

Ghost 180

Chapter 180: thread moonlight

Night settled slowly over the palace, carrying with it the quiet hush that only came when lanterns replaced the sun.

In the Empress's courtyard, the lamps glowed softly, casting warm halos across stone paths and wooden pillars. Crickets chirped somewhere beyond the walls. The air smelled faintly of incense and night-blooming flowers.

Lian An sat cross-legged on the low couch near the window, her back straight through sheer will rather than comfort.

Her fingers throbbed.

Not a sharp pain—worse than that. A dull, constant ache that crept from her fingertips up to her wrists, like they had been scolded and punished all day long for daring to exist.

She stared down at the crochet frame resting in her lap.

The stitches were... uneven.

Not disastrous. Not good either.

If this were her first day, it would be acceptable. But she had spent hours under that old woman's hawk-like gaze, threading, unthreading, tightening, loosening, correcting mistakes so many times that the yarn itself looked offended.

Still.

She could stitch now.

Slowly.

Clumsily.

But she could.

That alone felt like a small victory.

She flexed her fingers and winced.

"...I swear," she muttered, "if anyone ever tells me embroidery is 'elegant and relaxing,' I will personally make them do this for ten hours straight."

A soft sound of amusement came from nearby.

The Emperor sat across from her at the low table, sleeves loosened, posture relaxed in a way he never allowed himself in court. A single lantern illuminated the sharp line of his jaw, the faint shadow beneath his eyes.

"You didn't get scolded much today," he said mildly.

She shot him a look. "That's because you were here."

He didn't deny it.

Instead, he poured her a cup of warm tea and slid it toward her without looking directly at her face.

"Progress matters," he continued. "Not perfection."

She accepted the cup, their fingers brushing for the briefest second.

Her hand froze.

He paused too.

Then both pretended nothing happened.

She took a sip, grateful for the warmth easing her throat. "You say that like someone who's never had their knuckles rapped with a ruler for missing a loop."

"I've had worse," he replied calmly.

She snorted despite herself. "Of course you have."

The ghosts hovered nearby, invisible to everyone but her—and far too visible in attitude.

Fen Yu lay dramatically across the beam above them, her ghostly hair dangling upside down like a curtain. "I am STARVING," she declared loudly. "I am a tragic spirit wasting away from neglect."

Wei Rong crossed his arms, floating near the pillar. "You ate incense yesterday."

"That was NOT food," Fen Yu snapped. "That was betrayal."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves, expression long-suffering. "You also tried to eat the moon last night."

"It looked delicious!"

Lian An pinched the bridge of her nose. "I haven't cooked properly in days because I'm learning crochet like a punished noble lady."

Fen Yu gasped. "And whose fault is that?"

The Emperor raised an eyebrow slightly, though he couldn't hear them.

Lian An glared at Fen Yu. "Don't start."

Fen Yu floated down, hands on her hips. "You promised us good food. REAL food. Meat. Sauce. Texture. Not palace porridge."

Wei Rong added dryly, "The morale of your ghostly army is declining."

Li Shen nodded. "Statistically, hunger increases irritability."

Fen Yu pointed at him. "SEE? Even the scholar agrees!"

Lian An groaned. "You're all impossible."

She looked down at her sore hands again, then at the crochet frame.

Cooking would be easier.

Cooking always made sense.

Heat. Timing. Balance.

This... thread thing felt like it existed solely to humble her.

The Emperor watched her quietly, noticing the way her shoulders drooped despite her stubborn posture.

"You can stop for tonight," he said.

She blinked. "But—"

"You've done enough," he repeated, firmer now. "Your hands need rest."

The old version of him would have phrased it like an order.

This one sounded... considerate.

She hesitated, then slowly set the frame aside.

Relief washed over her body so quickly she hadn't realized how tense she'd been until that moment.

Fen Yu clapped. "YES. RELEASE HER FROM THREAD PRISON."

Wei Rong smirked. "So... dinner?"

Li Shen folded his hands. "Logically, nourishment would aid recovery."

Lian An sighed. "You all planned this."

"Obviously," Fen Yu said cheerfully.

She glanced at the Emperor. "They're hungry."

He tilted his head. "You haven't eaten properly either."

"...That's not the point."

"It is," he replied calmly.

She studied him for a moment.

His expression was neutral, but his eyes lingered on her hands.

Then, unexpectedly, he stood.

"I'll have the kitchen prepare something simple."

Fen Yu shrieked. "NO."

Everyone paused.

Lian An stared at the beam. "Fen Yu?"

Fen Yu floated down dramatically, pointing at the Emperor. "NO palace food. That food has no soul."

Wei Rong nodded once. "Agreed."

Li Shen added, "Statistically bland."

The Emperor blinked. "...I see."

Lian An pressed her lips together, fighting a smile. "They're... particular."

He looked at her.

Then, after a brief pause, he said, "Then cook. I'll help."

The ghosts froze.

Fen Yu's mouth fell open. "HE'S OFFERING TO COOK?"

Wei Rong's brows lifted. "Interesting."

Li Shen looked genuinely surprised. "Unexpected."

Lian An stared at him. "You don't need to—"

"I want to," he said simply.

Her heart did that strange, inconvenient flutter again.

"...Fine," she said. "But you follow my instructions."

A faint smile tugged at his lips. "Of course."

The kitchen came alive again.

Not with palace formality, but with quiet familiarity.

Lian An leaned against the counter, guiding him verbally while keeping strain off her hands.

"Slice thinner. Yes, like that."

He listened.

Carefully.

Fen Yu floated around narrating dramatically. "Observe: the Emperor learning knife skills."

Wei Rong commented, "His grip is wrong."

Li Shen added, "But improving."

Lian An shot them a look. "No commentary."

Soon, the scent of sizzling meat filled the air. Sauce thickened. Vegetables softened just enough.

Fen Yu sniffed deeply. "I forgive everything."

When the dishes were finally done, they gathered around the small table.

The Emperor ate quietly, watching her reactions.

Fen Yu devoured her portion theatrically. "THIS. THIS IS WHY I FOLLOW YOU."

Wei Rong nodded approvingly. "Acceptable."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Well done."

Lian An laughed softly, exhaustion finally easing from her bones.

For a moment, the palace felt... peaceful.

Later, as the lanterns dimmed and the moon climbed higher, she leaned back against the cushion, eyes heavy.

The Emperor stood. "Rest."

She nodded.

As he turned to leave, she spoke without thinking.

"...Thank you."

He paused.

Then, without turning back, said softly, "Anytime."

When the door closed, Fen Yu sighed dreamily. "He's doomed."

Lian An groaned into her pillow.

But she didn't deny it.

Not tonight.

Here's the next scene, written in smooth novel-style prose, playful and warm, focusing on dinner, subtle romance, and ghost mischief—without breaking tone or exposing the ghosts to the Emperor.

The low table was finally filled.

Warm dishes steamed gently under the lantern light—stir-fried meat glazed in sauce, a bowl of fragrant rice, crisp vegetables tossed with garlic, and a simple soup that smelled comforting rather than ceremonial. It wasn't palace cuisine. It was better. It felt lived-in.

The Emperor sat across from Lian An, sleeves neatly rolled, posture relaxed in a way no courtier would ever see.

"This," he said after the first bite, "is much better than what the imperial kitchen serves."

Lian An lifted her chin smugly. "Of course it is."

She reached for her bowl—and paused.

Something was... lighter.

She glanced down.

Her piece of meat was gone.

She froze.

Across the table, the Emperor was busy scooping soup, fully focused, utterly unaware.

Behind him—

Fen Yu floated upside down, cheeks puffed, chewing enthusiastically.

Wei Rong stood guard beside her like a general on lookout duty.

Li Shen delicately lifted a grain of rice with two fingers, inspecting it before eating with scholarly seriousness.

Lian An's lips twitched.

Don't laugh.

Don't you dare laugh.

She picked up her chopsticks and pretended to search for a different piece.

Fen Yu, encouraged by the lack of reaction, reached again—this time boldly.

A dumpling vanished.

The Emperor frowned slightly at his bowl. "Did I... already eat that?"

"No," Lian An said quickly, lowering her head. "You didn't."

Fen Yu nearly choked laughing.

Wei Rong shot her a warning look.

Li Shen murmured, "Restraint."

Fen Yu ignored him and stole another bite, whispering dramatically, "This is repayment for days of suffering."

Lian An bit the inside of her cheek so hard it almost hurt.

She lifted her cup to hide her face, shoulders trembling slightly.

The Emperor noticed.

"...Are you alright?" he asked.

She nodded too quickly. "Fine. Just—hot."

Fen Yu wiped her mouth and floated closer, waving a piece of vegetable directly behind the Emperor's head like a victory flag.

Wei Rong leaned in and muttered, "You're going to get caught."

Fen Yu grinned. "Worth it."

Li Shen sighed. "This is undignified."

"And delicious," Fen Yu replied.

The Emperor reached for another dumpling—and stopped mid-air.

"...Why does it feel like the food is disappearing faster than usual?"

Lian An nearly lost it.

She coughed, then deliberately took a large bite of rice to ground herself.

"Maybe," she said carefully, "you're just hungrier than you think."

He studied her.

Her eyes were suspiciously bright.

Her mouth curved just a fraction too much.

"...I see," he said slowly.

Fen Yu froze.

Wei Rong went rigid.

Li Shen closed his eyes as if accepting fate.

The Emperor looked down at the table, then back at Lian An.

Then—unexpectedly—he smiled faintly.

"Well," he said, picking up his chopsticks again, "as long as everyone is eating well."

Fen Yu silently cheered.

Lian An finally let herself smile too, warmth spreading through her chest.

The table felt full—not just of food, but of something rare.

Ease.

Laughter.

A moment that didn't belong to duty or danger.

Just dinner.

And a few very full ghosts hiding behind a man who had