

Ghost 194

Chapter 194: a table full of warmth

The moment the final dish was placed on the table, the entire hall seemed to breathe in unison.

Steam rose lazily from porcelain bowls and lacquered platters, carrying with it a fragrance so rich and layered that even the seasoned palace servants paused unconsciously. The scent of roasted duck skin, crisp and faintly sweet, mingled with the warmth of freshly pan-fried dumplings. The fried rice shimmered with oil and egg, grains separate and golden, while the noodles glistened beneath dark sauce, dotted with vegetables cut with meticulous precision.

For a heartbeat, no one spoke.

Then Prince Liang laughed.

A real laugh—unrestrained, surprised, almost boyish.

"So this is what everyone's been whispering about," he said, picking up his chopsticks eagerly. "If I had known, I would've begged you to cook sooner."

Princess Zhi smiled softly beside him. "You're exaggerating again."

"I am not," Prince Liang replied at once, already taking a bite of dumpling. His eyes widened. "This—this is dangerous."

The Dowager Empress raised an eyebrow. "Dangerous?"

Prince Liang nodded solemnly, chewing happily. "If I eat like this every day, I'll forget the taste of the imperial kitchen altogether."

That drew laughter from around the table.

Princess Zhi covered her mouth lightly, amused. "You always say that after good food."

"But this time I mean it," he insisted, reaching for another dumpling. "The texture, the seasoning... it's balanced. Not heavy. Not showy. Just... right."

The Dowager Empress nodded slowly, her expression approving despite herself.

"It is rare for you to praise anything so openly."

Prince Liang grinned. "Then the praise is deserved."

Across the table, Lady Chen lifted her chopsticks with practiced elegance. She sampled the fried rice first, then the noodles. Her expression remained composed, but there was no mistaking the brief flicker of surprise in her eyes.

This... is truly good.

She tasted the Peking duck last. The skin shattered delicately beneath her bite, the meat tender and fragrant.

Even the imperial chef would struggle to surpass this, she admitted inwardly.

Still, her lips curved into a graceful smile.

"At least," she thought coolly, "this woman can cook."

Around the table, the mood softened. Chopsticks moved faster. Servants hovered discreetly, refilling tea and wine, exchanging quiet glances of admiration. It was rare—almost unheard of—for an empress to cook personally for a gathering like this.

The Emperor watched it all with quiet satisfaction.

For once, the table felt whole.

The Dowager Empress was relaxed. Princess Zhi looked healthier than she had in days, color returning faintly to her cheeks. Prince Liang laughed freely. Lady Chen spoke gently, her tone unhurried.

It was... peaceful.

Then—

The hall doors opened.

Shin Gu stepped inside.

Her entrance was quiet, almost unremarkable, yet the atmosphere shifted in a way that was impossible to ignore. It was not dramatic—no sudden silence, no sharp intake of breath—but rather a subtle tightening, like a string pulled just a little too taut.

Prince Liang looked up.

The change in him was immediate.

He straightened, setting his chopsticks down as if suddenly remembering himself. A smile appeared on his face—soft, attentive, almost reflexive.

"You're here," he said, rising from his seat. "Come. Sit here."

He pulled out the chair beside him without hesitation.

Princess Zhi blinked.

For a brief moment, confusion crossed her face, but she said nothing, merely shifting slightly to make space.

Shin Gu approached with measured steps, her expression gentle. "I didn't wish to disturb everyone."

"You're not disturbing anything," Prince Liang replied quickly. "Sit."

She did.

The Dowager Empress's eyes lit up.

"Good," she said with clear approval. "That's right. Eat together."

Prince Liang picked up his chopsticks again, this time turning toward Shin Gu. Without thinking, he began placing food into her bowl—duck skin wrapped carefully, noodles lifted and set down with care, vegetables chosen and arranged neatly.

"Try this," he said softly. "And this."

Shin Gu smiled faintly. "You don't have to—"

"I want to," he interrupted, already reaching for more.

Princess Zhi's hands paused mid-movement.

She looked at the bowl in front of her, still half-full, then at Prince Liang's back.

Just moments ago, he had been laughing with her, teasing her, placing food into her bowl with easy familiarity.

Now... it was as if she had faded into the background.

The Dowager Empress watched the scene with satisfaction, nodding along.

"This is good," she murmured. "Harmony in the household."

Lady Chen followed her gaze and smiled, her tone smooth.

"They look well together."

Across the table, the Empress watched quietly.

Something felt wrong.

It wasn't jealousy—not in the simple sense. It was a strange, crawling unease that settled deep in her chest.

When Shin Gu had not been present, Prince Liang had been genuinely relaxed. His smiles toward Princess Zhi had been natural, unforced. There had been warmth—real warmth.

Now, his attentiveness felt... excessive.

Almost mechanical.

As if a switch had been flipped.

The Empress's fingers tightened slightly around her chopsticks.

Shin Gu turned toward her then, smiling softly.

"Your cooking is truly wonderful," she said. "I've never tasted anything like this."

The Dowager Empress nodded in agreement.

"Even the imperial chef would be hard-pressed to match it."

Lady Chen added politely, "It's rare for food to be both refined and comforting."

Her smile did not reach her eyes.

At least she has this, Lady Chen thought.

Cooking.

Other than that... nothing compares.

She sipped her tea calmly, satisfied with her own place.

The Emperor, meanwhile, was smiling.

To anyone watching, the scene was perfect.

Family gathered. Laughter flowing. Compliments exchanged. A table filled with warmth and abundance.

But then his gaze drifted back to the Empress.

She wasn't eating much.

Her brows were faintly drawn together, her eyes distant, as if she were watching something unseen between the people at the table.

Concern pricked at him.

He leaned slightly toward her. "What's wrong?"

She looked up, startled, then shook her head lightly.

"Nothing."

He studied her face for a moment longer than necessary.

She smiled faintly, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Across the table, Prince Liang laughed again, feeding Shin Gu another bite. The Dowager Empress beamed. Lady Chen spoke softly. Princess Zhi lowered her gaze, her smile thinning, hands folded neatly in her lap.

The laughter continued.

The dishes emptied.

The hall glowed with lantern light.

Yet beneath the warmth of the meal, beneath the praise and shared smiles, a shadow lingered—quiet, subtle, and growing.

And the Empress could feel it.

Eating together lifted everyone's mood.

The heavy atmosphere that had lingered in the palace for days finally loosened, replaced by warmth, laughter, and the comforting clatter of chopsticks against porcelain. Even the servants standing at the edges relaxed, smiling quietly as they watched the family dine together in rare harmony.

The Empress noticed it first.

Princess Zhi was not eating properly.

Her chopsticks moved slowly, mechanically, picking at food more than truly tasting it. When Shin Gu entered and Prince Liang's behavior changed so abruptly—his attention shifting, his care becoming excessive toward another—the Empress instinctively glanced at Princess Zhi.

But Princess Zhi did not react the way one might expect.

There was no anger.

No tears.

No sharp intake of breath.

Only acceptance.

A calm, practiced stillness.

The Empress's heart tightened.

She could see it clearly now—this was not the first time Princess Zhi had experienced this. The way she quietly adjusted, the way she withdrew without protest, showed that she had long grown used to being sidelined. She did not fight for attention anymore. She did not question it. She endured.

That realization made the Empress feel unexpectedly bitter.

Something about Prince Liang's sudden shift still felt wrong.

People did not change like this so completely in a single moment. Affection did not turn on and off like a switch. It felt less like choice and more like compulsion—almost as if he were being pulled by something unseen.

Was it confusion?

Was it guilt?

Or was it something darker?

The Empress could not say.

She only knew that the Prince she had just seen laughing freely with Princess Zhi was not the same man now carefully placing food into Shin Gu's bowl with unnatural attentiveness.

Across the table, the Dowager Empress looked pleased—very pleased. To her, this was the order of things being restored. Prince Liang beside Shin Gu was exactly how she wanted it, and her satisfaction was obvious.

Watching this, the Empress felt a strange helplessness.

What could she do?

Princess Zhi herself did not protest. The Dowager Empress approved. Shin Gu smiled gently. Prince Liang seemed unaware of his own inconsistency.

The table remained lively, the food delicious, the laughter genuine—but beneath it all, the Empress felt an unease she could not shake.

Something was wrong.

And for the first time, she wondered whether Prince Liang was merely confused... or whether he was no longer fully in control of himself at all.