

## Ghost 198

Chapter 198: the scarf

Morning light filtered through the palace corridors, pale and cold, carrying with it the scent of incense and fresh silk. The palace was already awake—maids hurried with trays, eunuchs called softly to one another, and distant laughter drifted from courtyards where preparations for the festival neared completion.

In the Empress's courtyard, Lian An was sitting quietly when footsteps approached.

A maid from the Dowager Empress's residence bowed stiffly.

"Her Highness, the Dowager Empress orders that all prepared works for the festival be delivered immediately to her courtyard for inspection."

The words were polite.

The tone was not.

Lian An's fingers paused mid-movement.

So... it begins.

She had known this moment would come. From the instant she picked up the crochet needle, from the first crooked stitch, she had known this would not end kindly.

Yet her spine straightened.

"I understand," she said calmly.

The maid glanced at the scarf lying folded on the table—red and black, uneven yet carefully made. Something flickered in the maid's eyes, a trace of pity, quickly hidden.

Lian An picked it up herself.

She did not ask anyone to carry it.

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The Dowager Empress's courtyard was already crowded when she arrived.

Women from every palace residence stood or sat in neat rows, their works displayed on long tables draped in embroidered cloth. The air buzzed with quiet confidence, whispered pride, restrained excitement.

Lady Chen stood gracefully beside her long coat, posture perfect. Shin Gu's gloves and hats were laid out neatly, admired by several noblewomen. Princess Zhi's small handmade toys drew gentle smiles and approving nods.

The Dowager Empress sat at the center, her back straight, eyes sharp, surveying the display like a judge presiding over fate itself.

She was... pleased.

"Very good," the Dowager said, nodding at one piece after another. "Lady Chen's work is refined. Shin Gu's craftsmanship is practical and elegant. Princess Zhi—" her tone softened slightly "—these toys have warmth. Children will adore them."

Princess Zhi lowered her head modestly.

Lian An stood quietly at the edge, scarf folded in her arms.

When the Dowager's gaze finally landed on her, the temperature in the courtyard seemed to drop.

"You," the Dowager said flatly. "Come forward."

Every eye turned.

Lian An walked ahead, steps steady.

"What have you prepared?"

Without a word, she unfolded the scarf and placed it on the table.

Silence.

The Dowager Empress stared at it.

Then she laughed.

It was not loud.

It was sharp.

Mocking.

"Is this a joke?" the Dowager said, tapping the scarf with one finger. "Even palace children make neater work than this."

A ripple of discomfort passed through the crowd.

Lian An did not lower her head.

"I learned only three days ago," she said evenly. "This is my first attempt."

The Dowager scoffed. "Excuses."

Before Lian An could respond, a soft voice broke in.

"mother," Princess Zhi said gently, stepping forward. "It truly is her first time. To learn crochet in three days and produce this... it's already admirable."

The Dowager's expression hardened instantly.

"Shut up," she snapped.

Princess Zhi froze.

"This has nothing to do with you," the Dowager continued coldly. "Whether I scold her or not is none of your business."

Princess Zhi's face paled, but she said nothing more.

The silence afterward was suffocating.

Lian An felt something tighten in her chest—not for herself, but for Princess Zhi. Still, she kept her expression calm.

The Dowager leaned back, dismissive.

"This will not be displayed prominently," she said. "It embarrasses the palace."

She waved her hand. "You may go."

Lian An bowed once.

She did not argue.

She did not cry.

She turned and left the courtyard with her scarf still folded neatly in her arms.

Behind her, whispers rose—but she did not listen.

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As she walked away, Princess Zhi watched her back, fingers clenched tightly in her sleeves.

The Dowager Empress returned to praising the others.

Yet for the first time that morning, something uneasy stirred beneath the surface of her satisfaction.

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Back in her own courtyard, Lian An placed the scarf on the table and sat down.

Her hands trembled slightly.

Then she exhaled.

"That went exactly as expected," she murmured.

Fen Yu appeared instantly. "She's awful."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "Cruel and predictable."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves. "And yet... you endured."

Lian An smiled faintly.

"I didn't make it to be praised," she said. "I made it to prove I could try."

She looked at the scarf again.

Crooked.

Uneven.

But real.

"And I did."

Outside, the palace continued preparing for celebration.

Inside, an Empress quietly reclaimed her dignity—stitch by imperfect stitch.

Princess Zhi came quietly, without announcement.

The Empress's courtyard was calm, almost too calm. Lian An was sitting near the table, the red-and-black scarf folded neatly beside her. She wasn't crying, wasn't angry—just staring at the stitches as if trying to understand where they had gone wrong.

Princess Zhi's heart tightened at the sight.

She stepped closer and softly called, "Sister-in-law."

Lian An looked up, a little surprised. "Zhi'er... why are you here? Shouldn't you be resting?"

Princess Zhi shook her head and sat beside her without waiting for permission. She picked up the scarf carefully, as if it were something precious.

"You did very well," she said firmly.

Lian An laughed lightly, a self-mocking sound. "You don't have to comfort me. You saw it. Even the Dowager—"

Princess Zhi interrupted her, almost urgently.

"No. Listen to me."

She looked straight at Lian An, eyes sincere.

"When I first learned embroidery, I was terrible. Truly terrible. My stitches were uneven, the cloth puckered, and I pricked my fingers until they bled. The servants hid my work because they were afraid the Dowager would see it."

Lian An froze.

"I cried that night," Princess Zhi continued softly. "I thought I was useless. But my nurse told me something I never forgot—skill is not talent, it's time."

She gently placed the scarf back on the table.

"You only learned for three days. Three days, Sister-in-law. And you made this with your own hands. That alone is something to be proud of."

Lian An's throat tightened slightly.

Princess Zhi smiled, warm and a little shy.

"Besides... I like it. The colors are bold. It feels honest. Not fake."

Lian An looked at her for a long moment, then smiled—this time, not forced.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "That... actually helps more than you know."

Princess Zhi stood up, relief washing over her face.

"Good. Then I've done what I came for."

Before leaving, she turned back and added with a small grin,

"And one more thing—if anyone laughs at you again, remember this: they had years. You had days."

When she left, the courtyard felt warmer.

Lian An picked up the scarf once more.

This time, she didn't see failure.

She saw a beginning.

The palace awoke to a liveliness it had not seen in years.

From dawn, the outer gates stood wide open as caravans rolled in one after another. Banners fluttered in the morning breeze, painted with bright colors announcing the beginning of the festival. The sound of wheels on stone mixed with laughter, excited chatter, and unfamiliar accents from faraway lands.

Merchants from the north unloaded bolts of cloth dyed in rare hues. Potters from the west carefully carried glazed wares wrapped in straw. Painters, musicians, herbalists, and craftsmen queued neatly at the registration tents, each holding their work like a treasure. Names were recorded, seals stamped, and wooden tokens handed out as proof of participation.

Inside the palace grounds, servants hurried back and forth, guiding guests, hanging lanterns, and arranging stalls. The air smelled of incense, fresh wood, and distant cooking fires. Even the guards looked more relaxed, watching the crowd with curiosity rather than suspicion.

Whispers spread everywhere—about the generosity of the palace, about the festival's rewards, about how rare it was for commoners and nobles to gather under the same sky.

High above, from the inner courtyards, the palace women watched the scene unfold. The festival had truly begun, and with it came opportunity, secrets, and changes no one could yet foresee.

At the registration grounds, the festival truly came alive.

It wasn't just names being written and tokens being handed out anymore—it was a place where talent breathed.

Long tables were set beneath silk canopies, and one by one, people stepped forward to show what they were good at.

A young painter unfurled a scroll, revealing mountains bathed in dawn light. The officials leaned closer, murmuring in approval as ink strokes flowed like mist. A potter placed down a bowl so thin it rang like a bell when tapped. Someone from the crowd gasped.

Nearby, a woman demonstrated delicate embroidery, her fingers moving swiftly as flowers bloomed on plain cloth. A woodcarver shaved curls from a block of cedar, shaping a crane mid-flight while people watched in stunned silence.

Music rose in waves—lutes, flutes, soft drums. A blind musician played a tune so sorrowful that even hardened guards felt their throats tighten. Children laughed as a paper-craft artist folded animals that seemed ready to run away.

Officials didn't rush anyone. They observed carefully, asking questions, stamping seals only after witnessing true skill. Some participants were nervous, hands trembling. Others stood tall, pride shining in their eyes.

Word spread quickly:

"This festival isn't just for show."

"They're truly valuing talent."

"Even commoners can shine here."

The palace, once distant and cold, now felt close—almost human.

And somewhere within the inner courtyards, the Empress sat quietly, listening to the hum of voices and music drifting in. She didn't know it yet, but among these talents were people who would change the palace forever.

The festival had only just begun.