

Ghost 181

Chapter 181: stiches under awful eyes

Morning light filtered softly into the Empress's courtyard, pale and quiet, carrying none of the tension that already waited inside.

Lian An sat at the low table, back straight, hands resting on her knees. In front of her lay folded cloth, thread spools arranged by color, and a half-finished crochet piece that looked... passable at best.

Her fingers still ached.

Not the sharp pain of injury, but the deep soreness of muscles unused to such delicate, repetitive work. Three days. It had already been three full days since the old crochet lady arrived, and every day felt longer than the last.

The lady—Madam Qiu—entered silently, as she always did.

She was dressed simply, hair pulled into a tight bun, expression carved from stone. No smile. No warmth. Only precision.

"Your Majesty," she said, bowing stiffly. "Today is the third day."

Lian An nodded. "I know."

Madam Qiu placed a folded paper on the table. "This is the design. You will follow this pattern exactly. Take your time, but complete it."

Lian An unfolded the paper.

The design was intricate.

Loops within loops. Tight turns. Symmetry that demanded patience and a steady hand. It wasn't something a beginner should be asked to make—certainly not someone who had picked up a hook for the first time three days ago.

Her heart sank slightly.

"I'll try," she said quietly.

Madam Qiu's eyes flicked to her hands. "Trying is not enough. Crochet does not forgive hesitation. Your stitches must be confident."

Before Lian An could respond—

The air shifted.

Footsteps approached. More than one.

Her stomach tightened.

She didn't need to turn to know who it was.

The Dowager Empress arrived like a cold wind, silk sleeves whispering as she entered the courtyard, followed by two maids who carried nothing but judgment in their eyes.

"So," the Dowager said, voice sharp and clear, "this is where you've been wasting palace time."

Lian An stood immediately and bowed. "Greetings, Dowager Mother."

The Dowager waved a dismissive hand. "Enough. Sit."

Her gaze landed on the cloth, the threads, the unfinished work.

She stepped closer, leaned in, and picked up the crochet piece between two fingers as if it were something distasteful.

"This?" she asked flatly.

Madam Qiu bowed. "This is Her Majesty's practice piece."

The Dowager snorted. "Practice?"

She dropped it back onto the table.

"I have seen children in noble households produce better work with half the instruction," she said coldly, eyes locking onto Lian An. "Is this the best you can do?"

Lian An felt heat crawl up her neck—but she kept her expression calm.

"I am learning," she replied. "It takes time."

"Time?" The Dowager laughed, sharp and humorless. "Talent reveals itself quickly. Mediocrity hides behind excuses."

Lian An clenched her fingers under the table.

Madam Qiu hesitated, then spoke carefully. "Your Grace, Her Majesty has improved since the first day. Her tension is lower, and her stitch consistency—"

"Spare me," the Dowager interrupted. "Improvement means nothing if the result is still embarrassing."

She turned back to Lian An.

"Do you know why I insisted on this?" she asked.

Lian An met her gaze. "To test my ability."

"No," the Dowager said. "To remind you of your place."

The words landed heavily.

"In this palace," the Dowager continued, "talent is currency. If you lack it, you compensate with obedience. You do not bring shame by presenting inferior work under the palace name."

She turned to Madam Qiu. "Teach her again. Here. Now. In front of me."

Madam Qiu bowed deeply. "Yes, Your Grace."

She moved closer to Lian An, picked up the hook, and pointed to the pattern.

"You are looping too loosely here," she said calmly, tapping a section of the design. "Your tension varies because you hesitate before pulling through. Do not think so much. Let the hand move."

She demonstrated slowly, methodically.

The Dowager watched like a hawk.

"Now," Madam Qiu said, handing the hook back. "You do it."

Lian An inhaled slowly.

Her ghosts hovered nearby, unseen, tense.

Fen Yu crossed her arms, fuming.

Wei Rong's jaw was clenched.

Li Shen watched silently, eyes dark with thought.

Lian An focused.

She ignored the Dowager. Ignored the weight of judgment pressing down on her shoulders.

Loop. Pull. Turn.

Her hands trembled slightly at first.

"Wrong," the Dowager snapped. "Look at that edge. Uneven."

Madam Qiu corrected gently. "Adjust your wrist angle."

Lian An did.

Again.

Again.

Minutes stretched.

The courtyard was silent except for the soft scrape of hook against thread.

Her fingers burned.

A bead of sweat rolled down her temple.

"Slow," the Dowager said. "Too slow."

Madam Qiu shook her head. "Precision first. Speed comes later."

The Dowager clicked her tongue but said nothing.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Madam Qiu held up the piece.

"This section is acceptable," she said honestly. "Not excellent. But acceptable."

The Dowager leaned in, scrutinizing it.

Her lips thinned.

"...Hmph."

She straightened.

"You will redo it," she said. "From the beginning. This time without hesitation."

She turned to leave, then paused.

"And remember," she added without looking back, "the festival will not wait for your growth."

With that, she left.

The courtyard felt ten degrees warmer the moment she was gone.

Lian An's shoulders sagged.

Madam Qiu exhaled quietly. "Do not take her words to heart."

Lian An gave a small, tired smile. "I'm used to worse."

Madam Qiu studied her for a moment, then said, "You learn faster than you think. But you fight yourself too much."

Lian An nodded.

When Madam Qiu left for lunch, Lian An remained seated, staring at the pattern.

Fen Yu drifted closer. "She was awful."

Wei Rong grunted. "Restraint is admirable."

Li Shen said quietly, "Pressure reveals character. Yours did not crack."

Lian An laughed softly, rubbing her sore fingers. "I still feel like crying."

Fen Yu immediately hugged her head. "Cry later. Eat first."

Later that afternoon, Madam Qiu returned.

They worked again.

And again.

Each stitch became steadier. Each mistake fewer.

By evening, Lian An's hands were numb—but the design finally resembled what it was supposed to be.

Not perfect.

But real.

She sat back, exhausted, staring at her work.

"I did it," she whispered.

Fen Yu cheered silently.

Wei Rong nodded once, approval clear.

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Progress."

Outside the courtyard, unseen—

The Emperor paused.

He had come to check on her quietly.

He saw the tension in her shoulders. The redness of her fingers. The stubborn way she stared at the cloth as if daring it to defy her.

He didn't interrupt.

He simply stood there for a moment longer than necessary... then left.

And for the first time in days, Lian An slept that night without dreaming of failure.

Midnight Frights at the Dowager's Courtyard

The palace slept.

Lanterns dimmed to a soft amber, guards changed shifts with muffled steps, and even the cicadas outside seemed to lower their voices. In the Empress's chamber, Lian An slept soundly at last—hands sore from crochet, mind finally quiet.

That peace did not extend to her three ghostly companions.

Fen Yu hovered near the beam, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. "I don't like her."

Wei Rong floated beside the window, posture straight even in death. "That woman enjoys cruelty."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves, expression thoughtful. "Correction. She enjoys control."

Fen Yu's lips curved into a grin. "Then let's take a little control back."

Wei Rong frowned. "No lasting harm."

"Relax," Fen Yu said sweetly. "Just... a reminder that nights belong to ghosts."

They drifted through walls and corridors, silent as breath, until the air shifted—cooler, heavier.

The Dowager Empress's courtyard.

It slept under immaculate order. Not a leaf out of place. Incense smoke curled lazily through the chamber window. Inside, the Dowager lay on her bed, silk covers drawn up, a faint scowl still etched on her face even in sleep.

Fen Yu cracked her knuckles. "Phase one."

Li Shen sighed. "Subtlety."

Wei Rong nodded. "Subtle."

Fen Yu immediately dimmed the lantern flame to a sickly blue.

The room cooled. The incense smoke twisted unnaturally.

The Dowager stirred.

A soft creak echoed.

Her eyes fluttered open.

The curtains swayed though there was no wind.

"Who—" she began.

A shadow crossed the wall. Then another.

Fen Yu leaned down from the ceiling, hair hanging loose, eyes glowing faintly. She whispered, very slowly, "Boo."

The Dowager screamed.

She bolted upright, clutching the blankets. "GUARDS!"

Wei Rong answered—by knocking over a lacquered stool with a loud CRASH.

Li Shen calmly rearranged the incense burner so the smoke spelled something like a crooked smile.

The Dowager's breath came in panicked gasps. "This—this palace—"

Fen Yu floated closer, deliberately letting her feet not quite touch the floor. "You shouldn't be so mean before bed," she said, voice echoing oddly. "Bad dreams stick."

"WHO ARE YOU?!" the Dowager shrieked, fumbling for the bell rope.

The rope slipped through her fingers—Li Shen had tied it into a neat knot.

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "Consider this... feedback."

Fen Yu giggled and snapped her fingers.

The lantern went out.

Total darkness.

The Dowager wailed.

A heartbeat later, the lantern flared back to normal.

Everything was... ordinary.

No shadows. No smoke tricks. No floating ghosts.

The Dowager sat trembling, hair disheveled, sweat soaking her collar.

Her maid burst in. "Your Grace! Are you unwell?!"

The Dowager stared wildly around the room. "Did you see them?!"

The maid blinked. "See... whom?"

Silence.

The Dowager swallowed hard, forcing herself to straighten. "It was... nothing. A nightmare."

The maid hesitated, then bowed. "Shall I bring calming tea?"

"Yes," the Dowager snapped. "And more incense. Stronger."

When the maid left, the Dowager lay back down—but sleep did not return.

Outside the courtyard, three ghosts drifted together, grinning.

Fen Yu clapped softly. "Ten out of ten."

Wei Rong huffed. "Immature."

Li Shen nodded. "Effective."

They vanished just as dawn's first light brushed the palace roofs.

Back in the Empress's chamber, Lian An stirred slightly, turned over—and smiled in her sleep, utterly unaware that somewhere across the palace, the Dowager Empress would never trust the dark the same way again.