

Ghost 179

Chapter 179: threads that cut deeper

Morning light filtered softly through the paper windows of the Empress's courtyard, landing in pale stripes across the long wooden table where skeins of thread lay arranged in rigid order. Every color was placed with precision—white, pale blue, muted peach—none chosen by Lian An herself.

Madam Qiao had chosen them.

And Madam Qiao was not a woman who allowed mistakes.

"Sit straight," the old woman said coldly.

Lian An immediately corrected her posture, spine straightening as if pulled by an invisible string. Her hands rested on the table, fingers already sore before the day had truly begun.

The crochet hook lay between them like a weapon.

"Today," Madam Qiao continued, voice flat, "you will repeat yesterday's pattern. Again. And again. Until your stitches are even. Crochet is not brute strength. It is patience."

Lian An nodded. "Yes."

She picked up the hook.

The moment metal touched thread, pain flared in her fingers—dull at first, then sharp. She ignored it, looping the yarn as she had been shown.

One stitch.

Then another.

Her fingers trembled slightly.

"Stop."

The word cut like a slap.

Madam Qiao leaned forward, her sharp eyes narrowing. She reached out, snatched the half-finished piece from Lian An's hands, and held it up.

"This is uneven."

Lian An swallowed. "I'll redo it."

"This?" Madam Qiao scoffed. "Redoing won't fix lack of talent."

The words struck harder than expected.

Lian An lowered her gaze. In her previous life, she had run a restaurant with her own hands. She had burned herself, cut herself, worked through exhaustion. In this world, she had survived palace intrigue, exile, illness, even death.

And yet—

This thread defeated her.

"Again," Madam Qiao said, tossing the yarn back.

Lian An obeyed.

Hours passed.

The sun climbed higher.

Her wrists ached. Her fingertips burned raw. Sweat gathered at her temples, but she didn't dare wipe it away. Every time she slowed, Madam Qiao's gaze sharpened.

"No. Too loose."

"No. Too tight."

"No. Are you blind?"

Fen Yu hovered nearby, fists clenched, biting her lip so hard she nearly tore it.

"She's doing her best," the ghost muttered angrily.

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "If I could still punch people—"

Li Shen cut in calmly. "Violence will not help."

Fen Yu rounded on him. "Neither does standing there like a scholar statue!"

Li Shen didn't reply. His eyes stayed on Lian An's hands—hands that trembled, slipped, bled slightly where the hook scraped skin.

By midday, the piece collapsed in on itself.

Madam Qiao stared at it in silence.

Then she dropped it onto the table.

"Terrible."

The word echoed.

Lian An felt something crack quietly inside her chest.

"I told the Dowager you lack refinement," Madam Qiao continued. "Now I see it clearly. You are impatient. Rough. Your hands are not made for art."

Lian An clenched her fists.

She did not cry.

She would not.

"I will improve," she said softly.

Madam Qiao looked unconvinced. "Hope does not replace skill."

She stood. "Continue."

When the old woman left briefly to fetch more thread, Lian An's shoulders finally slumped.

Her breath came shallow.

Her hands—once steady with knives and ladles—felt useless.

Fen Yu rushed to her side. "This is torture! She's doing this on purpose!"

Wei Rong knelt. "Your hands are shaking."

"I know," Lian An whispered.

Li Shen spoke gently. "Rest them when you can. Even steel dulls without care."

Lian An stared at the yarn.

"For the first time," she admitted quietly, "I don't know if effort will be enough."

Before Li Shen could respond—

Footsteps.

Light. Familiar.

Madam Qiao stiffened as a tall figure entered the courtyard.

The Emperor.

He wore simple robes, but nothing could hide the authority in his presence. His gaze moved from the scattered thread to Lian An's pale face, then to her hands.

They were red.

Swollen.

A thin line of blood marked her finger.

His jaw tightened.

"Madam Qiao," he said evenly.

She bowed stiffly. "Your Majesty."

"How long has she been training today?"

Madam Qiao hesitated. "Since sunrise."

Silence followed.

The Emperor stepped closer to the table. He picked up the failed crochet piece, examined it carefully—too carefully for a man known for battlefields and policy.

Then he placed it back down.

"She has never done this before," he said.

Madam Qiao's lips thinned. "That is not my concern."

"It is mine."

The courtyard froze.

Lian An looked up, startled.

The Emperor turned to her.

His voice softened—not loud, not commanding, but firm.

"Lian An," he said, deliberately using her name, "this is your first time. No one is born skilled."

Madam Qiao frowned. "Your Majesty, art—"

"Requires time," he interrupted calmly. "Just like governance. Just like trust."

He looked back at Lian An. "You don't need to master it today."

Her throat tightened.

"I don't want to embarrass you," she said quietly.

He shook his head. "You are not an embarrassment."

The words landed gently—but powerfully.

He reached for her hand.

Madam Qiao inhaled sharply.

But the Emperor ignored her.

His fingers were warm as he carefully turned Lian An's palm upward, inspecting the raw skin.

"You push yourself too hard," he said softly. "You always have."

She tried to pull her hand back.

He didn't let her.

"You survived things that would break most people," he continued. "Do not let thread convince you otherwise."

Her eyes stung.

"...What if I fail?" she asked.

"Then you fail today," he replied simply. "And try again tomorrow."

He released her hand and turned to Madam Qiao.

"She will rest now."

Madam Qiao bristled. "Your Majesty—"

"That was not a request."

The old woman bowed, displeased but obedient. "As you wish."

When she left, the courtyard seemed to exhale.

Fen Yu nearly cheered.

The Emperor turned back to Lian An.

"Eat," he said gently. "Rest your hands. I will not have you break yourself for appearances."

She nodded.

For the first time that day, she smiled—small, tired, but real.

And as she cradled her aching fingers, she realized something quietly terrifying and comforting all at once:

He was watching her now.

Not as an Empress.

Not as a political piece.

But as a person learning, struggling, and trying.

And somehow—

That made the pain hurt less.

She hadn't realized when it happened.

Only when the old woman paused her sharp reprimand, only when the servants lowered their heads, only when the courtyard fell into an unnatural stillness did Lian An slowly lift her gaze.

He was standing there.

Not close enough to touch her, yet close enough that his presence wrapped around her like a shield.

The Emperor.

His sleeves were neat, his posture straight, his expression calm—but there was something unmistakably different in his eyes. Not cold authority. Not distant scrutiny.

Concern.

And something firmer beneath it.

Protection.

"Enough," he said, his voice steady, not raised, yet heavy enough to settle the air. "This is her first day. Pain is expected. Skill comes with time."

No anger. No command. Just truth.

The old woman stiffened. Even Dawager's appointed instructor did not dare argue.

Lian An felt it then.

That strange, warm tightening in her chest.

Her fingers still ached. The thread trembled between them. The needle felt heavier than before. But suddenly, the pain didn't matter as much.

He stood up for me.

The thought slipped in quietly, almost shy.

She lowered her eyes again, pretending to focus on the crochet frame, but her heartbeat betrayed her. It was faster now. Louder. As if her chest had forgotten how to remain calm.

Her cheeks warmed.

No... no way.

She pressed her lips together, annoyed at herself. This wasn't the first time he had intervened. He had always been fair. Always rational.

So why does this feel different?

The ghosts noticed immediately.

Fen Yu floated closer, peeking at Lian An's face with exaggerated curiosity. "Ohhh?" she whispered in a singsong voice. "Someone's ears are red."

Wei Rong snorted. "She's embarrassed."

Li Shen adjusted his invisible sleeves, eyes thoughtful. "Or conflicted."

Lian An shot them a warning glare in her mind.

Shut up.

But it was too late. Her thoughts were already tangled.

She remembered how he had cleaned her wound earlier. How careful his hands had been, despite his usual coldness. How he hadn't spoken much, but hadn't rushed either.

She remembered the night market. The horse ride. His laughter when they ran from the dumpling stall. The way he had looked at her beneath the cherry blossoms, quiet and unguarded.

And now this.

Standing up for her.

Taking her side in front of others.

Her chest tightened again.

I don't hate him.

The realization came softly, like the first step onto unfamiliar ground.

She had hated him once. Truly. For doubting her. For punishing her without listening. For letting others hurt her while he stood by in silence.

But now...

She searched her heart carefully.

That sharp edge of resentment wasn't there anymore.

What remained was complicated. Confusing. Uneasy.

But not hatred.

Just like... before?

No. Even that wasn't right.

She didn't dislike him the way she used to.

The thought made her fingers slip. The thread knotted badly.

"Ah—" she hissed quietly.

Before the instructor could scold again, the Emperor spoke.

"Take a break."

The words weren't harsh. They weren't loud. They were simply said.

The instructor hesitated, then bowed stiffly. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Lian An froze.

He didn't look at her when he said it. He didn't need to. It was as if he already knew how much she was enduring.

Her throat tightened unexpectedly.

Why... are you doing this?

She wanted to ask. But she didn't.

Instead, she stood slowly, flexing her sore fingers, and stepped aside. The ghosts hovered near her, unusually quiet.

Fen Yu was the first to break the silence, softer now. "He really cares."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "He wouldn't intervene like this for nothing."

Li Shen glanced at the Emperor's retreating back. "Care and intention are different things. But... he is changing."

Lian An didn't respond.

She sat down on the low stone bench, letting the warmth of the sun seep into her back. Her hands rested in her lap, trembling faintly.

Her heart felt... unsettled.

She watched him from a distance as he spoke briefly to a servant, then turned away, as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

As if standing up for her was natural.

As if she mattered.

Her cheeks warmed again.

She quickly looked away.

This is dangerous, she thought.

Very dangerous.

She had built walls around herself for a reason. Feelings complicated things. Attachments made her vulnerable.

Yet no matter how much she warned herself, her heart refused to retreat.

She didn't hate him.

Not anymore.

And that realization scared her more than all the punishments she had ever endured.

Because hatred was easy.

This... was not.