

Ghost 202

Chapter 202: when the crowd whisper

The morning of the festival arrived like a tide of color.

From the highest pavilion of the palace to the farthest open courtyard, silk banners fluttered in the breeze. Red, gold, and jade ribbons were tied to pillars. Lanterns swayed gently, catching sunlight like scattered fire. Incense smoke curled lazily into the sky, carrying the scent of sandalwood and blooming plum blossoms.

The palace gates opened wide.

Merchants from distant towns, craftsmen from rural villages, wandering artists, potters, embroiderers, calligraphers, painters, and travelers poured in through the stone archway. Some carried baskets of wares. Some brought scrolls wrapped in silk. Others held wooden boxes tied with string, their faces full of hope and nervous excitement.

The festival that happened once every three years had begun.

Inside the main courtyard, long wooden tables were arranged in neat rows. On each table lay the works prepared by the palace women—embroidered cloths, crocheted scarves, painted fans, ceramic cups, carved hairpins, small toys, silk purses, and hand-painted lantern shades.

Soft music played from the pavilion. Servants guided guests politely.

Laughter, curiosity, admiration—

the palace buzzed with life.

The Display of Talent

Lady Chen's long embroidered coat lay draped over a carved stand. The stitches were fine and precise, the floral pattern elegant. Many noblewomen paused to admire it.

"How delicate."

"Such steady hands."

"No wonder she is praised."

Princess Zhi's small embroidered toys were placed beside her handkerchiefs. The tiny stuffed rabbits and birds were adorable, soft to the touch, and clearly made with care. Mothers passing by smiled and pointed them out to their children.

"How gentle."

"She must have a soft heart."

"These would soothe a child."

Shin Gu's gloves and hat were displayed neatly, dyed in muted colors, stitched evenly. They were simple but well made, practical for winter. Some merchants nodded appreciatively.

"Good craftsmanship."

"These will sell well."

"Practical and clean work."

One by one, the palace women's works drew praise. The crowd moved slowly, murmuring, discussing, choosing what they wanted to purchase later.

The festival felt warm. Lively. Full of human noise.

The Scarf

And then—

At the far end of the table, among delicate works and polished crafts, lay a single scarf.

Red and black thread.

The stitches were uneven.

Some loops were tight, others loose.

The edges wavered slightly instead of forming a clean line.

It looked... awkward.

Not terrible enough to be thrown away.

Not good enough to be admired.

Just—

Out of place.

A woman paused in front of it.

"...This one," she said hesitantly. "Did a servant place it wrongly?"

Another leaned closer. "It looks... like a beginner's practice."

A third whispered, "Why is this displayed here? Even apprentices in the textile workshop do better."

The murmurs spread like ripples in water.

"Is this a mistake?"

"Who put this here?"

"This doesn't belong among palace works."

"Perhaps it was mixed in by accident."

People leaned in, then leaned back.

Brows furrowed.

A few snickered quietly behind sleeves.

Some shook their heads.

"This is embarrassing."

"They should remove it."

"The palace women are known for refinement. This... lowers the standard."

The Empress's Eyes

From the pavilion steps, the Empress stood quietly.

She had been walking through the display with Yao Qing earlier, smiling politely at others' work, offering light praise. But when her gaze fell on the red-and-black scarf—

Her steps slowed.

Her breath stilled.

There it was.

Placed neatly on a silk cloth.

Under a small wooden plaque that read:

Crochet — Palace Entry

Her work.

The scarf she had struggled over for days.

The scarf she had stitched with aching fingers and quiet determination.

The scarf that had been scolded, teased, and doubted.

She heard the whispers.

Not loudly.

But clearly.

Each murmur slipped into her ears like thin needles.

Her fingers curled slowly at her side.

So... this is how it looks to others.

For a moment, she felt that familiar heaviness press down on her chest.

Not anger.

Not humiliation.

Just—

A quiet, sinking disappointment.

Ghost Reactions

Fen Yu hovered behind her shoulder, eyes wide.

"...They're so rude," she whispered. "If I were alive, I'd throw that scarf at their heads."

Wei Rong frowned. "They judge by polish, not effort."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves, gaze calm. "Crowds value perfection. They do not value process."

The Empress let out a slow breath.

"I knew this would happen," she said quietly. "It's fine."

Fen Yu floated around to her front. "You don't look fine."

"I am," the Empress said. "I didn't come to win praise."

Wei Rong glanced toward the scarf again. "Then why does your heartbeat sound louder?"

She froze.

"...It does?"

Li Shen nodded. "Slightly."

She huffed a small laugh. "You're all too observant."

The Crowd Grows

More people gathered near the scarf.

Some pointed openly now.

"Maybe it belongs to a palace maid."

"Why would they display this?"

"Who approved this?"

A merchant woman whispered to her friend, "If they sell this, no one will buy it."

Her friend replied, "Even beginners do straighter edges."

Their words weren't cruel.

Just careless.

And that somehow hurt more.

The Empress Steps Forward

The Empress took a step toward the table.

Yao Qing noticed and moved with her, brows furrowing. "Are you okay?"

The Empress nodded.

She reached out and gently adjusted the scarf's edge, straightening it where it had curled slightly from the breeze.

The crowd paused.

A few people looked at her.

Some recognized her as the Empress.

Whispers shifted.

"That's the Empress..."

"She made this?"

"No way..."

"She's known for cooking, not crafts..."

The Empress lifted her gaze.

Her voice was calm.

"Yes," she said. "I made it."

The courtyard fell into an awkward hush.

Someone coughed.

A woman bowed hurriedly. "Y-Your Majesty... we didn't mean—"

The Empress smiled faintly. "It's alright. You're not wrong."

She touched the scarf lightly.

"I learned crochet three days ago," she continued. "This is my first piece. It's clumsy. The stitches are uneven. It doesn't deserve praise."

The honesty startled them.

Some looked embarrassed.

Some looked uncertain.

"But," the Empress added softly, "I wanted to place it here anyway."

"Why?" someone asked without thinking.

She looked around at the rows of beautiful work.

"Because this festival is about showing what we can create," she said. "Not about pretending we're all masters. Everyone here started somewhere."

Silence lingered.

Then a woman with calloused hands—clearly a craftswoman from outside the palace—stepped forward.

"...Your Majesty," she said hesitantly. "The tension in the thread here... it shows you were afraid of making mistakes. That's why the stitch tightened."

The Empress blinked.

The woman smiled faintly. "But you didn't give up. That shows persistence."

A few heads nodded.

Another artisan murmured, "The color choice is bold."

Someone else added, "It's not good, but... it's honest."

The whispers shifted.

Not praise.

But—

Understanding.

The Emperor's Gaze

From the higher platform, the Emperor had been watching.

He had seen the scarf.

He had heard the whispers.

He had watched her step forward.

When the crowd fell silent at her words, something in his chest loosened.

She didn't hide.

She didn't retreat.

She stood there—calm, imperfect, honest.

And somehow, that made her shine more brightly than the polished silks around her.

His lips curved slightly.

Quiet After the Noise

As the crowd dispersed, the scarf remained on display.

Still crooked.

Still imperfect.

But no longer mocked openly.

Yao Qing nudged the Empress. "You were brave."

The Empress exhaled. "I was just tired of pretending."

Fen Yu grinned. "I still think it has personality."

Wei Rong nodded once. "And now, it has a story."

Li Shen added, "Stories add value."

The Empress glanced at the scarf again.

It didn't look beautiful.

But it didn't look shameful anymore either.

She turned away from the table, heart steadier than before.

The festival had only just begun.

And for the first time—

She wasn't afraid of being seen as imperfect.

The Empress turned away from the display table and walked back toward the pavilion, her posture calm, her steps unhurried. To anyone watching from afar, she looked composed, dignified, unshaken.

But the palace was never quiet for long.

The moment her figure disappeared behind the curtain of silk banners, the whispers returned—soft at first, then braver, sharper, like needles finding thin skin.

"So that scarf was really made by the Empress?"

"I thought it was a servant's practice piece."

"Three days of learning and she dares to display it among real works?"

Someone laughed behind their sleeve.

"No wonder His Majesty prefers Lady Chen. At least Lady Chen has real skills."

Another voice chimed in, lower but crueler, "Exactly. One is elegant, talented, and refined. The other... only knows how to cook."

A group of noblewomen stood together, their expressions carefully polite, their words anything but.

"She's too plain. A woman in the palace should be graceful in arts."

"Cooking is for servants."

"Even her embroidery is laughable. How embarrassing."

One woman leaned closer to another and whispered, "Perhaps that's why His Majesty keeps distance from her. A man of the world cannot admire such roughness."

Their laughter was quiet, practiced, polite enough not to be punished.

But the venom was real.

The Ghosts Hear Everything

Fen Yu's face twisted with anger. "They're so shameless! If I could throw something at them—"

Wei Rong's eyes darkened. "Humans wound each other with words more easily than blades."

Li Shen watched the group of whispering women calmly. "They are projecting their envy. Lady Chen's favor threatens their pride. The Empress's honesty unsettles them."

Fen Yu clenched her fists. "They're saying His Majesty loves Lady Chen because the Empress is useless!"

The Empress stopped walking.

Not abruptly.

Just enough to let her shadow still.

She had heard them.

Not every word.

But enough.

She didn't turn back.

She didn't confront them.

She simply breathed in slowly.

So this is how they see it.

Her chest tightened—not from anger, but from a familiar ache she had learned to live with.

She had always known.

Cooking would never be seen as "art" here.

Honesty would never be valued over polish.

And love... would always be measured by comparison.

Fen Yu hovered closer, voice trembling with frustration. "Why do they get to say that about you?"

The Empress smiled faintly. "Because people believe stories more than they believe people."

Wei Rong glanced toward the Emperor's pavilion. "Do their words matter to you?"

The Empress paused.

"...They used to," she admitted quietly. "Not anymore."

But even as she said it, the memory of their whispers lingered.

No wonder His Majesty prefers Lady Chen.

At least Lady Chen has real skills.

The words didn't break her.

But they brushed against old scars.

The Emperor Notices

From the pavilion, the Emperor saw the Empress slow her steps.

He noticed the subtle change in her shoulders.

The momentary stillness.

The faint tightening of her jaw.

He followed the direction of her gaze.

And saw the cluster of women.

Their heads were close.

Their eyes flicked toward her, then away.

He didn't hear their words.

But he knew the shape of gossip.

His expression cooled.

Lady Chen stood near the Dowager, smiling gently as she accepted praise for her embroidered coat. She didn't say anything cruel. She didn't mock the Empress.

But her presence—

her perfection—

made the comparison inevitable.

The Emperor's gaze lingered on Lady Chen for a heartbeat.

Then shifted back to the Empress.

She was walking away from the display now, her steps light, her face composed.

But he knew that look.

She was pretending it didn't matter.

The Empress's Quiet Resolve

Back in the shade of the pavilion, Yao Qing touched the Empress's sleeve.

"They're idiots," she muttered. "Don't let it get to you."

The Empress chuckled softly. "If I let idiots decide my worth, I'd never stand again."

Fen Yu puffed her cheeks. "I still want to scare them."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "Let their words rot in their own mouths."

Li Shen inclined his head. "You stood honestly before the crowd. That is rare. Rare things are often mocked before they are understood."

The Empress looked back once more at the scarf.

It still lay there—crooked, imperfect, unremarkable.

And yet...

She felt strangely lighter than before.

"They can mock," she said. "It won't change what I can do."

She turned away from the display and walked toward the garden path, her steps steady.

Behind her, the whispers continued.

But for the first time—

They didn't follow her heart.