

Ghost 104

Chapter 104: chaos in restaurant

The streets of the capital were quiet, folded in silver moonlight.

Water dripped from the eaves after an evening rain; the air smelled faintly of sesame oil and wet earth.

Lian An walked swiftly, wrapped in a gray palace-guard coat that brushed her knees.

Her scarf hid her face, and her heart beat fast—not with fear, but with the small thrill of being free.

When she turned the corner, she stopped.

The Whisper Bowl—her restaurant—was unrecognizable.

Only half a month had passed since she last saw it, but in that time it had transformed completely.

Silk banners rippled from carved beams; lotus-shaped lanterns glowed along the entrance. The dark wood shone with polish, and faint music floated through the open windows.

Her breath caught.

"Half a month," she whispered. "And you've built an empire."

Pride warmed her chest as she stepped closer and pushed the door open.

The bell above gave a soft chime—

—and the world exploded.

"THIEF! THERE'S A THIEF!"

The scream nearly knocked her backward.

Before she could blink, a whole bucket of freezing water hit her square in the chest.

She gasped, hair plastered to her face, sputtering.

Across the room stood Yao Qing—her friend, her manager—eyes blazing like a general on the battlefield, one hand clutching another bucket.

"Catch him! Guards! Twins! Catch the spy!"

"Wait—what—" Lian An barely got a word out before chaos erupted.

From the kitchen burst two figures—Lian and Lin, her twin apprentices—each armed with chopsticks like daggers.

"Where's the thief?" Lin yelled.

"There! Near the counter!" Lian shouted, pointing straight at her.

The twins launched their attack.

Ping! One chopstick hit her shoulder.

Ping! Another bounced off her boot.

The third landed perfectly in her sleeve and stuck there like a flag of surrender.

"Hold still!" Lin cried.

"I'm not—!" Lian An tried to say, but the words drowned in laughter from the rafters.

Fen Yu was nearly doubled over, floating upside down, her translucent feet waving.

"Oh heavens," she giggled. "They're pelting the Empress with chopsticks!"

Wei Rong groaned, voice like thunder. "Idiots, all of you. Let me fix this."

He grabbed a nearby stool and, with one invisible shove, slid it right under the charging man's foot.

The tall stranger—broad-shouldered, sleeves rolled up—tripped spectacularly and crashed into a flour barrel. A cloud of white exploded around him.

Li Shen sighed but tried to help. "Precision adjustment," he muttered, flicking his sleeve—

and accidentally sent a dozen metal spoons flying like arrows. They rained over the floor with a musical clatter.

Lin slipped on the flour, bumped into her brother, and they both went down in a puff of white dust.

The tall man staggered up, coughing, looking more ghost than human.

Yao Qing shouted, "Don't let him escape! Get him!"

"Escape?!" the Empress sputtered, wiping flour off her face. "From my own restaurant?!"

Fen Yu howled with laughter, clutching her sides. "Oh this is priceless!"

Li Shen floated higher, trying to look dignified but snorting between words. "Statistically speaking, chaos efficiency is at one hundred percent."

"Everyone, stop!" Lian An cried, pulling the scarf from her face.

The lanternlight hit her wet cheek. Her voice, sharp with royal command, froze them all.

The world fell silent—except for the faint drip of water off her coat.

"...Lian An?" Yao Qing breathed, blinking.

"Yes!" the Empress said, exasperated and dripping. "Who else would come dressed as a thief and get assaulted by chopsticks?"

The bucket clanged to the floor as Yao Qing's jaw dropped.

The twins stared, mouths open, white as steamed buns.

"B-Big Sister An?" Lian squeaked.

Then they both dropped their chopsticks and bolted straight toward her, nearly tackling her legs.

"We missed you!" Lin shouted.

Lian An staggered, laughing through her breath. "You two—what on earth was that? A welcome ceremony?"

Yao Qing rushed over, snatching a towel and throwing it over her friend's shoulders. "Heavens above, you scared me! You're wearing a palace uniform! How was I supposed to know it was you?"

"I couldn't exactly arrive in my crown," Lian An said dryly, wringing out her sleeve. "They'd stop me at the gate. So I borrowed this."

Yao Qing blinked between shock and admiration. "You dressed like a man and sneaked out of the palace?"

"Would you have preferred a letter by pigeon?" the Empress asked, raising a brow. "You said it was urgent."

Yao Qing opened her mouth, closed it again, then sighed. "And you're the only person foolish enough to come at midnight."

The tall man, still dusted in flour, stepped forward stiffly and bowed. "My apologies, Madam. I thought you were—"

"Doing your job," Lian An finished for him, smiling faintly. "Next time, perhaps less enthusiasm."

From the rafters, Fen Yu whispered gleefully, "I like him. He trips beautifully."

Wei Rong muttered, "You'd know. You made him trip."

"Technicalities," she said, spinning midair.

Li Shen added with dignity, "It was a commendable disaster."

Yao Qing stared at the empty air, rubbing her temples. "I swear this place is haunted."

"It is," the Empress murmured, "but only by idiots I know."

The ghosts snickered.

"Sit, sit," Yao Qing said finally, waving everyone into motion. "You're soaked, and you haven't eaten. I'll bring you something hot before you freeze solid."

"I can manage—"

"No, you can't," Yao Qing scolded, already bustling toward the kitchen. "You sit, I'll feed."

The twins ran off, still giggling, to help. The tall man—Wei Jie, as Lian An soon learned—picked up the broken chopsticks and the fallen flour sack with stoic efficiency, pretending the chaos had never happened.

Lian An sank into a chair near the window, half laughing, half sighing. Water still dripped down her neck.

Yao Qing returned with tea, steam curling like silk ribbons.

"Drink this before you catch cold," she ordered, pressing the cup into her hands. "And don't glare at me. You look ridiculous, by the way."

"I'll add that to my list of royal titles," the Empress said, taking a sip. "Empress of Flour and Ridiculousness."

The tea was warm and fragrant—ginger and chrysanthemum. The chill began to fade from her hands.

The twins returned with trays—lotus duck, crystal mushroom stew, honey buns glistening with syrup.

"We made it!" Lin said proudly.

Lian An took a bite. Her eyes widened. "It's perfect."

The twins lit up, glowing with pride. "We practiced every night!"

Yao Qing placed her fists on her hips. "Your recipes changed everything, you know. After you mentioned us at the Duchess's banquet, nobles came running. The Duke's family themselves ordered catering. Half the ministers' wives visit weekly. We've been swamped."

The Empress smiled softly. "I'm glad. The banquet was worth it then."

"Worth it?" Yao Qing laughed. "We're earning better than every restaurant on this street combined! Merchants travel from neighboring towns to eat your food. Some even say they taste happiness in it."

Lian An chuckled lightly, stirring her soup.

If only they knew the real secret—that her "southern recipes" were memories from another world, recipes of a time not yet born.

She'd lied once, saying she learned them from her aunt and uncle's kitchens.

A harmless lie, wrapped in affection.

As she ate, warmth spread through her chest. The twins cleared tables and polished bowls, Wei Jie swept quietly, and Yao Qing fussed over every last crumb.

Fen Yu floated down beside her shoulder. "It's strange," she whispered softly. "Seeing them laugh without knowing what you truly are."

"Strange," Lian An agreed. "But good."

Wei Rong's shadow stood near the door like a silent guard. Li Shen leaned against a beam, counting profits aloud to no one.

The night grew gentler.

Outside, the wind played with the lanterns, and the scent of sesame oil mixed with rain.

When Lian An set down her empty bowl, Yao Qing came over with a small smile. "See? You still eat like you used to—quietly, but with judgment in every bite."

Lian An laughed. "And you still talk like a general."

"I've had to," Yao Qing replied. "Managing this place is harder than managing a small army."

The Empress leaned back, watching the twins and the man cleaning. "You've done well. I'm proud of you."

Yao Qing's eyes softened. "You gave us a start. We only kept it alive."

They fell into a companionable silence, broken only by the sound of sweeping and Lin's muffled laughter as her brother dropped a bowl.

Yao Qing turned back and frowned suddenly. "You're still soaked."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not," Yao Qing said, hands on hips. "You're shivering. Look at you."

"I'll survive."

"You'll sneeze yourself to death before morning," she scolded. "Come—change in my room. There's a dry robe that should fit. Go."

The Empress hesitated, smiling faintly. "Still bossy."

"Someone has to be," Yao Qing retorted. "Here, you're not Empress. You're my troublesome friend sneaking out past curfew. Now go before you ruin my floor with royal puddles."

Lian An laughed softly and rose. "Yes, yes, Manager Yao."

"Good. I'll warm more tea."

The twins kept sweeping, the tall man rearranged chairs, and her ghosts floated like faint silver mist above the lanterns.

Fen Yu giggled one last time, whispering, "We make a wonderful disaster team."

Wei Rong grunted. "You mean you cause the disasters."

"Semantics," she said, twirling midair.

Through the open door, the Whisper Bowl glowed warm and golden against the sleeping city—

a tiny world built from courage, laughter, and one well-thrown bucket of water.

For the first time in months, Lian An felt truly at peace.

And somewhere behind Yao Qing's calm eyes and folded letter waited the question she hadn't yet asked:

what danger had brought her here tonight?

That answer would come later.

For now, there was warmth, laughter, and a borrowed robe waiting.

Tonight, she was home.