

Ghost 204

Chapter 204: the scarf finds it's owner

The festival grounds were already awake when the Empress returned the next morning.

Lanterns still swayed from wooden frames, though their flames were dimmer in the daylight. Stalls bustled with merchants shouting prices, artists calling for attention, and palace women standing beside their creations, faces bright with anticipation and pride. The air smelled of ink, wood shavings, roasted chestnuts, and fresh silk.

She walked slowly, her steps hesitant.

Yesterday's whispers still lingered in her mind.

"Even beginners can do better..."

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

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

She told herself she had already made peace with it. She hadn't come today expecting anything different. She only wanted to take one more look at the display, to confirm to herself that trying once and failing was not the end of the world.

Her eyes drifted toward the section where palace women's handiwork was displayed.

Handkerchiefs fluttered in neat rows.

Gloves lay folded on silk cloth.

Crocheted hats were pinned carefully onto wooden stands.

And then—

Her heart skipped.

The small wooden board where her scarf had been placed was empty.

No red-and-black fabric lay there.

The space was bare.

For a moment, she thought her eyes were deceiving her. She stepped closer. Her fingers brushed the wood.

It was truly gone.

The Question No One Answered

She turned to the palace maid overseeing the display.

"Excuse me," the Empress said softly, careful not to draw attention. "The scarf that was here yesterday... where is it?"

The maid's lips twitched.

"It was sold."

The Empress froze.

"...Sold?" she repeated.

"Yes," the maid said, bowing her head slightly, though her eyes sparkled with suppressed amusement. "Someone bought it early this morning."

The Empress felt a strange rush in her chest—half disbelief, half embarrassment.

"Who bought it?" she asked.

The maid covered her mouth, trying not to laugh. "We were told not to say."

Another attendant nearby giggled openly. "You'll know soon enough."

The Empress stared at them.

They only smiled.

She walked away slowly, her thoughts tangled.

Who would buy that scarf?

It was uneven. Crooked. The stitches were wrong.

Was someone mocking her? Buying it as a joke?

Her steps faltered.

For the first time since yesterday, doubt crept back into her heart.

The Walk Back Felt Different

The path back to her courtyard felt longer.

The sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the stone path with shifting shadows. Servants passed her, carrying baskets of festival goods, laughing softly among themselves.

Everything looked the same.

And yet, the Empress felt different.

Someone had taken her work.

Someone had chosen it.

The thought was unsettling.

She didn't know whether to feel happy or uneasy.

Ghostly Celebration... Then Sudden Concern

The moment she entered her courtyard, three figures materialized.

Fen Yu nearly flew into her face. "You're back early! Did someone laugh at your scarf again?"

Wei Rong leaned against the pillar, arms crossed. "Or did you trip over your pride?"

Li Shen tilted his head, studying her expression. "Your heartbeat is faster. Something happened."

The Empress hesitated, then said, "My scarf is gone."

All three froze.

"...Gone?" Fen Yu echoed.

"It was sold," the Empress added.

For a second, silence.

Then—

Fen Yu squealed. "SOLD?! Someone bought it?!"

Wei Rong's eyes widened. "Who?"

Li Shen blinked. "Impossible."

The Empress shook her head. "They wouldn't tell me who bought it. They only laughed."

Fen Yu clapped her hands. "See?! I told you! Someone has taste!"

Wei Rong scoffed. "Or someone has strange hobbies."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Either way, it means someone valued what you made."

They all congratulated her at once, voices overlapping.

"You did it!"

"First work sold!"

"Next time, make ten and sell them all!"

The Empress smiled, but the smile didn't reach her eyes.

The Unease Beneath the Joy

Fen Yu noticed first.

"You're not happy," she said slowly. "Why do you look like you lost something instead of gained it?"

Wei Rong narrowed his eyes. "Something's wrong."

Li Shen's gaze softened. "Tell us."

The Empress sat down, fingers twisting together in her lap.

"My scarf... it wasn't good," she said quietly. "You all know that."

The three ghosts nodded.

"It was crooked," Fen Yu admitted.

"The pattern was uneven," Wei Rong added.

"The tension was wrong," Li Shen concluded.

The Empress gave a weak laugh. "Exactly. So who would buy it?"

They fell silent.

Fen Yu frowned. "Maybe someone who didn't care if it was perfect."

Wei Rong said slowly, "Or someone who didn't buy it for the scarf itself."

Li Shen's eyes darkened slightly. "Sometimes, objects are bought not for their quality, but for their meaning."

The Empress's heart sank.

"You mean... pity?" she whispered.

The three ghosts exchanged glances.

Fen Yu bit her lip. "Maybe... but even pity requires someone to care enough to spend money."

Wei Rong nodded. "Someone chose it."

Li Shen spoke softly, "And choice, even flawed, is still choice."

The Empress leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling.

She didn't know what unsettled her more.

That her scarf had sold.

Or that she had no idea why.

The Question That Wouldn't Leave

That night, as the courtyard fell quiet, the Empress lay on her bed, staring into the darkness.

Someone in this palace had bought her scarf.

Not because it was beautiful.

But because it was hers.

And somehow... that made her heart ache more than the laughter ever did.

Next Chapter — The Scarf on the Emperor's Shoulders

The Empress's courtyard felt strangely quiet that afternoon.

Even the sunlight seemed dull.

She sat by the window, staring at nothing, her chin resting on her hand. The breeze fluttered the curtains, but her thoughts refused to move.

Her scarf had been sold.

Someone had bought the crooked, uneven piece she had struggled over for three days and three nights. The fact should have made her feel proud. Instead, it left a hollow ache in her chest.

She didn't know why.

Was it because she didn't believe in herself?

Or because she didn't believe anyone could genuinely like something she had made?

Her three ghost companions hovered nearby, trying their best not to disturb her mood.

Fen Yu floated upside down from the beam.

Wei Rong leaned against the wall, pretending not to worry.

Li Shen sat by the window, observing her quietly.

"She's sulking again," Fen Yu whispered.

Wei Rong snorted. "She sulks every time she doubts herself."

Li Shen said calmly, "This time, the doubt is different. It is not about failure. It is about being seen."

The Empress suddenly sighed.

"I keep thinking..." she murmured. "Who would buy something like that? It wasn't beautiful. It wasn't worthy of being sold in a palace festival. Compared to Lady Chen's coat or Princess Zhi's embroidery, my scarf was... embarrassing."

Fen Yu opened her mouth to protest, but the Empress cut her off.

"Don't lie to comfort me," she said softly. "You all said it was bad too."

The three ghosts fell silent.

That was when whispers drifted in from outside the courtyard.

Two palace maids passed by, unaware that the Empress was close enough to hear.

"I heard His Majesty bought the Empress's scarf."

"You're joking! That crooked thing? Compared to Lady Chen's coat, it's nothing."

"Well, people say His Majesty is in love with the Empress now. That's why he bought it."

Another maid scoffed.

"In love? More like pity. Poor Empress... she tried so hard and still made something like that. His Majesty probably didn't want her to be humiliated."

The Empress stiffened.

Her fingers curled tightly around the edge of the table.

Fen Yu shot up. "They're talking nonsense!"

Wei Rong's expression darkened. "If I could slap maids, I would."

Li Shen narrowed his eyes. "Words spoken carelessly are sharper than knives."

The Empress forced herself to stand.

"So that's what people think," she said quietly. "Love... or pity."

Her heart felt heavier than before.

The Scholar's Discovery

Elsewhere in the palace, Li Shen drifted through the corridors, his expression unusually serious.

He had overheard enough whispers.

At first, he had dismissed them as gossip. But one name kept repeating in the murmurs of servants and guards alike.

The Emperor.

Curiosity—and something close to dread—pulled him toward the Emperor’s courtyard.

The guards outside could not see him. He passed through the gates like mist.

Inside, the Emperor sat alone on the stone steps of his courtyard.

He wasn’t reading memorials.

He wasn’t practicing calligraphy.

He was... smiling.

Not the cold, controlled smile of an emperor.

Not the polite, distant smile he wore in court.

But a soft, distracted smile.

And draped around his shoulders was a familiar red-and-black scarf.

Li Shen froze midair.

That crooked stitch.

That uneven edge.

That awkward pattern.

There was no doubt.

It was the Empress's scarf.

The Emperor lifted a hand, adjusting it slightly, his fingers lingering on the fabric as if afraid it might disappear.

Li Shen felt something shift inside his chest.

So it was true.

The rumors were wrong in their reasoning—but not in their conclusion.

The Emperor had indeed bought the scarf.

And he was wearing it.

The Bickering Interrupted

Li Shen returned swiftly to the Empress's courtyard, where Fen Yu and Wei Rong were in the middle of yet another argument.

"I told you not to scare the cat like that!" Fen Yu snapped.

"I didn't scare it! It walked through me!" Wei Rong retorted.

"You floated through the bowl again!"

"That bowl was already crooked!"

They were so busy fighting that they didn't notice Li Shen until he raised his hand and released a small pulse of spiritual pressure.

Both ghosts froze mid-argument, mouths open.

"What happened?" Fen Yu demanded. "Why did you stop time?"

Wei Rong scowled. "What's so urgent that you interrupted our important discussion?"

Li Shen looked at them solemnly.

"The Empress's scarf," he said slowly, "was bought by the Emperor."

Both ghosts stared at him.

Then—

They burst out laughing at the same time.

Fen Yu wiped imaginary tears. "That's the best joke you've told all year."

Wei Rong snorted. "The Emperor? The one who only knows Lady Chen? Buying that scarf? Impossible."

Li Shen didn't smile.

"He is wearing it," Li Shen said quietly. "Right now. In his courtyard. And he is smiling to himself."

The laughter died instantly.

Fen Yu's eyes widened.

Wei Rong's mouth fell open.

"...You're serious?" Fen Yu whispered.

Li Shen nodded.

The spiritual pressure faded. The two ghosts moved at once, shooting out of the courtyard like arrows.

Seeing Is Believing

They hovered outside the Emperor's courtyard, peeking through the gate like two nosy children.

And there it was.

The Emperor sat in the fading afternoon light.

The scarf lay loosely around his shoulders.

He lifted a corner of it, his thumb brushing the uneven stitching.

Then, as if amused by his own thoughts, he smiled again.

Fen Yu clutched Wei Rong's arm.

"It's real..."

Wei Rong swallowed hard.

"The dog-like Emperor who follows Lady Chen... is wearing the Empress's scarf?"

They stared in silence.

The Emperor, sensing nothing, rose and walked inside, the scarf trailing softly against his robe.

The two ghosts slowly floated back to Li Shen.

Their expressions were no longer mocking.

They were stunned.