

Ghost 276

Chapter 276: Walking Away with Dignity

Walking Away with Dignity

The morning that should have been filled with celebration—

Felt heavy.

Quiet.

Unforgiving.

—

Inside the Empress's chamber at the palace residence, everything had changed.

The warmth of last night.

The laughter.

The sense of belonging—

All of it now stood in contrast to what was about to happen.

—

The Empress stood before the mirror.

—

Slowly.

One by one—

She removed her ornaments.

—

The golden hairpin.

The jade earrings.

The necklace gifted by her family.

—

Each piece placed aside with calm hands.

—

No hesitation.

No regret.

—

Then—

She reached for her robes.

—

The rich fabric of an Empress.

Heavy.

Elegant.

Powerful.

—

She removed it.

—

And wore instead—

A plain, simple dress.

—

Rough cloth.

No embroidery.

No color of status.

—

Just—

Ordinary.

—

Behind her—

The three ghosts stood silently.

—

For once—

They weren't bickering.

—

They watched.

—

Because something about this moment—

Felt different.

—

Final.

—

A knock came at the door.

—

The guards.

—

"Her Majesty."

"The Dowager's order."

—

The door opened.

—

Two palace guards stepped in.

Holding a bundle.

—

They placed it on the table.

—

"Simple clothing for the shrine."

"You are to reside there."

"Two meals a day."

"Minimal contact."

—

Their tone was formal.

Cold.

Detached.

—

The Empress didn't react.

—

"...I understand."

—

She picked up the bundle.

—

No argument.

No resistance.

—

The guards bowed and left.

—

The door closed.

—

Silence.

—

Then—

Explosion.

—

"This is too much!" the female ghost shouted.

—

"They are humiliating you!" the general growled.

—

The scholar's voice turned cold,

"...This is no longer punishment. This is isolation."

—

The Empress sat down slowly.

Holding the simple clothes.

—

"...It's fine."

—

All three ghosts froze.

—

"...Fine?" the female ghost repeated.

—

The Empress smiled faintly.

—

"This palace..."

"...has always been like this."

—

Her gaze lowered.

—

"No matter what I do..."

"I'm wrong."

—

A pause.

—

"So I stopped trying."

—

The words—

Soft.

But heavy.

—

The general ghost clenched his fists.

"If we had bodies—"

—

"We'd destroy them," the female ghost added.

—

The scholar sighed,

"...This is injustice."

—

Then—

Suddenly—

The female ghost said,

"Let's leave."

—

The Empress blinked.

"...What?"

—

"Let's run away!"

—

"Yes," the general nodded.

"Elope from this cursed palace!"

—

The scholar added thoughtfully,

"...It is possible. With planning."

—

The Empress stared at them.

Then—

She laughed.

—

A soft laugh.

But real.

—

"You all are ridiculous."

—

"We're serious!" the female ghost insisted.

—

The Empress shook her head gently.

—

"No."

—

Her voice firm now.

—

"I won't run."

—

The ghosts fell silent.

—

"If I leave like that..."

"People will say I was guilty."

"That I did something wrong."

—

She stood up.

—

"I didn't."

—

Her gaze steady.

—

"So I will leave..."

"...with dignity."

—

The words settled.

—

Heavy.

Resolute.

—

The ghosts looked at her.

—

Then—

The general nodded slowly.

"...As expected of you."

—

The scholar added,

"Then we stay."

—

"We guard you," the female ghost said firmly.

—

"We can't enter the shrine..."

"But we'll stay outside."

—

"We won't let anything happen to you."

—

The Empress smiled.

—

"...Alright."

—

She picked up the bundle.

—

And walked out.

—

The Walk Through the Palace

The corridor stretched long ahead.

—

Servants stopped as she passed.

—

Whispers followed.

—

"The Empress..."

"She's been punished..."

"Shrine duty..."

—

But she didn't stop.

—

Her steps calm.

—

Steady.

—

Behind her—

The ghosts floated.

—

Arguing again.

—

"She should have run!"

"No, dignity matters!"

"Both are valid options—"

—

"...Can you all be quiet?" the Empress said softly.

—

They didn't.

—

And she smiled.

—

Princess Zhi's Arrival

In another courtyard—

Princess Zhi froze mid-stitch.

—

"What?"

—

Her maid nodded urgently.

"It's true."

—

Without hesitation—

She stood.

—

Dropped everything.

—

And ran.

—

The Meeting

She found her—

Walking alone.

—

"Empress!"

—

The voice echoed.

—

The Empress stopped.

—

Turned.

—

Princess Zhi reached her.

Breathless.

Eyes filled with emotion.

—

"You don't have to do this!"

—

"I'll talk to the Dowager!"

"I'll beg her!"

—

The Empress shook her head gently.

—

"No."

—

"I accept it."

—

"...Why?" Princess Zhi's voice trembled.

—

"You are the Empress!"

—

"You shouldn't wear this!"

"You shouldn't live in the shrine!"

—

The Empress smiled softly.

—

"I don't mind."

—

Princess Zhi's eyes filled with tears.

—

"This is wrong..."

—

"You opened a restaurant..."

"You cooked..."

"That's not a sin!"

—

Her voice grew stronger.

—

"People should learn from you!"

—

"You showed independence!"

—

"You showed courage!"

—

"Everyone..."

"...is proud of you."

—

The Empress froze.

—

For a moment—

She didn't speak.

—

Then—

She stepped forward.

—

And hugged her.

—

Princess Zhi froze.

—

Then held her tightly.

—

"I know," the Empress whispered.

—

"I know."

—

They stayed like that for a moment.

—

Then—

Princess Zhi pulled back slightly.

—

"...I'll visit you."

—

"I'll bring food."

—

"I won't let you be alone."

—

The Empress smiled.

—

"I know you won't."

—

Elsewhere — Lady Chen's Chamber

—

Laughter.

—

Soft.

Controlled.

—

Lady Chen sat elegantly.

Tea in hand.

—

"So... she's gone."

—

Her maid nodded.

—

Lady Chen leaned back.

—

"...Good."

—

Her lips curved slightly.

—

"At least now..."

"...she won't be around him."

—

Her eyes gleamed faintly.

—

"This is my chance."

—

She didn't know—

—

That removing the Empress—

—

Would only make the Emperor realize—

—

What he was losing.

—

Back to the Empress

—

The shrine gates appeared ahead.

—

Quiet.

Sacred.

Distant.

—

The Empress stopped for a moment.

—

Behind her—

The palace.

—

Ahead—

Isolation.

—

The ghosts hovered behind her.

—

"We're here," they said.

—

She smiled.

—

"...I know."

—

Then—

She stepped forward.

—

Not as a defeated woman.

—

But as someone—

Who chose her path.

—

Even if it meant—

Walking alone.

A Quiet Beginning

The shrine stood at the edge of the palace grounds—distant enough to feel separate, yet close enough to remind one of where they came from.

When the Empress stepped through its gates, the air changed.

Cooler.

Softer.

Quieter.

—

A faint scent of incense lingered in the wind.

Soft chanting echoed somewhere deeper within.

And unlike the palace—

There were no whispers.

No judgment.

No watching eyes filled with hidden intentions.

—

Only stillness.

—

A monk approached her.

Dressed in simple robes, his expression calm and welcoming.

"Welcome."

—

He did not bow deeply.

Did not show fear or formality.

Only respect.

—

"You must be Her Majesty."

—

The Empress nodded slightly.

"...I will be staying here."

—

The monk smiled gently.

"Then you are not a guest."

"You are one of us."

—

The words were simple.

But they felt... different.

—

He gestured for her to follow.

"I will show you your room."

—

They walked along a narrow stone path.

Trees lined both sides.

Leaves rustled softly.

—

Soon—

They reached a small room.

—

The monk opened the door.

—

Inside—

It was simple.

—

A wooden bed.

A small desk.

A single chair.

A wardrobe.

Two shelves.

And a window that allowed soft light to enter.

—

Nothing luxurious.

Nothing excessive.

—

But—

Peaceful.

—

"This will be your space," the monk said.

"If you need anything, you may ask."

—

The Empress stepped inside.

Looked around slowly.

—

Then nodded.

"...Thank you."

—

The monk bowed lightly and left.

—

The door closed.

—

Silence filled the room.

—

The Empress placed her bundle down.

—

Ran her fingers lightly over the wooden desk.

The window.

The bed.

—

No gold.

No silk.

—

Yet—

It felt lighter.

—

"...This is enough."

—

She began arranging her things.

—

Folding the simple clothes.

Placing them neatly in the wardrobe.

—

Cleaning the shelf.

Adjusting the bed.

—

Each movement—

Calm.

Deliberate.

—

For the first time in a long while—

There was no rush.

—

No pressure.

—

When she finished—

She stood by the window.

Looking outside.

—

The shrine courtyard was visible.

—

People moved around quietly.

—

Some were sweeping.

Some were carrying water.

Some sat in meditation.

—

No one argued.

No one whispered.

—

Everyone simply...

Lived.

—

The Empress watched for a moment.

—

Then—

A decision formed.

—

"...I will use this time."

—

Her eyes steadied.

—

"To grow."

—

"To cultivate."

—

"To understand this power."

—

Enlightenment.

—

The thing that had begun to change everything.

—

If she was here—

She would not waste it.

—

She stepped out of the room.

—

The air brushed gently against her face.

—

And for the first time—

She felt it clearly.

—

Freedom.

—

Outside the Shrine

Hidden beyond sight—

The Emperor stood at a distance.

—

Watching.

—

He had seen everything.

—

Her arrival.

Her calm acceptance.

Her quiet strength.

—

She wore simple clothes.

Walked without hesitation.

—

Not once—

Did she look back.

—

"...She didn't even hesitate."

—

His chest tightened slightly.

—

"...Not even once..."

—

He had expected—

Something.

—

Resistance.

Anger.

A plea.

—

But she had given none.

—

"...She didn't come to me."

—

The realization settled heavily.

—

She could have.

—

One word.

One request.

—

And he would have removed the punishment.

—

But she didn't.

—

"...Does she hate me that much?"

—

The thought lingered.

—

Unfamiliar.

Uncomfortable.

—

His hand clenched slightly.

—

He had faced wars.

Court politics.

Betrayals.

—

But this—

—

This quiet distance—

—

Felt heavier.

—

His gaze remained fixed on her.

—

She stood among the people.

Blending in.

—

Not as an Empress.

—

But as herself.

—

And somehow—

That made him feel further away from her than ever.

—

Then—

A memory surfaced.

—

Her injury.

—

Her feet—

Hurt during the previous days.

—

His expression shifted.

—

"...She didn't even care about that."

—

He turned slightly.

—

"Guard."

—

A shadow appeared instantly.

—

"Yes, Your Majesty."

—

"Send ointment to the shrine."

—

A brief pause.

—

"...For the Empress."

—

The guard nodded.

—

"Shall I inform her—"

—

"No."

—

The Emperor's voice was firm.

—

"...Do not tell her I sent it."

—

Silence.

—

The guard bowed.

"It will be done."

—

The Emperor looked once more toward the shrine.

—

Toward her.

—

"...You don't need me."

—

The words were quiet.

—

But they carried weight.

—

Then—

He turned.

—

And walked away.

—

Behind him—

The shrine remained peaceful.

—

And inside—

The Empress began a new Chapter.

—

Not of survival.

—

But of growth.