

Ghost 206

Chapter 206: proudly showing

Chapter — The Uneven Scarf and the Wind That Softened a King

The festival grounds were brighter than ever.

It was the last day of the palace festival, and the courtyard overflowed with lanterns, silk banners, and the warm noise of people laughing, bargaining, and praising the talents of the palace women. From noble ladies to visiting merchants from distant lands, everyone crowded the stalls where paintings, pottery, embroidery, coats, scarves, handkerchiefs, and small trinkets were displayed.

Almost everything had been sold.

The palace maids rushed around, collecting empty display stands, while eunuchs counted silver and copper coins to prepare for the donation to the kingdom's welfare fund. The festival had been a great success — far greater than anyone had expected.

But today, the atmosphere was different.

People were whispering.

Not about the paintings.

Not about Lady Chen's elegant coat.

Not about Shin Gu's neatly stitched gloves.

Not about Princess Zhi's gentle handkerchiefs.

They were whispering about one thing.

The Emperor.

Because the Emperor had appeared at the festival grounds... wearing a scarf.

Not just any scarf.

The uneven, crooked red-and-black scarf made by the Empress.

The Wind, the Scarf, and the Shock

A cold wind swept through the courtyard, lifting the hems of robes and making lanterns sway slightly.

The Emperor stepped forward from the side path, his long black cloak fluttering behind him.

And around his neck...

The scarf.

The stitches were uneven.

The pattern was crooked in places.

The edges weren't aligned properly.

It was clearly made by someone inexperienced.

The moment people noticed, the entire courtyard fell into a stunned silence.

Then—

A wave of whispers erupted.

"That scarf... isn't that the Empress's?" "He's wearing it... in public?" "But it's not even that well made..." "He really bought that?" "Isn't Lady Chen's coat much finer?" "Why would the Emperor wear this instead?"

Some people covered their mouths, shocked.

Some stared openly.

Some noble ladies looked as if their worldview had cracked.

The Emperor walked calmly through the crowd, utterly unaffected by the attention. The scarf fluttered slightly against his chest as the wind passed, and instead of looking embarrassed...

He looked content.

A rare, faint smile curved his lips.

To others, it looked like arrogance.

To those who truly observed, it looked like warmth.

What the Emperor Thought

He remembered the way the Empress had sat under the lamp, eyes red from strain, fingers trembling as she forced herself to pull thread through cloth.

He remembered how she bit her lip when the teacher scolded her.

He remembered how she had tried to smile and say it was fine, even when her hands were sore.

She was a beginner.

She had only learned for a few days.

Yet she had stayed up late, stitching and undoing and stitching again.

He had seen her exhaustion.

He had seen her frustration.

So when he saw that scarf displayed among flawless works...

He had felt something tighten in his chest.

People might mock it.

People might ignore it.

People might think it embarrassing.

But he did not.

To him, it was proof of effort.

Proof of stubbornness.

Proof that she tried, even in a place that humiliated her.

He had bought it without hesitation.

Not because it was beautiful.

But because she had made it.

And because she was his wife.

No one else had the right to own something made by her hands.

The Palace Whispers

As the Emperor walked through the festival grounds, people bowed hurriedly, still staring at the scarf.

"He's really wearing it..." "He must love the Empress deeply..." "But he's always with Lady Chen, isn't he?" "Then why would he do this?" "Maybe he's changing..."

Some whispered with admiration.

Some whispered with envy.

Some whispered with disbelief.

Among the crowd, Lady Chen stood stiffly beside the Dowager.

Her fingers clenched slowly around her sleeves.

Her eyes fixed on the scarf.

Not the Emperor.

The scarf.

It was uneven.

It was crude.

It was inferior to her own carefully crafted coat.

And yet...

He was wearing it.

Pride surged in her chest — sharp and bitter.

So this is what she's become to him...

The Empress Doesn't Know

Inside her courtyard, the Empress had no idea.

She had returned earlier, unwilling to face the festival again after hearing whispers about her scarf being mocked. She sat with her three ghost companions, pretending not to care.

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The Moment She Finds Out

Later that evening, as the festival neared its end, the Empress was dragged back out by her ghosts, who insisted on "seeing the disaster area one last time."

When she reached the courtyard...

She froze.

Because she saw him.

Standing beneath the lantern light.

The Emperor.

Wearing her scarf.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Her mind went blank.

That crooked pattern.

That uneven stitch.

That loose thread she'd tried to hide.

She recognized every flaw.

Because she had made it.

The wind lifted the ends of the scarf slightly, brushing against his chest.

He noticed her standing there.

Their eyes met.

For a moment, the world went quiet.

People around them faded into background noise.

He walked toward her.

Slowly.

Calmly.

As if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"You came," he said softly.

Her voice came out hoarse.

"...Why are you wearing that?"

He looked down at the scarf, then back at her.

"It's warm."

She stared at him.

"That's not the point."

A corner of his lips lifted.

"I saw you working day and night on it."

She didn't know what to say.

Her heart thumped loudly in her ears.

"It's uneven," she muttered.

"So are people," he replied.

She blinked.

"I didn't want anyone else to buy it," he continued, voice low. "It's yours. You made it. Why should anyone else wear it?"

Her chest tightened.

The wind brushed past them again.

He didn't move the scarf away.

Instead, he adjusted it.

Carefully.

As if afraid to damage it.

"I like it," he said. "And I like that you made it."

She didn't realize her eyes had gone wet until her vision blurred slightly.

"...You're strange," she murmured.

His gaze softened.

"Only when it comes to you."

The Crowd's Reaction

Behind them, the crowd erupted into whispers again.

"So he really bought it for her..." "He even wore it publicly..." "That's not pity. That's affection." "He looks... gentle."

The Dowager noticed too.

Her expression was unreadable.

Lady Chen's nails dug into her palms.

Princess Zhi watched quietly, a faint sadness and warmth mingling in her eyes.

Prince Liang glanced at the Emperor, then at the Empress, and for the first time... felt uncertain about his brother's heart.

The Emperor's Quiet Decision

As they stood beneath the lanterns, the Emperor realized something.

He no longer cared what people thought.

Not about the scarf.

Not about her lack of skill.

Not about palace rules.

Not about expectations.

He only cared that she smiled — even if it was small, hesitant, and embarrassed.

The wind blew again.

The scarf fluttered.

And for once, the winter cold did not feel cold at all.

The lantern light bathed the festival courtyard in gold, but not everyone standing there felt warmth.

Lady Chen stood beside the Dowager Empress, her posture perfect, her smile gentle, her hands folded gracefully in front of her. From afar, she looked like the image of elegance and calm.

But her eyes...

Her eyes were fixed on the scarf around the Emperor's neck.

The red-and-black threads that were uneven.

The crooked pattern that should have been laughed at.

Yet the Emperor wore it openly.

Not hidden beneath his cloak.

Not removed when he entered public view.

He wore it proudly.

Lady Chen felt something tighten in her chest.

She had spent nights crafting her coat.

She had carefully chosen silk.

She had embroidered every edge with care.

And yet...

He wore the Empress's imperfect scarf.

A bitter taste rose in her mouth.

So this is how it is now...

She lowered her gaze, her expression still gentle to anyone watching. Only her fingers betrayed her — curling slowly into her palm, nails pressing into soft skin.

The Dowager Empress noticed.

Her eyes narrowed.

She followed Lady Chen's line of sight and saw it too.

The scarf.

Her lips thinned.

That woman's handiwork.

Publicly worn by the Emperor.

Her voice was cold when she spoke, though soft enough for only those beside her to hear.

"So shameless," the Dowager murmured. "To show such crude work in front of nobles and foreign guests."

Lady Chen forced a small, obedient smile.

"Your Majesty is kind-hearted," she replied. "He must be trying to encourage the Empress."

The words were polite.

But inside, her heart was not calm.

Encourage her?

Then what about me?

Shin Gu's Eyes

Not far from them, Shin Gu stood quietly, her figure half-hidden behind a pillar.

Her expression was calm.

Too calm.

Her gaze slid from the Emperor's scarf... to Lady Chen's stiff posture... to the Dowager's darkened eyes.

Then, very slowly, a faint curve appeared at the corner of her lips.

No one noticed.

No one was watching her.

But something cold stirred behind her eyes.

So this is the crack, she thought.

The Dowager was displeased.

Lady Chen was wounded.

The Emperor was openly showing affection.

Hearts were unsettled.

Jealousy was blooming.

And jealousy was the easiest soil to plant poison in.

Shin Gu lowered her eyes, hiding the glint within them.

She stepped closer to Lady Chen, her voice soft and careful.

"Sister Chen," she said gently, "His Majesty is only being considerate. After all... the Empress worked so hard."

Lady Chen's smile did not change.

But her breath hitched, just slightly.

"Of course," she replied. "I understand."

Shin Gu watched her closely.

Understood that tightness in her jaw.

That tension in her shoulders.

You understand, Shin Gu thought, but you do not accept.

And that was enough.