

## **Ghost 205**

Chapter 205: the scarf

The Empress's courtyard had gone quiet again.

Not the peaceful kind of quiet—

but the kind that pressed on the chest.

The late afternoon sun slanted across the stone floor, drawing long shadows from the pillars. The Empress sat beside the small table, her fingers loosely holding the edge of her sleeve. She looked calm on the surface, but her thoughts were tangled beyond repair.

The scarf.

The Emperor.

Her scarf... on his shoulders.

She still couldn't wrap her mind around it.

Across the room, the three ghosts hovered together, whispering furiously like conspirators plotting against fate itself.

Fen Yu paced back and forth in the air, her translucent skirt fluttering with every sharp movement.

"I still don't believe it," she said for the tenth time. "The Emperor bought that scarf? The same Emperor who barely looks at her and spends all his time with Lady Chen?"

Wei Rong crossed his arms, his expression dark. "That's exactly why I don't trust it. Men don't suddenly change without reason."

Li Shen remained silent for a moment, his gaze resting on the Empress's downcast face.

"She looks like she's about to doubt herself again," he said quietly.

Fen Yu stopped pacing and turned sharply. "That's what scares me. She finally did something brave. She finally put her work out there. And now this... confusing nonsense from the Emperor is going to mess with her head."

Wei Rong snorted. "He's dangerous in a different way. If he were openly cruel, it would be easier. But this half-kindness, half-distance? It's worse."

Li Shen nodded slowly. "Intentions matter more than actions. Buying her scarf is an action. But why he did it... that is the intention we don't know."

Fen Yu folded her arms, floating upside down beside the beam. "I don't want her to be hurt again. She already thinks she's inferior. Now people are saying the Emperor bought it out of pity. Even if he didn't mean it that way, she's going to hear those words and believe them."

The Empress, who had been pretending not to listen, suddenly spoke.

"You're all too loud," she said softly.

The three ghosts froze.

Fen Yu immediately drifted down beside her. "We're just worried about you."

The Empress smiled faintly. "I know."

She looked at the floor for a long moment before lifting her gaze.

"Tell me honestly," she said. "Do you think he bought it because he pitied me?"

Wei Rong opened his mouth.

Li Shen shot him a look.

Fen Yu answered carefully, "We don't know why he bought it. But we do know one thing."

The Empress waited.

"He is not a simple person," Fen Yu said. "And his feelings toward Lady Chen are complicated. That's why we don't trust what he's doing now."

The Empress's fingers tightened slightly around her sleeve.

"He has always been with Lady Chen," she said quietly. "Everyone in the palace knows that. Even the servants whisper about it. If he wanted to make Lady Chen happy, why buy my scarf? Why not buy her coat, or praise her embroidery?"

Wei Rong scoffed. "Because he doesn't need to. Lady Chen already has his attention. You don't."

The words were blunt.

Too blunt.

Fen Yu glared at Wei Rong. "You're not helping."

Wei Rong looked away, guilt flickering across his face. "I'm just saying what she's already thinking."

The Empress didn't deny it.

That was the worst part.

Her mind kept circling the same question.

What does he want to prove?

---

The Weight of Old Wounds

The Empress stood and walked to the window, staring out at the courtyard where servants moved quietly, unaware of the storm inside her heart.

"He never stands up for me in public," she said slowly. "He protects me when it suits the situation. He scolds me when it doesn't. He is gentle one moment, distant the next. And now... he wears my scarf."

Fen Yu floated closer, her voice softer. "That's why we're afraid. Mixed signals are more dangerous than clear rejection."

Wei Rong added, "If he truly loved Lady Chen, he wouldn't do things that confuse you. If he truly cared about you, he wouldn't keep you at arm's length."

Li Shen spoke gently, "He may not even understand his own heart. Power and responsibility have buried his emotions for too long."

The Empress let out a quiet breath.

"I don't want to misunderstand him," she said. "But I don't want to misunderstand myself either."

Fen Yu smiled sadly. "That's because you're kind. Too kind."

Wei Rong shook his head. "Kindness is what gets people hurt in this palace."

The Empress laughed faintly at that.

"True."

She turned back toward them.

"I don't want to hope for something that isn't real. If he bought the scarf to make himself feel better, or to quiet the palace gossip, or to show the Dowager that he's being considerate... then it has nothing to do with me."

Li Shen's gaze softened. "Then treat it as nothing to do with you."

The Empress nodded.

"That's what I'll do."

But her heart didn't quite believe her own words.

---

Ghosts' Silent Pact

Later that night, after the Empress fell asleep, the three ghosts gathered again.

Fen Yu sat cross-legged in the air, pouting. "She pretends she's fine, but I can feel it. She's shaken."

Wei Rong clenched his jaw. "I don't like this Emperor. He confuses her."

Li Shen looked toward the closed door of the Empress's chamber. "Whether his intentions are good or not, the result is the same. She is affected."

Fen Yu nodded fiercely. "Then we protect her."

Wei Rong raised an eyebrow. "From the Emperor?"

"From disappointment," Fen Yu corrected. "And from false hope."

Li Shen folded his hands behind his back. "We will watch him. If his actions continue to hurt her, intentionally or not, we intervene."

Wei Rong smirked slightly. "I've been waiting for an excuse."

Fen Yu sighed. "Don't punch the Emperor. That causes too much trouble."

Wei Rong clicked his tongue. "No promises."

They hovered in silence for a moment, the weight of their silent pact settling between them.

Whatever the Emperor's reasons—

They would not allow the Empress to be toyed with.

---

## The Empress's Quiet Resolve

Inside her chamber, the Empress lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

The image of the scarf on the Emperor's shoulders wouldn't leave her mind.

She closed her eyes.

"I won't misunderstand," she whispered to herself. "I won't hope for things I can't afford to hope for."

Outside, the palace lanterns flickered.

And somewhere in the distance, the Emperor adjusted the scarf around his neck—

unaware of the storm of doubt and fear his small, silent gesture had caused.

The news reached Lady Chen's chamber quietly.

Not through formal announcement, not through servants meant to inform her—but through whispers that slipped beneath doors, drifted along corridors, and curled into the ears of maids who thought no one important was listening.

By the time the message reached her, it had already grown sharp edges.

"The Emperor bought the Empress's scarf."

"The ugly one."

"He's wearing it."

"He smiled."

The words stabbed deeper than any insult ever could.

Lady Chen sat before her mirror, her long hair falling like dark silk over her shoulders as her maid gently brushed it. The room smelled faintly of incense and fresh flowers, carefully arranged to soothe the senses. Everything in her chamber was beautiful. Perfect. Polished.

Yet the reflection staring back at her looked... unfamiliar.

Her smile was frozen.

Her eyes had gone cold.

"Who said this?" she asked softly.

Her maid hesitated. "The servants from the festival grounds, My Lady. They saw His Majesty wearing the scarf when he passed the inner corridor. Some said he adjusted it himself."

Lady Chen's fingers tightened around the jade comb in her hand.

Adjusted it himself.

That small detail burned.

She dismissed the maid with a gentle wave, her voice calm, as if she had heard nothing worth reacting to. Only when the door closed did her composure finally crack.

The comb slipped from her fingers and hit the table with a sharp sound.

She stared at her reflection.

The Empress's scarf.

That crooked, amateur piece of work.

That thing... was now on the Emperor's shoulders.

Her chest tightened.

She had spent years perfecting herself for him.

Her posture, her words, her clothes, her patience, her tears, her silence when she was hurt—everything was carefully measured so she could remain the woman who soothed him, the one who stood by him when his world was heavy.

She learned the guqin because he once praised its sound.

She studied poetry because he admired refined speech.

She endured the Dowager's cold treatment.

She tolerated the palace's cruel hierarchy.

She had given him warmth when the world gave him pressure.

And now...

He wore another woman's scarf.

Not Lady Chen's carefully embroidered cloak.

Not her refined handiwork.

But the Empress's flawed, uneven, poorly stitched scarf.

Something snapped inside her.

Not loudly.

But deeply.

---

The First Crack

Lady Chen stood and walked slowly to the window, looking out at the palace grounds. The festival lanterns were still being taken down, their glow lingering faintly in the twilight.

She remembered how the Emperor used to sit in her courtyard in the evenings, listening to her play the zither.

She remembered the way he once told her, "Your presence calms me."

She remembered thinking...

That someday, calm would turn into love.

But lately, he came less often.

He stayed longer in the Empress's courtyard.

He ate the Empress's cooking.

He defended the Empress before the Dowager.

He wore the Empress's scarf.

Lady Chen laughed quietly to herself.

"So this is how it begins."

Her reflection in the windowpane showed a woman who looked gentle—but whose eyes were calculating.

She was not naive.

She understood men.

Affection rarely shifts suddenly without reason.

Something had changed.

And she could feel it slipping from her grasp.

---

Jealousy, Wound, and Resolve

A maid knocked hesitantly.

"My Lady... the Dowager asks if you will come for tea later."

Lady Chen turned back to the mirror, her face already composed.

"Yes. Tell her I will be there shortly."

The door closed again.

Lady Chen's smile returned—soft, obedient, harmless.

But inside her chest, her thoughts moved like blades.

She thought of the Empress.

That woman who cooked in kitchens like a commoner.

That woman who embarrassed herself with crochet.

That woman who had once been dismissed as inferior.

And yet...

The Emperor's eyes lingered on her now.

Not the polite glance of duty.

Not the distant respect of obligation.

Something else.

Something Lady Chen had waited years to see.

And now it was no longer hers alone.

Her nails pressed into her palm.

"I can't let this continue."

She had worked too hard.

She had waited too long.

She had endured too much humiliation in silence.

She would not lose now.

Not to a woman who didn't even know how to embroider properly.

---

The Fear Beneath the Calm

She sat down slowly, her breath measured.

What frightened her most was not the scarf.

It was what the scarf represented.

The Emperor did not care about objects.

He cared about meaning.

If he wore that scarf despite knowing it was poorly made, it meant the scarf itself was not important.

The person who made it was.

That realization hurt more than any insult.

Her heart pounded.

He's changing.

And if he's changing...

Then I'm losing him.

The thought made her chest ache.

She had always believed the Empress was not a threat.

The Empress had never competed for his attention.

Never tried to charm him.

Never tried to please him.

She existed quietly, like background noise.

And yet...

Sometimes, indifference was more dangerous than pursuit.

---

Lady Chen's Decision

Lady Chen rose, smoothing her sleeves.

Her expression was gentle.

Her mind was sharp.

"I need to act," she murmured to herself.

Not recklessly.

Not openly.

She knew better than to provoke the Emperor directly.

If she tried to pull him away from the Empress too aggressively, he would resent her.

So she needed subtlety.

Positioning.

Timing.

She needed to remind him of who had always been by his side.

She needed to reawaken familiarity.

She needed to create situations where he would rely on her again.

And perhaps...

She needed to ensure the Empress made a mistake.

Not a big one.

Just enough to remind the Emperor that the Empress was unsuitable for the role she was beginning to occupy in his heart.

Lady Chen's smile curved faintly.

"I've survived this palace for years," she whispered. "One scarf won't defeat me."

Her eyes hardened.

"But I won't wait until it's too late."

---

The Mask Returns

When Lady Chen stepped out of her chamber to visit the Dowager, she looked exactly as she always had.

Graceful.

Gentle.

Devoted.

No one saw the storm beneath her calm exterior.

No one heard the quiet vow forming in her heart.

But the palace itself seemed to sense the shift.

As if something subtle, dangerous, and deliberate had just begun to move.