

Ghost 199

Chapter 199: outside the wall where talent bloom

Princess Zhi arrived at the Empress's courtyard just as the morning light softened the stone paths. Her steps were lighter than they had been in days, and there was a quiet excitement in her eyes.

"Lian An," she said gently, stopping near the door, "let's go outside for a while. The registration grounds are lively today. You should see what kind of people are coming."

The Empress looked up from her seat, surprised. After everything that had happened, Princess Zhi rarely suggested going out.

"Are you feeling well enough?" she asked.

Princess Zhi smiled faintly. "I am. And staying inside all the time makes the heart heavy. Come—let's take a look."

After a brief moment, the Empress nodded. "Alright. Let's go."

The moment they stepped beyond the inner courtyards, the atmosphere changed.

It was as if the palace had opened its lungs and begun to breathe.

The registration area buzzed with voices, laughter, and the soft rhythm of work. Canopies fluttered in the breeze, and long tables were filled with objects that made the Empress slow her steps unconsciously.

"So many people..." she murmured.

Princess Zhi chuckled. "They come from everywhere. When the festival begins, distance stops mattering."

They moved from stall to stall.

At one table, women sat with baskets of yarn, their fingers flying as crochet hooks danced. Scarves, gloves, and shawls lay folded neatly—patterns intricate, colors balanced perfectly. The Empress leaned closer, unable to hide her amazement.

"They're so even," she said softly. "Every stitch looks identical."

Princess Zhi nodded. "Some of them have been doing this since childhood. Three days of learning can't compare to years of practice."

The Empress felt a twinge in her chest—but instead of bitterness, there was understanding.

At the next table, handkerchiefs were displayed like works of art. Lotus flowers, cranes, phoenixes—each embroidered with astonishing detail. One elderly woman explained her technique proudly, and the official listening couldn't stop nodding.

Further on, pottery caught the sunlight. Bowls glazed in jade green, vases painted with clouds, cups so thin they almost looked fragile as leaves. A potter demonstrated how he shaped clay, his hands steady and calm.

The Empress watched, mesmerized.

"They're incredible," she said honestly.

Princess Zhi smiled, her eyes warm. "This is why the festival exists. Every three years, the palace opens its gates not just to nobles—but to skill."

She paused, then added softly, "People come from far lands. Some travel for months just to stand here."

The Empress looked around again—at the hopeful faces, the pride in their work, the quiet determination.

"So this isn't just a market," she said.

"No," Princess Zhi replied. "It's a chance. For recognition. For survival. For dreams."

They stopped near a display of wooden carvings—animals, deities, scenes of village life. Children gathered around, pointing excitedly.

The Empress felt something settle in her heart.

Her scarf might be crooked. Her stitches imperfect.

But here, among real effort and honest skill, she no longer felt ashamed.

Instead, she felt... inspired.

Princess Zhi glanced at her and smiled knowingly. "You see? Everyone starts somewhere."

The Empress returned the smile, her gaze lingering on the people around them.

"Yes," she said softly. "And this... this is beautiful."

The festival wasn't just about art.

It was about people.

They wandered for nearly an hour.

Princess Zhi paused often, drawn to small details—the rhythm of a potter's wheel, the calm patience of an old embroiderer correcting a single stitch, a young girl proudly presenting her first woven pouch. The Empress listened as Princess Zhi explained little customs of the festival, stories she had learned over years of watching from the sidelines.

For once, neither felt rushed.

When the sun climbed higher and the crowds grew thicker, the Empress finally smiled and said, "Let's go back. I'll cook today. We'll eat together."

Princess Zhi blinked in surprise, then nodded eagerly. "I'd like that."

Back in the quieter kitchens, sleeves were rolled up and hair pinned back. The Empress moved with practiced ease, washing rice, slicing vegetables into neat ribbons, seasoning gently but confidently. Princess Zhi hovered close, asking questions, helping where she could—spreading rice thinly, arranging colors, laughing when a roll came out crooked.

They made bibimbap, bright and warm—rice crowned with vegetables, egg, and sauce mixed just right. And sushi, simple and careful, rolled by hand, imperfect but sincere.

When they finally sat down, the room felt softer.

Princess Zhi tasted a bite and smiled, genuine and wide. "It's comforting," she said. "Like someone thought about the person eating it."

The Empress laughed quietly. "That's the idea."

They ate slowly, talking between bites—about the festival, about small hopes, about nothing important at all. Outside, the palace buzzed with preparation. Inside, two women shared a meal, warm and unguarded.

For that moment, it was enough.

Princess Zhi stayed a little longer after the meal, helping clear the dishes and insisting—despite the Empress's protests—that she could at least carry the bowls back to the kitchen. When everything was finally tidy, she stood at the doorway, hands folded, her expression softer than it had been in days.

"I'll take my leave now," Princess Zhi said gently. "Thank you... for today."

The Empress walked her to the courtyard gate. "Come whenever you feel like it," she replied. "You don't need an excuse."

Princess Zhi nodded, eyes warm, then turned and disappeared down the lantern-lit path, her steps slow but steadier than before.

The moment she was gone, the courtyard fell into a quiet stillness.

The Empress exhaled, stretching her shoulders. "Finally... some peace."

A cold breeze brushed past her ear.

"Oh?" a familiar voice echoed lazily. "So this is peace now?"

The Empress froze.

Slowly, very slowly, she turned around.

Three translucent figures were hovering behind her—arms crossed, expressions offended, dramatic, and unmistakably hungry.

Fen Yu was the first to float forward, hands on her hips, eyes sharp. "Peace?" she repeated. "You ate bibimbap and sushi with the princess. Slowly. Warmly. Lovingly. And you forgot about us."

Wei Rong drifted closer, looming like an offended general. "We smelled everything," he added gravely. "Every grain of rice. Every slice of vegetable."

Li Shen adjusted his spectral sleeves, sighing theatrically. "Truly tragic. To die once is unfortunate. To die twice—this time from hunger—is unbearable."

The Empress stared at them.

"...You're ghosts."

"Yes," Fen Yu snapped. "Hungry ghosts."

"You don't even need food!" the Empress argued.

Wei Rong raised a brow. "We don't need it. But we enjoy it."

Li Shen nodded solemnly. "Spiritual nourishment."

Fen Yu pointed accusingly. "You promised last time you'd never forget us again."

"I never promised that," the Empress muttered.

"You implied it!" Fen Yu shot back.

The Empress pinched the bridge of her nose. "I cooked all afternoon. I'm tired."

Fen Yu's eyes glistened. "So you cook for the princess... but not for us?"

Wei Rong leaned down slightly. "Cruel."

Li Shen clasped his hands behind his back. "Heartless."

The Empress stared at the three of them for a long moment... then sighed in defeat.

"Fine," she said. "Sit. Hover. Whatever. I'll cook."

Fen Yu instantly brightened. "Really?"

Wei Rong straightened. "I knew she had a conscience."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Justice prevails."

The kitchen lit up again that night.

The Empress tied her apron back on, muttering under her breath while washing her hands. Behind her, three ghosts floated in a loose circle, watching with intense interest.

"What are you making?" Fen Yu asked eagerly.

"Something simple," the Empress replied. "No complaints."

Wei Rong peered into the pot. "Meat?"

"No."

Fen Yu gasped. "What do you mean no?"

Li Shen tilted his head. "Vegetarian dishes can be spiritually cleansing."

Fen Yu glared at him. "Say that again after being dead for decades."

The Empress chopped vegetables with sharp, efficient movements. "You'll eat what I make."

Fen Yu sniffed. "You're abusing your power."

Wei Rong chuckled. "She's always abused it."

The Empress shot him a look. "Do you want spices or not?"

Wei Rong immediately zipped his mouth shut.

Soon, the familiar sounds of cooking filled the space—oil warming, vegetables sizzling, broth simmering softly. Even though ghosts didn't breathe, all three leaned in closer as the aromas spread.

Fen Yu floated dangerously near the stove. "Careful with the salt."

"I know," the Empress replied.

Wei Rong added helpfully, "The heat should be slightly lower."

Li Shen nodded. "Balance is important."

The Empress slammed the spatula down. "If any of you comments one more time, I'm burning it."

Three mouths closed instantly.

Minutes later, bowls were placed neatly on the table.

The Empress sat down, exhausted. "There. Eat."

Fen Yu stared. "How?"

The Empress rolled her eyes. "Like always."

The ghosts reached out. Their hands passed through the bowls—but the warmth, the essence, the energy of the food shimmered faintly, drawn toward them.

Fen Yu took the first bite.

Her eyes widened.

"...Oh."

Wei Rong tasted next, nodding slowly. "Good."

Li Shen smiled. "Comforting."

Fen Yu looked at the Empress suspiciously. "You didn't poison this, did you?"

The Empress snorted. "You're already dead."

Fen Yu laughed, the sound bright and unrestrained. "Fair point."

They ate—or absorbed—the meal together, teasing each other between bites.

Wei Rong nudged Fen Yu. "You complained the loudest. How's the food?"

Fen Yu sniffed. "Acceptable."

Li Shen smirked. "High praise."

Fen Yu kicked him—her foot passed straight through, but the intent was there. "Don't get smug."

The Empress leaned back, watching them bicker, something warm settling in her chest.

For a long time, she had eaten alone.

Now—even with three noisy, demanding, invisible companions—the nights felt less empty.

When the bowls were finally cleared, Fen Yu floated closer and said softly, "Next time... don't forget us."

The Empress looked at her, then nodded. "I won't."

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "We'll remind you anyway."

Li Shen chuckled. "Loudly."

The Empress smiled despite herself.

Outside, the palace slept. Lanterns flickered gently in the night wind. And in a quiet kitchen, a living woman and three ghosts laughed, teased, and shared warmth that had nothing to do with food at all.

For now, that was enough.