

Ghost 203

Chapter 203: the palace learned to breathe

The morning sun rose over the palace roofs like a gentle promise.

By the time the first drum was struck, the entire palace had already transformed.

Colorful banners fluttered between the tall pillars. Long silk ribbons were tied around carved stone railings. Red and gold lanterns swayed softly in the breeze, their tassels brushing against one another like whispers of celebration. From every courtyard, laughter drifted into the open air. The sound of wooden carts rolling over stone paths mixed with the calls of vendors and the excited chatter of visitors who had come from distant lands.

The festival had begun.

For once, the palace did not feel cold or heavy with power.

It felt alive.

A Sea of People, A Sea of Colors

Merchants from far regions set up their tents in neat rows. Potters arranged shining clay bowls and teapots on wooden shelves. Painters hung bright scrolls of landscapes and birds. Women who had mastered embroidery laid out handkerchiefs, coats, scarves, and small purses, each stitch reflecting years of patience and skill.

There were musicians playing flutes and drums. Children laughed as they ran between stalls, their parents calling after them with helpless smiles. Noblewomen leaned closer to examine crafts made by commoners, their eyes filled with surprise.

"So beautiful... I never imagined village embroidery could be this fine."

"This pottery glaze is rare. I've only seen this in the southern lands."

"Look at these hand-carved hairpins... each one is different!"

Coins clinked. Bargaining voices rose and fell. Small pouches of silver changed hands. The palace, once a place of rigid rules, now felt like a bustling market square.

The Empress Walks Among the Crowd

The Empress walked quietly through the festival grounds.

She wore simple but elegant robes, her hair loosely pinned, her expression calm. No one bowed deeply to her. Many didn't even recognize her. To them, she was just another noble lady enjoying the festival.

And for the first time in a long while, she liked that.

She stopped in front of a stall where an old woman sold small embroidered purses.

"These stitches are very fine," the Empress said gently.

The old woman smiled proudly. "It took me ten years to master this pattern. My granddaughter helped choose the colors."

The Empress bought one without bargaining.

She paused at a pottery stall and lifted a small cup. The glaze was uneven, but the warmth of handmade work lingered in her palms.

At another tent, she watched a young girl paint cherry blossoms on silk. The girl's hands trembled, but her eyes shone with hope.

"Take your time," the Empress said softly. "Art is patient."

The girl nodded, cheeks red with excitement.

Behind her, Fen Yu hovered, eyes sparkling. "So many shiny things..."

Wei Rong stood guard-like, scanning the crowd. Li Shen observed the stalls thoughtfully, murmuring about how human creativity left traces in the air.

The Empress felt something she hadn't felt in the palace before.

Connection.

These people were not here to flatter her.

They were here to live, to sell, to laugh, to celebrate.

Food Stalls and Warm Smiles

The scent of grilled meat and sweet pastries drifted through the air.

A group of cooks from the palace kitchens had set up a stall to sell festival snacks. Steam rose from bamboo baskets filled with dumplings. Oil sizzled as flatbreads cooked over open flames.

"Hot dumplings! Fresh dumplings!"

The Empress smiled faintly at the sound.

She bought a small plate and tasted one.

It wasn't as refined as her own cooking.

But it was warm.

And it tasted like effort.

Nearby, she saw Princess Zhi seated at a table, gently sipping soup, her face calmer than it had been in days. The cats lay curled near her feet, purring softly as children nearby laughed at them.

Yao Qing waved when she saw the Empress. "This festival is a success! Look at the crowd!"

The Empress nodded. "People needed this."

For once, sorrow wasn't the loudest sound in the palace.

The Emperor Watches from Afar

From a shaded pavilion, the Emperor observed the festival.

He saw the crowd moving freely.

He saw nobles and commoners standing side by side.

He saw smiles that did not belong to duty.

And he saw the Empress walking through it all, her presence quiet, her steps light.

She didn't stand on a high platform.

She didn't demand attention.

She listened.

Something in his chest softened.

This was the palace she had brought to life.

For once, power wasn't being displayed.

Humanity was.

Lady Chen stood beside the Dowager, speaking softly. The Dowager nodded, occasionally glancing at the crowd with a measured gaze.

The Emperor didn't hear their words.

He only watched the Empress pause at a stall, speak to a child, and smile.

And for a moment, the weight of the throne felt lighter.

Joy That Spread Like Fire

As the day deepened, the festival grew louder.

Coins piled up in bowls.

Laughter echoed between pillars.

Music grew bolder, drums beating in rhythm with dancing feet.

People praised the palace women for their crafts.

They praised the Emperor for allowing such openness.

They praised the Dowager for organizing the event.

But beneath all the praise, something else was happening.

The palace was changing.

Walls that once separated status and worth were thinning, even if only for a day.

The Empress stood at the edge of the festival grounds and watched the crowd surge forward, hungry for beauty, hungry for life.

She realized then—

Even if her scarf was mocked.

Even if whispers followed her steps.

This festival was real.

This joy was real.

And she had been part of making the palace breathe again.

She turned away with a small, quiet smile.

For today, the palace was not a cage.

It was a celebration.

The noise of the festival slowly faded as the Empress walked back toward her courtyard.

Behind her, laughter still rose into the night sky. Lantern light flickered across palace walls. Music echoed faintly, carried by the breeze. The joy of the crowd lingered in the air, warm and heavy, like the aftertaste of sweet wine.

But as she passed beneath the archway of her own courtyard, the world grew quieter.

The lanterns here were dimmer.

The stones beneath her feet were familiar.

The silence wrapped around her shoulders like a thin shawl.

She paused near the entrance, her gaze drifting toward the direction of the festival grounds once more. For a moment, she allowed herself to remember the whispers she had heard earlier that day.

"Even beginners can do better than that scarf..."

"So that's the Empress's work?"

"No wonder the Emperor prefers Lady Chen..."

She exhaled slowly.

Her steps grew heavier as she crossed the courtyard and entered her chambers.

Ghosts Who Couldn't Stay Silent

The moment the door closed behind her, three figures burst into view.

Fen Yu rushed toward her first, skirts fluttering, eyes wide with urgency.

Wei Rong followed, arms crossed but concern etched into his stern face.

Li Shen drifted in last, his expression unusually soft.

"Well?" Fen Yu blurted out. "Did anyone buy your scarf?"

The Empress didn't answer immediately.

She placed the small pouch she carried onto the table, then slowly removed the scarf from inside. The red-and-black threads caught the lantern light. The stitches were uneven. The pattern crooked. The edges slightly twisted.

"No," she said quietly. "No one bought it."

Fen Yu's mouth fell open. "No one?!"

Wei Rong clicked his tongue. "Those people have no taste."

Li Shen sighed. "Crowds tend to follow perfection. They don't understand effort."

The Empress gave a small, tired smile and sat down.

"I knew it wouldn't sell," she said. "I only learned for a few days. I can't compare to women who've practiced for years."

She lowered her gaze to her hands.

"They weren't wrong to laugh. It really is... bad."

A Quiet Crumble

The Empress had faced swords.

She had faced schemes.

She had faced accusations, exile, sickness, and death.

But somehow, the laughter of strangers over something she had poured her effort into hurt in a different way.

It wasn't rage she felt.

It was smallness.

Fen Yu floated closer and peered at the scarf, frowning. "It's not that ugly..."

Wei Rong leaned in. "The stitches are messy, yes. But you didn't even know how to hold a crochet hook a few days ago."

Li Shen nodded. "Art is not born. It is endured."

The Empress let out a short laugh. "Endured... I like that."

She rested her chin in her hand.

"I just thought... maybe for once, I could make something with my hands and have people like it. I cook, yes, but they praise my cooking as the Empress. This scarf... it was only me."

Her voice grew softer.

"And they didn't like it."

Fen Yu's Dramatic Comfort

Fen Yu suddenly crossed her arms and huffed.

"So what if they didn't buy it?" she snapped. "Do you know how many men admired my beauty when I was alive? Did that make my life happy? No! They were all idiots!"

Wei Rong raised a brow. "You were tricked by a fake ghost husband."

Fen Yu pointed at him. "And you trusted him too!"

Li Shen coughed to hide a laugh.

Fen Yu turned back to the Empress, her tone gentler. "You tried something new. That alone is brave. Most people never try because they're scared to be bad at something."

The Empress looked up.

Fen Yu continued, surprisingly sincere, "You cook because you practiced for years. If you practiced crochet for years, you'd be better than those women too. They didn't wake up skilled."

Wei Rong nodded slowly. "Strength is built. Not given."

Li Shen added quietly, "Even we three needed centuries to become what we are now. And we still make mistakes."

A Different Kind of Strength

The Empress leaned back against the chair.

"When I transmigrated here, I thought survival was enough. Then I wanted freedom. Then I wanted respect. Now... I wanted something smaller. To be good at something gentle."

She lifted the scarf again.

"I don't regret trying."

Fen Yu smiled brightly. "That's the spirit! Next time, make something uglier and scare them into buying it."

Wei Rong snorted.

Li Shen shook his head. "Your encouragement methods are questionable."

The Empress laughed—softly at first, then more freely.

Her chest felt lighter.

Reframing Failure

She folded the scarf carefully and placed it in the chest beside her bed.

"I'll keep it," she said. "Not because it's good. But because it reminds me that I tried."

Wei Rong nodded approvingly. "Failure recorded is progress remembered."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "One day, you'll look at this and laugh."

Fen Yu tilted her head. "And one day, you'll sell scarves for gold and make the Dowager choke on her tea."

The Empress burst out laughing.

A Quiet Promise to Herself

Later that night, after the lanterns dimmed and the festival noise finally faded into distant echoes, the Empress sat by the window.

She watched fireflies drift lazily in the garden.

She touched the small calluses forming on her fingers from days of crochet.

They stung.

But they were proof.

"I won't stop trying new things just because I'm bad at them," she murmured.

The ghosts hovered nearby, oddly quiet.

For once, they didn't tease.

They simply stayed with her.

And in that quiet company, the Empress realized something simple but powerful:

Failure did not make her small.

Giving up would have.

Tonight, she rested.

Tomorrow, she would try again.