

## Ghost 193

Chapter 193: evening firelight

Evening descended gently over the palace, lanterns lighting one by one as the sky turned a deep indigo. When the Empress stepped into the imperial kitchen, the atmosphere changed instantly.

Every kitchen servant froze.

For a heartbeat, there was only the crackle of firewood and the hiss of hot oil.

Then—

they bowed in a flurry.

"Your Majesty!"

"Why are you here?"

"Please give orders!"

The head cook rushed forward, hands trembling slightly. "If there is anything you desire, we will prepare it immediately."

The Empress lifted her hand calmly. "I'll be cooking dinner tonight."

Silence.

Absolute, stunned silence.

The servants exchanged looks, disbelief written plainly across their faces.

"C-Cooking...?" one whispered.

She added evenly, "It's the Emperor's order."

That single sentence ended all resistance.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

They stepped back at once, lining up along the walls, eyes bright with curiosity and awe. Some wanted to help out of instinct, but when a young maid tried to approach, the Empress gently shook her head.

"No need. Just watch."

And so they did.

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The First Dish — Dumplings (Jiaozi)

She began with dumplings.

Flour was poured into a wide basin. She added warm water slowly, fingers moving with practiced ease, kneading until the dough became smooth and elastic. The rhythm of her hands was steady, unhurried—almost comforting to watch.

On another table, she prepared the filling.

Finely chopped pork, minced ginger, garlic, spring onions, a drizzle of soy sauce, a splash of sesame oil. She stirred in one direction only, binding the mixture until it grew glossy and fragrant.

"Always stir the filling the same way," she murmured softly, more to herself than anyone else. "It keeps the texture tender."

She rolled the dough into thin rounds, spooned the filling carefully into the center, then folded and pleated each dumpling with neat precision. Every one looked identical, like a row of small white crescents.

Water came to a rolling boil.

The dumplings slid in, sank, then rose—plump and perfect.

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The Second Dish — Fried Rice (Chǎofàn)

Next came fried rice.

She insisted on using rice cooked earlier and cooled properly. "Fresh rice is too soft," she said quietly. "Grains must be separate."

Oil heated in the wok. Eggs went in first—scrambled just until silky, then removed. Garlic followed, releasing a sharp aroma. Diced carrots, scallions, and small cubes of meat were tossed in, the wok singing as she flipped it effortlessly.

The rice was added, spread thin, then stirred briskly.

She returned the eggs, seasoned lightly—never overpowering—and finished with a flick of soy sauce along the edge of the wok, letting it caramelize before mixing.

The rice shimmered, each grain golden and fragrant.

Several servants swallowed unconsciously.

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#### The Third Dish — Chow Mein

For the noodles, she boiled them briefly, shocking them in cold water to stop the cooking. She drained them carefully, ensuring no excess moisture remained.

In another hot wok, oil, garlic, and ginger met flame. Sliced cabbage, bell peppers, and onions followed, still crisp. Thin strips of meat seared quickly, locking in juices.

The noodles went in last.

She lifted and tossed them with practiced ease, coating them evenly in sauce—a balance of savory and slightly sweet. The noodles remained springy, never soggy.

"Speed matters," she said calmly. "Hesitation ruins noodles."

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#### The Fourth Dish — Kung Pao Chicken

This dish demanded precision.

She cut the chicken into even cubes, marinated them briefly with starch and seasoning. Dried chilies were snapped in half, seeds removed for control, then toasted lightly in oil until fragrant—not burnt.

Chicken followed, sizzling sharply.

Garlic, ginger, scallions—then peanuts, added last so they stayed crunchy.

She poured in the sauce in one smooth motion. It thickened instantly, clinging to the chicken in a glossy coat. The balance of heat, sweetness, and umami filled the kitchen with a bold, mouthwatering aroma.

A servant near the door muttered, "This... this smells better than any banquet."

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The Fifth Dish — Peking Duck

The final dish was the most demanding.

The duck had been prepared earlier—air-dried, skin carefully separated. She brushed it with a thin glaze, then placed it into the oven.

Time passed slowly.

When it emerged, the skin was a deep, lacquered gold, crisp at the lightest touch.

She sliced it expertly—skin first, then tender meat—each piece perfect.

Thin pancakes were warmed. Scallions were cut into fine threads. Sauce was prepared smooth and rich.

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By the time she finished, the kitchen was silent again.

Not from shock this time—but reverence.

Five dishes stood complete, steam rising, colors vibrant, aromas layered and irresistible.

The Empress wiped her hands calmly, as if she had done nothing extraordinary.

"Prepare to serve," she said.

The servants bowed deeply, eyes full of admiration.

That evening, the palace would not just dine.

It would remember.

Evening Whispers and a Table Full of Wonder

The moment the last dish was plated, the imperial kitchen felt... unreal.

Steam curled lazily upward, carrying aromas so rich and layered that they slipped through corridors, climbed pillars, and drifted into courtyards. It wasn't the heavy scent of ceremonial banquets or overly spiced noble food—it was warm, inviting, alive.

One by one, the chefs and servants stood frozen.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then a young helper whispered, almost afraid to breathe,

"Is... is this really what Her Majesty cooked?"

The head chef leaned forward, eyes sharp and experienced. He examined the dumplings—the pleats even, the dough translucent but not torn. He looked at the fried rice—each grain separate, glossy but not oily. The chow mein still had steam but no excess moisture. The Kung Pao chicken glistened perfectly, peanuts intact. And the Peking duck—

He swallowed.

"This..." he murmured, voice hoarse, "This is master-level cooking."

A ripple of hushed voices spread through the kitchen.

"She didn't ask for help at all."

"She didn't even let us touch the wok."

"Other noble ladies don't know where the kitchen is..."

"But Her Majesty cooked for everyone."

Someone laughed softly, full of awe.

"She's really down to earth. Not like the others."

Another servant nodded.

"I've served three palaces. I've never seen a woman of her status step into the kitchen like this."

Their gazes followed the Empress as she removed her apron calmly, hands steady, expression serene—as if cooking five demanding dishes was nothing more than an ordinary task.

She did not wait for praise.

She only said, "Serve while it's hot."

And then she left.

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#### A Quiet Return

Back in her courtyard, the Empress washed her hands slowly, the heat of the kitchen finally leaving her skin. The water felt cool, grounding.

She changed into clean clothes—simple, elegant, unfussy. Her reflection in the mirror looked calm, but her eyes carried a quiet focus, the kind that came after pouring one's heart into work.

Outside, faint laughter drifted in the air.

Dinner time.

She took a breath and stepped out.

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#### The Emperor's Courtyard

The Emperor's courtyard was unusually lively.

Lanterns glowed warmly, casting soft light across the stone paths. A table had been set to the side, but most people were gathered near a mahjong table, tiles clicking rhythmically.

The Dowager Empress sat at the head, posture relaxed, expression indulgent for once. Princess Zhi sat nearby, her face softer than it had been in days. Lady Chen smiled gently as she placed a tile, while Shin Gu sat composed and quiet, observing more than playing.

Prince Liang leaned back slightly, laughing as he lost a round.

"Again?" he said, shaking his head. "Mother, you're too ruthless."

The Dowager Empress chuckled. "Skill is skill. Don't blame fate."

The Emperor sat nearby, watching rather than playing, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Then—

Someone noticed her.

"Her Majesty is here."

All conversation paused for a brief second.

The Empress stepped into the lantern light, calm and composed.

Princess Zhi's face brightened instantly.

"Sister."

Lady Chen turned, surprise flickering in her eyes, followed by a polite smile. Shin Gu's gaze lingered a fraction longer than necessary before she lowered her eyes.

The Dowager Empress assessed her from head to toe, unreadable.

The Emperor stood.

"You're back," he said simply.

"Yes," the Empress replied. "Dinner is ready."

A servant hurried in at once.

"The dishes... Your Majesty... the entire palace can smell them."

Prince Liang laughed. "That good?"

The servant nodded fervently. "Better than the imperial chef's banquet."

That earned a raised brow from the Dowager Empress.

"Is that so?" she said coolly.

Moments later, dishes were brought in.

The table fell silent again—but this time, it wasn't disbelief.

It was anticipation.

Steam rose. Chopsticks paused mid-air.

Princess Zhi took a bite first.

Her eyes widened.

"...This is wonderful."

Prince Liang followed, then Lady Chen, then the Dowager Empress herself.

No one spoke for several heartbeats.

Finally, the Dowager Empress said, slowly,

"Hm. You have... skill."

For her, it was high praise.

Servants watched from the edges, barely containing their excitement. Whispers spread again.

"She really cooked all of this?"

"No wonder His Majesty visits her courtyard so often."

"How can someone be both noble and so capable?"

The Emperor glanced at the Empress.

She was seated quietly, eating without flourish, unconcerned with the attention swirling around her.

For a moment, he forgot everyone else at the table.

The courtyard was lively—laughter, clinking dishes, warm light—but his gaze stayed on her, steady and thoughtful.

And for the first time that evening, he smiled openly.

Dinner had only just begun.