

Ghost 177

Chapter 177: cooking is also art

The night wind drifted lazily through the Empress's courtyard, stirring the hanging curtains and brushing against the lantern light. Lian An sat quietly at the low table, her earlier frustration now settled into something calmer—determination.

Fen Yu floated in front of her, hands on her hips.

"You're overthinking again."

Wei Rong nodded from the beam above. "If you keep sitting like this, the festival will come and go before you decide anything."

Li Shen folded his sleeves neatly. "Logically speaking, avoidance will not improve the situation."

Lian An sighed. "I'm not avoiding. I'm... considering."

Fen Yu rolled her eyes. "Considering what? You already decided. You'll cook."

"Yes," Lian An said, "but deciding is one thing. Getting approval is another."

Wei Rong dropped lightly to the floor. "So go ask."

She looked up. "Ask... the Dowager?"

Fen Yu grinned. "Exactly. Cooking is an art. Let her hear it from you."

Li Shen nodded. "If you don't state your position clearly, others will define it for you."

Lian An was silent for a moment, then slowly stood.

"...You're right."

She straightened her robe, lifted her chin, and took a steady breath.

"I won't hide from this."

The Dowager Empress's courtyard was lively, as always—maids moving in quiet precision, incense burning faintly in the air. Lian An had barely stepped inside when she saw them.

The Emperor was there.

Standing beside the Dowager Empress.

The Dowager sat comfortably, her posture regal and unyielding, speaking with an air of authority that filled the space effortlessly.

"...You should spend more time with Lady Chen," the Dowager said coolly. "She has been by your side since childhood. A woman like that understands you. And children—this palace needs heirs."

The Emperor listened without interruption.

He didn't respond immediately.

Lian An walked in without hesitation, her steps light but firm.

She bowed properly. "Greetings, Dowager Empress."

The Dowager barely glanced at her.

Instead, she continued speaking, her tone unchanged. "Some people forget their place once they are given too much freedom."

Lian An didn't react.

She stood calmly, hands folded, eyes steady.

The Emperor's gaze shifted.

He noticed her then.

Not because she demanded attention—but because she didn't.

His eyes lingered on her profile, the quiet composure she carried so naturally now.

The Dowager noticed his distraction and frowned slightly.

"Don't let yourself be distracted," she said sharply. "Remember who stood with you when you were young."

The Emperor looked away at once. "When I have time, I will consider it."

His response was vague—but final.

The Dowager's lips thinned.

Only then did she turn her attention to Lian An. "Why are you here?"

Lian An met her gaze without flinching. "To speak about the festival."

"Oh?" the Dowager said coolly. "Have you chosen your contribution?"

"Yes," Lian An replied. "I have."

"And what is it?" the Dowager asked, already sounding unimpressed.

Lian An answered clearly. "Cooking."

The air stilled.

A few nearby maids froze mid-step.

The Dowager's eyes sharpened. "Cooking?"

"Yes," Lian An said evenly. "I know only one skill well. And I believe cooking is also an art."

The Dowager gave a short laugh. "Food is necessity, not refinement."

Lian An didn't lower her head.

"Painting pleases the eyes. Music pleases the ears," she said calmly. "But food nourishes the body and comforts the heart. It carries memory, effort, balance, and skill. If that is not art, then art serves only the idle."

Silence followed.

The Emperor looked at her—really looked at her this time.

Not as an Empress fulfilling duty.

But as a woman standing firmly by her truth.

The Dowager studied Lian An for a long moment, expression unreadable.

"...You are bold," she finally said.

"I am honest," Lian An replied.

The porcelain cup shattered the moment it hit the stone floor.

The sound was sharp—violent—like a slap echoing through the Dowager Empress's courtyard.

Fragments scattered outward, skidding across the ground. One shard slid farther than the rest, catching the light for a brief second before slicing across exposed skin.

Lian An sucked in a breath.

A thin line of red bloomed along her hand.

It wasn't deep, but it burned.

She instinctively curled her fingers, blood welling slowly between her knuckles. The sting made her hiss softly before she could stop herself.

The courtyard froze.

Maids stiffened, eyes lowered. Concubines stopped breathing. Even the incense smoke seemed to hesitate.

The Emperor saw it all.

He saw the cup fall.

He saw the shard fly.

He saw blood on his wife's hand.

And something dark flashed across his eyes.

"That is enough."

His voice cut through the silence—low, controlled, but unmistakably sharp.

The Dowager Empress turned to him in disbelief. "What did you say?"

"That is not how you speak," the Emperor repeated, stepping forward. His gaze dropped briefly to Lian An's injured hand, then lifted again to his mother. "Nor how you act."

A ripple of shock passed through the courtyard.

The Dowager laughed—short and incredulous. "Are you taking her side now?"

Lian An stood very still.

Her hand throbbed, but she barely felt it.

What she did feel was the warmth that spread through her chest when she heard his words.

He defended me.

Openly.

The Emperor didn't hesitate. "She only wants to cook."

"Cook?" The Dowager scoffed. "This festival honors our ancestors. They invented these arts. Painting. Music. Weaving. Pottery. Tradition."

She waved a dismissive hand. "Cooking is for servants and kitchens, not exhibitions."

Lian An opened her mouth—then closed it.

She knew better than to interrupt.

The Dowager continued, voice rising. "If cooking is added, more people will demand participation. Chaos will follow. This is an art festival, not a marketplace."

The Emperor's expression didn't change. "She doesn't know anything else."

Silence fell again.

His words weren't cruel.

They were simple. Honest.

"If that is the case," he continued, "then let her not participate."

The Dowager paused.

She studied him closely now, eyes narrowing.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then she smiled—a slow, calculating smile.

"...Very well."

Lian An felt her shoulders loosen—just slightly.

But the Dowager wasn't finished.

"She will learn crochet," the Dowager said decisively. "It is simple. I will send a lady to teach her. Three days is enough for someone obedient."

Lian An's heart sank.

Crochet.

She had tried embroidery once. The ghosts still laughed about it.

She took a step forward. "Dowager Empress, I—"

"Enough."

The Dowager raised her hand sharply.

"I am done speaking with you."

Her gaze hardened. "You are rude. You break rules. You lack manners. This time, I will let it go."

The words landed like stones.

"But remember," the Dowager added coldly, "next time, punishment will follow."

She turned away.

"Leave."

Lian An stood frozen for a heartbeat, blood still slipping down her hand.

Then she bowed.

Deeply.

Silently.

And walked out.

She didn't look back.

Behind her, the Emperor watched her retreating figure.

His jaw tightened.

The Dowager noticed.

"...You are changing," she said coolly.

The Emperor replied without turning, "Or perhaps I am finally seeing clearly."

The Dowager's smile vanished.

Outside the courtyard, Lian An finally stopped.

The pain in her hand caught up with her then—sharp, insistent.

Before she could reach for her sleeve, someone gently took her wrist.

She looked up.

The Emperor.

He hadn't followed her loudly. She hadn't even heard his steps.

He examined the cut carefully, his fingers steady, surprisingly gentle.

"You're bleeding," he said quietly.

"It's nothing," Lian An replied, instinctively trying to pull away.

He didn't let her.

"This," he said firmly, tearing a strip of cloth from his sleeve and wrapping it around her hand, "is not nothing."

She watched him, stunned.

When he finished, he finally released her wrist.

"...Thank you," she said softly.

He nodded once. Then, after a pause, added, "You should have spoken."

She smiled faintly. "I did. Just not out loud."

For a brief moment, neither of them spoke.

Then the Emperor said quietly, "I know you can cook."

She looked at him.

"And you're good at it," he added.

Something warm settled in her chest again.

As he turned to leave, she realized—

Even if she was forced to crochet.

Even if the Dowager disapproved.

Even if tradition stood against her—

She wasn't standing alone anymore.

And that changed everything.

Lian An returned to her chamber with measured steps, her back straight even though her palm still throbbed beneath the cloth wrapping. The moment the door closed behind her, the calm expression she had worn outside cracked.

She exhaled sharply.

Before she could even sit, the air stirred.

Fen Yu appeared first, floating upside down near the beam, her messy hair dangling like silk threads. Wei Rong leaned against the pillar with crossed arms, while Li Shen drifted near the table, folding his sleeves as if he were a living scholar again.

"Well?" Fen Yu grinned. "Judging by your face, something interesting happened."

Lian An dropped onto the chair and placed her injured hand on the table.

"The Dowager threw a cup," she said flatly. "It broke. I got cut."

The three ghosts froze.

Then—silence.

Wei Rong's expression darkened. "She injured you?"

Li Shen frowned. "Intentionally?"

Before Lian An could answer, Fen Yu suddenly clapped her hands together, eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Ohhh—so that's why he stepped in!"

Lian An blinked. "What?"

Fen Yu floated closer, circling her like a teasing sparrow.

"The Emperor. He defended you, didn't he?"

Wei Rong raised a brow. "He spoke against his mother?"

Li Shen's lips curved slightly. "Interesting."

Lian An felt heat rise to her ears.

"He only said cooking was all I knew," she muttered. "That's not romantic."

Fen Yu laughed loudly. "That's exactly romantic. Men don't protect what they don't care about."

Wei Rong snorted. "She's right. He wouldn't risk angering the Dowager for nothing."

Li Shen added calmly, "Affection often shows itself before the heart admits it."

Lian An slapped the table lightly with her uninjured hand.

"Enough. Stop imagining things."

Fen Yu leaned in, eyes shining.

"Face it, Your Majesty. He's falling in love with you."

"I said enough," Lian An warned, though her voice lacked its usual sharpness.

At that exact moment—

Knock. Knock.

All three ghosts vanished instantly, as if they'd never existed.

Lian An barely had time to straighten before the door opened.

The Emperor stepped inside.

In his hand was a small jade jar.

He didn't say anything at first. His gaze went straight to her wrapped palm.

"Sit," he said.

She obeyed without thinking.

He pulled a stool closer, gently unwrapped the cloth, and examined the cut. His movements were careful, practiced—like someone used to treating wounds on battlefields rather than palace halls.

"This should have been cleaned properly," he murmured.

Before she could respond, he dipped his finger into the ointment and applied it to her skin.

Cool. Soothing.

Lian An stiffened.

His fingers were warm.

Too warm.

Neither of them spoke.

She watched his lashes lower as he focused, his expression serious, almost... tender.

"You should be more careful," he said quietly.

She swallowed. "It wasn't my fault."

"I know," he replied without hesitation.

That simple certainty made her chest tighten.

When he finished, he rewrapped her hand and tied the cloth neatly.

"There," he said, standing. "It will heal quickly."

She looked up at him. "Thank you."

He hesitated, then nodded.

As he turned to leave, Fen Yu's voice echoed faintly in Lian An's mind, teasing and smug—

See? Totally in love.

Lian An closed her eyes for a brief second.

"...Troublemakers," she muttered—though she wasn't sure whether she meant the ghosts... or the man who had just left her chamber.