

## Ghost 178

Chapter 178: threads beneath silk

Morning light filtered gently into the Empress's courtyard, soft and pale, brushing against the stone paths and the half-open windows. Lian An had just finished her morning wash when the sound of footsteps—measured, deliberate—echoed outside.

Her maid stiffened.

"Your Majesty... the Dowager Empress has arrived."

Lian An paused for a heartbeat.

So soon.

She smoothed her sleeves, her expression settling into calm composure.

"Invite her in."

Moments later, the Dowager Empress entered the courtyard, her presence heavy and commanding as always. She was flanked by two maids, and between them walked an elderly woman.

The woman stood straight-backed despite her age. Her hair was neatly coiled into a severe bun, streaked with silver but glossy and well-kept. Her clothes were plain yet impeccably clean, the fabric stiff with discipline rather than luxury. Her face was expressionless—no smile, no frown—just a calm, unreadable mask.

Her eyes, however, were sharp.

They swept across the courtyard, the furniture, the arrangement of space, and finally landed on Lian An with quiet scrutiny.

The Dowager Empress stopped at the center of the courtyard.

"So," she said coolly, "this is the Empress's residence."

Lian An bowed politely.

"Greetings, Mother."

The Dowager's gaze lingered on her bandaged hand for a fraction of a second before she turned away.

"This," the Dowager said, gesturing to the elderly woman, "is Madam Qiao."

Madam Qiao inclined her head slightly—no more, no less.

"She has served in noble households for over forty years," the Dowager continued. "She taught embroidery, crochet, and textile arts to three generations of palace women. Even the late Empress Dowager once praised her skill."

Lian An's expression remained respectful.

"I am honored."

The Dowager's lips curved into a faint, humorless smile.

"You will learn crochet from her," she said plainly. "You claimed you could not do painting, music, or embroidery. Very well. Crochet is simple. Even a child can learn it."

The words were sharp, but controlled.

"If you embarrass the palace during the festival," the Dowager added, "the fault will be entirely yours."

Lian An lowered her gaze.

"I understand."

Madam Qiao finally spoke, her voice calm and firm, like stone worn smooth by time.

"I will teach what I know," she said. "But whether Her Majesty learns well... depends on her willingness."

Her eyes met Lian An's directly.

No fear.

No flattery.

No softness.

Just expectation.

Lian An nodded.

"I will do my best."

The Dowager Empress gave a short nod, satisfied—for now.

"Begin today," she said. "I will return in three days."

With that, she turned and left, her robes whispering against the stone as if the matter were already settled.

Silence followed her departure.

Only then did Fen Yu slowly materialize near the roof beam, arms crossed.

"Well," she muttered, "she looks like she eats disobedient students for breakfast."

Wei Rong appeared beside the pillar, his expression dark.

"That woman is strict. Very strict."

Li Shen drifted closer to Lian An, studying Madam Qiao thoughtfully.

"She is not hostile," he said softly. "But she will not bend."

Madam Qiao ignored the strange chill in the air—she could not see the ghosts—but she felt it. Her fingers twitched almost imperceptibly.

"Shall we begin?" she asked Lian An.

"Yes," Lian An replied.

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Learning the Thread

They moved into a side room where sunlight poured in generously. A low table had already been prepared with yarn, hooks, and half-finished samples.

Madam Qiao sat across from Lian An and placed a bundle of yarn in front of her.

"First," she said, "you will learn how to hold the hook."

Her hands moved with practiced precision—slow, deliberate, flawless.

"Crochet is not force," she continued. "It is patience. If you rush, the thread rebels."

Lian An mimicked her movements.

Her fingers were steady—but unfamiliar.

The hook slipped.

The yarn tangled.

Fen Yu snorted quietly. "She cooks like a goddess but fights yarn like an enemy general."

Wei Rong hid a smirk.

Lian An shot them a warning look and focused harder.

Madam Qiao observed silently, then corrected her grip with a light tap of the ruler.

"No tension," she said. "Your hand is stiff."

Lian An inhaled, loosened her fingers, and tried again.

This time, the loop formed.

Small. Uneven. But real.

Madam Qiao gave a single nod.

"Again."

Hours passed.

The sun climbed higher. Tea was brought and left untouched. Yarn piled up beside Lian An—some neat, some hopelessly knotted.

Her fingers ached.

Her patience thinned.

Yet she did not stop.

Fen Yu floated closer, unusually quiet now.

"She's really trying," she whispered.

Wei Rong nodded. "She always does."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "That is why she endures."

At last, Madam Qiao set down her ruler.

"For today, this is enough," she said. "Your stitches are uneven, but your foundation is acceptable."

Acceptable.

From Madam Qiao, that was praise.

"You will practice this pattern until night," she added. "Tomorrow, we begin shaping."

Lian An bowed her head.

"Thank you for your guidance."

Madam Qiao studied her for a long moment, then spoke again.

"You are not talentless," she said quietly. "You are simply unfamiliar."

With that, she rose and left the room.

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After the Lesson

The moment she was gone, Fen Yu collapsed dramatically onto the table.

"I almost died watching that."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "You did well."

Li Shen added, "You did not complain once."

Lian An flexed her sore fingers and sighed.

"I never thought thread could be harder than politics."

Fen Yu grinned. "Still think cooking isn't an art?"

Lian An smiled faintly.

"Everything requires patience."

As sunlight softened into afternoon glow, she picked up the hook again.

Three days.

She would endure.

Not because the Dowager demanded it—

But because she refused to be defeated by thread.

Afternoon — Stiff Fingers and Quiet Comfort

By the time the sun leaned westward, Madam Qiao finally set her hook down.

"Lunch," she said simply. "Rest your hands. We resume after."

With that, she stood and left the room, her footsteps as measured as ever.

The moment the door closed, Lian An's shoulders sagged.

She looked down at her hands.

Red. Slightly swollen. Fingers trembling faintly from strain.

The crochet hook slipped from her grasp and rolled across the table.

"...It hurts," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Only then did the ache truly bloom—sharp, deep, relentless. Her wrists throbbed, and when she tried to curl her fingers, a sting shot up her arm. Tears welled up despite her effort to hold them back.

"I've never done work like this," she said quietly. "Not in this life... not before either."

Fen Yu appeared instantly, panic written all over her face.

"Hey—hey! Don't cry!" she said, hovering anxiously. "It's just thread! That old lady is cruel, that's all!"

Wei Rong knelt beside Lian An, unusually gentle.

"Your hands are used to holding knives, ladles, pens—not hooks all day. Anyone would hurt."

Li Shen drifted closer, his voice calm and grounding.

"Pain does not mean failure. It means your body is learning."

That didn't stop the tears.

Lian An wiped her eyes hastily, frustrated with herself.

"I've endured exile, poison, humiliation... but this—this feels ridiculous to cry over."

Fen Yu floated right in front of her face.

"You're allowed to cry. You're not a stone."

Wei Rong nodded once. "If the Dowager saw this, she'd call you weak. Which is exactly why you shouldn't let her see it."

Li Shen added softly, "Strength does not mean never breaking. It means standing back up."

The maid entered quietly with lunch—warm soup, soft rice, light vegetables.

Lian An tried to pick up the spoon.

Her fingers refused to close properly.

The spoon clattered back into the bowl.

That was it.

Tears slid down her cheeks, silent but unstoppable.

Fen Yu snapped.

"That's enough!"

She turned on Wei Rong. "Why are you just standing there?! Say something useful!"

Wei Rong looked away, awkward. "I... don't know how to comfort people."

Li Shen sighed and gently guided Lian An's hand around the spoon, steadying it.

"Slowly," he said. "No rush."

Fen Yu leaned in close, her voice softer now.

"You're not useless. You're not embarrassing. You're doing this for survival—and for dignity. That's more than enough."

Lian An took a shaky breath.

She managed a small sip of soup.

Warmth spread through her chest.

"...Thank you," she whispered.

She ate slowly, carefully, each bite an effort. The ghosts hovered nearby, unusually quiet, guarding her fragile moment like sentinels.

Outside, the courtyard remained peaceful.

Inside, Lian An gathered herself.

When lunch ended, she wiped her hands, flexed her aching fingers again, and straightened her back.

"Alright," she said softly. "Let's continue."

Fen Yu smiled through her worry.

"That's our Empress."

And when Madam Qiao returned, she found Lian An seated properly—hands trembling, eyes tired, but posture unbroken.

The thread waited.

So did her resolve.

no idea he was being robbed blind.