

Ghost 176

Chapter 176: the dawgress decree

The sound of footsteps echoed first.

Measured. Unhurried. Heavy with authority.

Every concubine instinctively straightened when the Dowager Empress entered the courtyard.

She arrived flanked by six senior maids, their steps perfectly synchronized. Each maid carried an item in her arms—carefully wrapped, deliberately displayed. One held a rolled crochet pattern stitched in fine silk thread. Another carried a lacquered box filled with paint brushes and pigments. A third bore a small guqin, polished and elegant. Others held folded embroidery frames, pottery molds, and scrolls of calligraphy.

The message was unmistakable.

This was not a casual summons.

This was an announcement.

The Dowager Empress seated herself slowly, her expression composed, her gaze sweeping across the gathered women like a blade passing over silk.

No one dared to speak.

Even Lady Chen lowered her eyes respectfully. Shin Gu sat with her hands folded, calm and unreadable. Princess Zhi's posture was polite but distant, her face pale from recent events. Lian An remained still, her back straight, her face serene.

Only Fen Yu muttered faintly beside her ear, invisible to all.

"This woman never does anything without layers."

The Dowager Empress lifted her hand.

The courtyard maids immediately stepped forward, laying the items neatly on long tables placed before the gathering. Crochet hooks glinted. Ceramic clay rested in clean white cloth. Ink stones reflected the sunlight.

Only then did the Dowager Empress speak.

"An imperial festival will be held in the palace."

Her voice was steady, firm, leaving no room for interruption.

"A grand market festival. Merchants, artisans, and craftsmen from across the kingdom will be invited to enter the palace grounds."

A ripple of restrained surprise moved through the crowd.

The palace—open to common artisans?

The Dowager Empress continued as if she hadn't noticed.

"Painters will sell their art. Potters their wares. Weavers their cloth. Scholars their calligraphy. Every individual will present what they are skilled at."

Her gaze sharpened.

"And the women of the inner palace will not be exempt."

Some concubines stiffened.

Others exchanged cautious glances.

The Dowager Empress's eyes swept across them again, slower this time.

"Each woman of the palace will prepare one item."

She raised a finger.

"One."

"It may be a painting, embroidery, crochet, music performance, pottery, calligraphy, or any craft she is proficient in."

Her voice hardened slightly.

"These items will be sold in designated palace tents during the festival."

Silence.

Then—

"All proceeds," the Dowager Empress said clearly, "will be donated to the welfare of the kingdom."

The words settled heavily in the air.

Charity.

Public scrutiny.

Skill displayed openly.

This was not merely generosity.

This was judgment.

Princess Zhi's fingers curled subtly in her sleeve. She leaned slightly toward Lian An and whispered, "This is... unusual."

Lian An nodded faintly. "Very."

Fen Yu scoffed. "She wants to measure everyone."

Li Shen added calmly, "And remind them that even palace women are subjects of the realm."

The Dowager Empress's gaze paused briefly on Princess Zhi—just long enough to make her uncomfortable—before moving on.

"This festival," she continued, "will demonstrate that the palace does not live detached from the people."

Her eyes lingered this time on Lady Chen and Shin Gu.

"It will show refinement, virtue, and usefulness."

A clear message.

Those who displayed skill would gain favor.

Those who failed would be remembered.

"You will have limited days to prepare," the Dowager Empress said. "I expect sincerity. Not shortcuts."

Her gaze finally reached Lian An.

For a fraction of a second, it sharpened.

"You," the Dowager Empress said coolly, "have spent much time outside the palace recently."

The courtyard seemed to inhale.

Lian An remained calm.

"I assume," the Dowager Empress continued, "you will have no trouble preparing something appropriate."

Lian An bowed her head slightly. "I will comply."

Fen Yu hissed softly, "She's testing you."

Princess Zhi glanced at Lian An, concern flickering in her eyes.

The Dowager Empress waved her hand.

"The festival will last several days. Palace women will rotate attendance at the selling tents."

Her voice lowered.

"You will be seen. You will be judged. Conduct yourselves accordingly."

With that, she rose.

The maids immediately gathered the displayed items and followed her out, leaving behind a courtyard buzzing with restrained unease.

Only after the Dowager Empress disappeared did the whispers begin.

"Selling crafts in public...?" "What if my embroidery isn't good enough?" "Is this really for charity?"

Lady Chen smiled gently, though her eyes were calculating. "It is a noble idea."

Shin Gu said nothing, her gaze lowered, thoughtful.

Princess Zhi turned fully toward Lian An now.

"What will you make?" she asked softly.

Lian An paused.

Images flashed through her mind—knives, fire, dough, precision, discipline.

Food.

She smiled faintly.

"I already know," she said.

Princess Zhi relaxed slightly. "That's good."

Fen Yu laughed quietly. "Of course you do."

Li Shen nodded. "And unlike others, yours will actually benefit the people."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "Just be careful. This festival is a battlefield without weapons."

Lian An looked toward the empty path the Dowager Empress had taken.

She understood.

This festival wasn't about charity alone.

It was about position, favor, and exposure.

And whatever she chose to present—

It would place her directly under the eyes of the palace and the kingdom.

Her lips curved slightly.

"Then let them look," she murmured.

The festival was coming.

And she would not be unprepared.

After the Dowager Empress left, the courtyard did not return to normal.

It couldn't.

Lian An sat there long after the other palace women began whispering among themselves, their voices rising and falling like nervous birds. Some were already boasting about their embroidery. Others quietly panicked. A few smiled confidently, already imagining praise and favor.

But Lian An felt only one thing.

Trouble.

When she finally returned to her chamber, the silence hit her harder than the Dowager's words.

She sat at the low table, hands folded, staring at nothing.

"One item," she murmured.

"One skill."

Fen Yu floated upside down in front of her face, arms crossed. "So? Which one are you choosing? Painting? Calligraphy? Music?"

Wei Rong snorted from the beam. "She can't even draw a straight line."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves calmly. "Statistically speaking, her handwriting is functional at best."

Lian An glared at all three. "You're not helping."

Fen Yu flipped upright and landed beside her dramatically. "I'm helping by telling the truth. If you pick embroidery, you'll embarrass yourself."

"I can learn," Lian An said stubbornly.

Wei Rong raised an eyebrow. "In how many days?"

That... stung.

Still, she refused to give up without trying.

That evening, she asked her maid to bring embroidery tools—needle, thread, silk cloth. She sat properly, posture straight, copying the pattern the maid demonstrated.

Ten minutes later—

The thread tangled.

The stitches were uneven.

The flower she tried to embroider looked less like a flower and more like something that had survived a battlefield.

Fen Yu leaned in, squinting. "Is that... a flower or a dying insect?"

Lian An's eye twitched.

"I'm improving," she said tightly.

Li Shen peered over her shoulder. "Objectively, it has gotten worse."

She stabbed the needle into the cloth and stood up abruptly.

"Enough."

She paced the room, frustration building with every step.

"I'm not good at this," she admitted quietly. "Even if I force myself to learn, it will never compare to women who've done this their entire lives."

Wei Rong nodded. "And people won't buy something out of pity."

That was the real problem.

Even if she finished something—

Who would buy it?

A badly stitched handkerchief? A crooked painting? Uneven calligraphy?

The festival wasn't just about making something.

It was about selling it.

And Lian An knew the palace.

No one spent money lightly. Especially not on inferior goods.

She stopped pacing and sat again, suddenly tired.

"I can only cook," she said softly.

The room fell quiet.

Fen Yu blinked. "Only cook?"

Wei Rong frowned. "Only?"

Li Shen tilted his head thoughtfully.

Lian An continued, voice low but firm. "I don't know embroidery. I don't paint. I don't play instruments. I don't crochet. I've never lived a life where those things mattered."

Her fingers curled slightly.

"But cooking... that's the only thing I know I'm good at."

Fen Yu floated closer, expression complicated. "But food isn't listed."

"Exactly," Lian An said bitterly. "This is a festival of crafts. Art. Refinement."

She laughed once, humorless.

"What place does cooking have among silk and jade?"

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "You're thinking too small."

She looked up.

Li Shen spoke calmly. "Food is not lesser. It is simply... overlooked."

Fen Yu nodded slowly. "You feed people. They remember that longer than a pretty stitch."

Lian An hesitated. "But will the palace allow it?"

Wei Rong smirked. "They didn't forbid it."

That thought settled in her chest, heavy but warm.

Still, doubt lingered.

"What if I fail?" she whispered. "What if no one buys it? What if they laugh?"

Fen Yu reached out and flicked her forehead lightly. "You survived plague rumors, palace politics, ghosts, and an emperor. And you're afraid of selling food?"

Wei Rong added bluntly, "If they don't buy it, it's their loss."

Li Shen nodded. "And if they do... it will be undeniable."

Lian An closed her eyes.

She thought of the Whisper Bowl. Of hungry people. Of hands reaching for warm food. Of smiles after the first bite.

When she opened her eyes again, the hesitation was gone.

"I'll cook," she said.

Fen Yu grinned. "Good. Because if you tried embroidery again, I'd haunt you."

Lian An exhaled, a small smile forming.

Cooking wasn't the safest choice.

It wasn't traditional.

It wasn't refined.

But it was hers.

And for the first time since the Dowager Empress's announcement, her heart felt steady.

"Then," she said quietly, "I'll make something worth buying."

The ghosts exchanged glances.

This festival had just become interesting.