty hundred copper coins.

He looked down at his empty sleeves.

No money.

She sighed softly and stepped back. "Let's go."

But as they turned, he noticed something behind the stall.

A sign.

"Model needed — Wear new designs — 500 copper coins."

The Emperor stopped.

She walked two steps ahead before realizing he wasn't beside her anymore. Turning back, she saw him staring at the sign, thoughtful.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

Instead, he turned to her and said calmly, "Wait here."

"...Wait where?"

"Here."

Before she could argue, he stepped toward the clothing stall next door.

Her brows knitted together. "Hey—where are you going?"

But he was already speaking to the vendor.

She stood there, confused, watching from a distance.

The vendor looked him up and down—tall frame, straight posture, sharp features softened by the lantern light.

His expression changed instantly.

"...You," the vendor said slowly. "You'd look good in our clothes."

The Emperor raised a brow. "I heard you need a model."

The vendor's eyes gleamed. "Very much."

Within moments, the Emperor was ushered behind a screen.

The Empress stared.

"What is he doing...?"

People began gathering.

A hush fell over the stall as the Emperor stepped out wearing a dark blue robe with silver embroidery along the sleeves. It fit him perfectly, as if tailored to his body alone.

Gasps rippled through the crowd.

"Who is that?" "So handsome!" "That robe looks incredible on him!"

The vendor nearly trembled with excitement.

"Walk," he instructed.

The Emperor did.

Slow. Steady. Confident.

He didn't need to act. Years of ruling an empire had carved authority into his bones. Even pretending to be a commoner, he moved like someone born above others.

Customers surged forward.

"I'll take that one!" "No, me!" "Do you have my size?"

The vendor laughed loudly, overwhelmed. "Slow down! Plenty of stock!"

The Empress stood frozen.

Her heart... was beating strangely fast.

She had seen him in imperial robes, in armor, seated upon a dragon throne.

But this?

This was different.

This was him—unguarded, illuminated by lantern light, admired not for his title but for his presence.

He returned behind the screen once more, then emerged in another outfit. And another.

The crowd grew.

Coins clinked.

Sales soared.

Finally, the vendor clasped his hands together. "Sir, you're incredible! Would you consider working here permanently? I'll pay you well!"

The Emperor laughed—a real laugh. "No. I already have a job."

"What job could be better than this?"

He smiled faintly. "One that doesn't let me choose my clothes."

The vendor blinked, then burst out laughing. "Fair enough!"

He pressed a small pouch into the Emperor's hand. "Your pay."

Five hundred copper coins.

The Emperor bowed slightly and returned to her.

She stared at him, mouth slightly open.

"...Where did you go?"

He held out his hand.

Nestled in his palm was the silver bracelet with the crescent moon.

Her breath caught.

"You—" she whispered, then narrowed her eyes. "Did you steal again?"

He scoffed lightly. "I worked."

"...Worked?"

"As a model."

She stared at him.

Then—she laughed.

Not politely. Not restrained.

She laughed until her shoulders shook.

"You? A model?" she teased. "Does the court know their Emperor is earning copper coins in the street?"

He leaned closer. "Do you want the bracelet or not?"

Her laughter softened.

He gently fastened the bracelet around her wrist. His fingers brushed her skin, warm and careful.

For a moment, neither spoke.

"...Thank you," she said quietly.

He looked away, suddenly aware of his heartbeat. "You liked it."

"I did."

Her smile lingered longer this time.

As they walked on, she found herself glancing at the bracelet again and again, fingers brushing the cool silver as if to confirm it was real.

A strange warmth bloomed in her chest.

Ahead, lantern light reflected off dark water.

A small dock stretched over the river, where wooden boats waited.

A sign read:

"Night Crossing — One Copper Per Person."

Her eyes lit up again.

"There's a boat," she said eagerly. "It goes to the other side!"

The Emperor checked the pouch.

A few coins remained.

"...We can go and come back."

Her smile widened. "Really?"

He nodded. "Easily."

She didn't hesitate.

They boarded the boat together, the wood creaking softly beneath their feet. As it drifted away from the shore, the night market stretched out behind them—lanterns like fallen stars, laughter echoing across the water.

The river reflected everything.

Light. Shadow. Them.

She sat quietly beside him, bracelet glinting, hair stirred by the breeze.

"This is nice," she said softly.

"Yes," he replied.

He didn't say because I'm with you.

But he thought it.

The boat glided forward, carrying them between two worlds—neither Emperor nor Empress for this brief moment, just two people sharing a night that neither would forget.

And somewhere deep inside both their hearts, something fragile, dangerous, and beautiful began to take root.

The boat slowed as it reached the other side of the river.

The Emperor stepped down first, then turned and offered his hand. This time, the Empress didn't hesitate. Her fingers slipped into his palm naturally, as if they had done this countless times before.

The moment her feet touched the ground, she froze.

Before them stretched a hidden garden.

Cherry blossom trees arched over a winding stone path, their petals drifting down like pale pink snow. Fireflies hovered in the air, glowing softly, blinking on and off like tiny stars that had lost their way. The night was quiet here—no shouting vendors, no laughter, no clatter of bowls—only the sound of leaves rustling and water flowing somewhere nearby.

"It's... beautiful," she whispered.

The Emperor watched her expression carefully. "Not many people know this place exists. The river bends in a way that hides it."

He guided her forward. Their steps were slow, unhurried. The fireflies parted gently as they walked, floating higher, as if giving them space.

At the center of the garden stood a single wooden bench beneath the largest cherry blossom tree. Its branches were heavy with flowers, petals falling steadily onto the ground—and onto them.

"There's no one," she said quietly, glancing around.

He nodded. "At this hour, never."

They sat.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Petals landed softly on her hair, on her sleeve, on his shoulder. The fireflies gathered closer, their light reflecting in her eyes. She rested her hands in her lap, fingers brushing the bracelet he had bought her earlier.

She realized something then.

Her heart was calm.

No fear. No alertness. No calculation.

Just... peace.

She turned slightly, looking at him from the corner of her eye.

"I feel safe here," she said honestly.

The Emperor's fingers tightened slightly on his knee.

"...With me?" he asked, voice low.

She nodded. "Yes."

The word seemed to settle between them, heavy and fragile at the same time.

He looked at the cherry blossoms above them. "That's rare. Even in the palace... safety is an illusion."

She smiled faintly. "Here, it doesn't feel like that."

Silence returned—but it was comfortable.

The kind that didn't demand words.

A firefly landed briefly on the back of her hand before drifting away. She watched it go, her lips curving softly.

"I never imagined," she said after a while, "that one night outside the palace would feel more peaceful than all the years inside it."

He turned to her fully now. "If you wanted this kind of life... would you leave?"

She was surprised by the question.

She thought for a moment. Then she shook her head slowly. "Not yet."

His chest loosened slightly—an emotion he didn't name.

The cherry blossoms continued to fall, surrounding them in quiet pink snowfall, as if the world itself had chosen to pause and let them breathe.

And for the first time since their marriage, neither Emperor nor Empress felt alone.