

## Ghost 197

Chapter 197: stitches that hurt more than word

The afternoon sunlight filtered gently into the Empress's courtyard, warm and golden, but Lian An felt none of its comfort.

She sat near the window, back straight, shoulders tense, a half-finished crochet scarf pooled in her lap like an accusation. The yarn was soft—too soft—slipping between her fingers no matter how tightly she tried to control it. Her hands ached. Her fingers felt stiff, unfamiliar, clumsy.

She stared at the uneven stitches.

They were bad.

No—worse than bad.

They were obvious.

"This loop is wrong," Fen Yu said, hovering far too close. "If you pull it tighter, it'll look less crooked."

Wei Rong snorted. "Tighter? She already pulled it too tight. Look, it's curling."

Li Shen adjusted his robes and spoke in his calm, scholarly tone—the worst kind. "Technically, both of you are correct. The tension is inconsistent. The pattern lacks harmony."

Lian An's hand froze.

"Can you all... please stop talking?"

Fen Yu tilted her head. "But we're helping."

"Yes," Li Shen added earnestly. "Constructive feedback is—"

"I didn't ask for a lecture!" Lian An snapped, her voice trembling despite herself.

The yarn slipped from her fingers and unraveled slightly, ruining an entire row she had spent nearly an hour on.

Her vision blurred.

She bit her lip hard, but it didn't help. Hot tears welled up anyway, spilling down her cheeks and splashing onto the pale yarn.

"I'm trying," she whispered. "I really am."

The ghosts fell silent.

For once, none of them had a joke ready.

Lian An bowed her head, shoulders shaking.

"I can cook. I can manage people. I can build a business from nothing. But this—this stupid scarf—" she laughed weakly through tears, "—I can't even do this right."

Fen Yu floated closer, her teasing gone. "Lian An..."

"I don't belong here," the Empress continued, words spilling out like a wound finally torn open. "They all have talents they grew up with. Painting. Embroidery. Music. I was thrown into this world and told to compete without tools, without time, without choice."

Her fingers clenched the yarn.

"And if I fail, I'm not just embarrassing myself. I'm embarrassing everyone."

Behind the screen, unseen, the Emperor stood still.

He had arrived quietly, intending only to check on her progress before continuing his inspection of the festival preparations. He had not meant to overhear.

But now that he had, he could not move.

He watched her small figure curled inward, her pride stripped bare by something as simple as thread and needle.

She was the Empress of the realm.

Yet here she was—crying alone over a scarf.

His chest tightened.

She had learned this craft in days—days—something others trained for years to master. And still, she blamed herself for not being perfect.

Li Shen cleared his throat softly. "Lian An... mastery is not measured by speed."

Wei Rong nodded. "Even generals train for years before their blades stop shaking."

Fen Yu hovered awkwardly. "We didn't mean to gang up on you."

Lian An wiped her tears angrily. "Then don't talk like I'm failing some test."

She stood abruptly, scarf clenched in her hand, and turned away from them.

That was when she noticed the shadow on the floor.

She froze.

Slowly, she turned.

The Emperor stood behind her, expression unreadable, eyes dark and steady.

"How long have you been there?" she asked stiffly, mortified.

"Long enough," he replied quietly.

The ghosts immediately scattered—pretending to examine the ceiling, the wall, absolutely nothing of importance.

The Emperor stepped forward and gently took the scarf from her hands.

She stiffened. "It's bad. You don't need to—"

"It's unfinished," he said, correcting her calmly. "That's all."

He examined the stitches carefully—not with judgment, but with curiosity.

"You know," he continued, "the first sword I trained with was so heavy I couldn't lift it properly. I dropped it on my foot and couldn't walk for two days."

She blinked.

"You?" she asked skeptically.

"Yes," he said. "And my instructor laughed."

Despite herself, her lips twitched.

He handed the scarf back to her.

"Perfection isn't born," he said. "It's endured."

Her grip loosened slightly.

"You are already doing more than anyone expects," he added. "Including yourself."

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then he stepped back.

"I won't distract you further," he said. "The festival preparations need my attention. Take your time."

She nodded silently.

As he turned to leave, he paused at the threshold.

"And Lian An?"

She looked up.

"Even if you make nothing worth selling," he said gently, "you are still enough."

Then he was gone.

The courtyard felt quieter after that.

Fen Yu sniffed loudly. "Ugh. He's annoyingly comforting."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "He knows when to retreat."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "That, too, is wisdom."

Lian An sat back down slowly.

Her hands still hurt.

Her scarf was still crooked.

But her chest felt lighter.

Outside the courtyard, the palace buzzed with energy.

Painters laid out scrolls, potters glazed final pieces, musicians rehearsed softly under trees. Servants ran with lists, banners, lanterns. Laughter echoed down corridors.

Everyone was ready.

Everyone—except her.

She picked up the hook again.

"This stitch," she murmured to herself, "one more time."

The yarn slipped.

She tried again.

And again.

And though her scarf was still imperfect, the tears did not return.

The palace had never looked this alive.

From dawn until late afternoon, every courtyard, every hall, every shaded corridor buzzed with movement. Silk rustled, needles flashed, paintbrushes dipped and lifted, laughter rang out and faded only to be replaced by focused silence.

The upcoming festival had awakened something unusual in the palace women.

Not rivalry.

Pride.

In Lady Chen's courtyard, sunlight poured over long wooden tables where a deep navy coat lay stretched open. The fabric was heavy and rich, the kind that held warmth and authority. Lady Chen's fingers moved with practiced ease, her posture straight, her expression calm and confident.

Each stitch was precise.

Each seam smooth.

She had chosen a long coat embroidered with subtle silver thread along the edges—elegant, restrained, unmistakably noble.

"This one will sell," her maid said softly, admiration clear in her voice.

Lady Chen did not smile widely, but her eyes softened.

"I've made coats like this since I was young," she replied. "It's nothing new."

But inside, she felt satisfied.

This was her domain—grace, refinement, mastery earned over years. When people saw her work, they would see discipline and status woven into every line.

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In another courtyard, Princess Zhi sat surrounded by soft fabrics, cotton filling, and small piles of thread in gentle colors. Tiny animals—rabbits, bears, kittens—lay arranged carefully on a mat beside her.

Her fingers moved more slowly than before, still healing, still careful.

Yet each small toy carried warmth.

Love.

She smiled faintly as she finished stitching a tiny red bow onto a stuffed rabbit.

"These are cute," her maid said. "Children will love them."

Princess Zhi nodded, though her smile held a trace of sadness.

"I used to imagine making clothes like this," she said quietly. "For my child."

The maid froze.

Princess Zhi shook her head gently. "It's fine. Making these... it feels like I'm still giving something."

She arranged the toys neatly, her hands steady, her heart calmer than it had been days ago.

Her talent wasn't showy.

But it was sincere.

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Not far away, Shin Gu's courtyard carried a different atmosphere.

Sharp.

Efficient.

She sat upright, hands moving quickly as she finished a pair of gloves lined with soft fur. A matching hat lay beside them, simple but perfectly proportioned.

Every stitch was tight.

Every edge clean.

"These will sell well in winter," her maid said carefully.

Shin Gu nodded, her expression composed.

"I don't like waste," she replied. "Function matters more than decoration."

She inspected the gloves one final time, satisfied.

People admired her work openly. Some whispered about how capable she was, how well she fit the role of managing a household, how practical and composed she seemed.

Shin Gu heard it all.

And accepted it.

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Everywhere in the palace, talent bloomed.

Paintings dried on racks.

Ceramic pieces cooled carefully.

Embroidered handkerchiefs, purses, scarves, ornaments—each reflected years of training, generations of tradition.

The palace women were radiant with confidence.

They knew their worth.

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And then there was the Empress.

In her quiet courtyard, away from the noise, Lian An sat cross-legged with a single scarf spread across her lap.

Red and black.

The colors were bold, almost defiant—but the stitches themselves were uneven. Some loops were tighter, others looser. The pattern wavered, as if unsure of itself.

Crooked.

Imperfect.

Unmistakably handmade.

Fen Yu floated above her shoulder, head tilted.

"...It leans slightly to the left."

Wei Rong squinted. "The edge curls."

Li Shen nodded thoughtfully. "Structurally, it lacks symmetry."

Lian An sighed and looked at them.

"And yet," she said calmly, "it exists."

The ghosts went quiet.

She ran her fingers over the scarf—not with embarrassment, but with acceptance.

"I learned this in days," she continued. "Days. Not years. Not childhood training. Just borrowed time and sore fingers."

She folded the scarf neatly.

"If people buy it, good. If they don't, that's fine too."

Fen Yu blinked. "You're... not upset?"

Lian An smiled faintly.

"I was," she admitted. "But not anymore."

She leaned back, resting on her hands.

"I've built businesses from nothing. I've survived a palace that wanted me gone. I've learned to cook for hundreds, to manage people, to negotiate power."

Her gaze softened.

"If this scarf is imperfect... then let it be imperfect."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "That's... very unlike palace logic."

Li Shen smiled. "But very you."

Fen Yu floated closer and poked the scarf. "Honestly? It's ugly in a charming way."

Lian An laughed.

"Thank you. I think."

She stood, draping the scarf over her arm.

"This isn't about proving I'm better than anyone else," she said quietly. "It's about standing there honestly."

The ghosts exchanged glances.

They nodded.

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As evening approached, lanterns were lit across the palace. Finished works were carefully stored, wrapped, admired one last time.

Confidence filled the air.

And somewhere in that grand preparation, an Empress stood with a crooked scarf and an unshaken heart.

She did not shine the brightest.

But she stood the firmest.

And somehow—

That was enough.