

Ghost 208

Chapter 208: morning light quite bloom

Morning light spilled gently into the Empress's courtyard, brushing the dew off the leaves and warming the stone path that led to the small kitchen area. The palace was waking up slowly, but her courtyard was already alive with sound.

The soft crackle of oil in the pan.

The rhythmic tap of a knife on the wooden board.

The faint hum of a tune she didn't realize she was humming.

The Empress was in a good mood.

A very good mood.

She had tied her hair loosely with a simple ribbon, sleeves rolled up, moving easily between the stove and the table. The uneven scarf was folded neatly on a chair beside her. Her eyes were bright. Her movements light.

Fen Yu floated above the counter, nose wrinkled suspiciously.

"What is that smell?" she asked. "It's not soup. It's not porridge. It's... weird."

Wei Rong leaned against the pillar, arms crossed.

"It smells like something fried but not meat."

Li Shen hovered near the ceiling beam, watching carefully.

"Your cooking methods defy this era's logic."

The Empress flipped a vegetable pancake with practiced ease.

"This is breakfast. A British-style breakfast."

Fen Yu blinked.

"British? Is that a ghost clan?"

The Empress laughed.

"No. It's just... from where I come from. Flat pancakes made with vegetables, flour, and spices. And omelette with herbs."

Wei Rong frowned.

"In this world, breakfast is soup or steamed buns. No one eats fried food in the morning."

The Empress shrugged.

"That's why it's interesting."

Fen Yu drifted lower, peering into the pan.

"And that yellow folded thing?"

"Omelette."

Li Shen tilted his head.

"Eggs... folded?"

Fen Yu gasped.

"You're folding eggs?! That's violent."

The Empress burst into laughter.

"It's not violent. It's delicious."

Fen Yu crossed her arms.

"I don't trust food that doesn't look like food."

Wei Rong snorted.

"You didn't trust soup either, and you drank three bowls."

Fen Yu pointed at him.

"Don't expose me."

The Empress placed the pancakes on a plate, steam rising gently.

She turned back to the pan, humming again.

For a moment, the courtyard was peaceful.

Then—

A shadow fell across the entrance.

The Emperor stood there.

He hadn't meant to come this early.

He told himself he only came to check if she had breakfast prepared for him as promised. That was all.

But the moment he stepped into the courtyard, he stopped.

The Empress was smiling.

Not the careful smile she used in court.

Not the polite smile she wore in front of nobles.

A real smile.

Her cheeks were faintly flushed from the heat of the stove. A loose strand of hair brushed her cheek. She was talking to... empty air, flipping food, looking content.

For some reason, the scene tightened his chest.

This was not the Empress he saw in the palace halls.

This was... home.

He didn't realize he was smiling until Fen Yu noticed him.

The female ghost pulled a face instantly, sticking out her tongue.

Wei Rong raised an imaginary blade and pretended to stab the air.

Li Shen sighed.

"Your presence interrupts domestic harmony."

The Emperor felt a strange chill run down his spine.

He couldn't see them.

But he felt watched.

The Empress noticed him then.

She froze for a second.

Then her face brightened.

"You're early."

Her tone was natural. Warm. Comfortable.

The Emperor stepped inside slowly.

"You look... busy."

She nodded, pointing to the stove.

"Breakfast. Sit. Maid will serve soon."

Fen Yu floated around the Emperor's head, making faces.

"Look at him pretending to be calm. His heartbeat just jumped."

Wei Rong smirked.

"His ears are red."

Li Shen added quietly,

"He likes this scene more than he admits."

The Empress didn't hear them. She turned back to the pan, flipping the omelette.

"Give me five minutes."

The Emperor watched her.

The way she moved naturally in the kitchen.

The way she spoke casually.

The way she hummed when she thought no one was listening.

Something warm bloomed in his chest.

It wasn't desire.

It wasn't duty.

It was... fondness.

He sat down on the stone bench.

For once, he didn't feel like the Emperor.

He felt like a man waiting for breakfast.

The maid arrived with tea, bowing deeply when she saw him.

"Your Majesty—"

He waved his hand.

"Let her finish."

The maid blinked, startled.

The Empress placed the plates on the table herself.

Vegetable pancakes, golden and crisp.

Soft omelette sprinkled with herbs.

Fresh fruit on the side.

Warm tea.

The Emperor stared at the unfamiliar spread.

"This is... breakfast?"

She nodded proudly.

"Try it."

Fen Yu whispered loudly,

"If he dies, I told you so."

Wei Rong added,

"Don't let him haunt us."

The Emperor picked up his chopsticks.

He took a bite.

Then paused.

Then took another.

It was... good.

Crisp on the outside. Soft inside. Savory. Warm.

He looked at her.

"This is... different."

She smiled.

"Good different or bad different?"

"Good."

Fen Yu gasped dramatically.

"He likes it."

Wei Rong looked offended.

"He doesn't deserve it."

Li Shen floated closer to the Empress.

"You fed the enemy."

She rolled her eyes.

"Shut up."

The Emperor ate slowly, watching her eat as well.

The courtyard felt warm.

For the first time, there was no tension between them.

No politics.

No accusations.

No secrets.

Just breakfast.

And in that quiet moment,

the Emperor realized—

He didn't want this to end.

The Empress's courtyard was filled with warmth.

Not the warmth of torches or sunlight,

but the warmth of voices, laughter, and the simple comfort of people sharing food.

Steam curled up from bowls placed on the low table. The vegetable pancakes were almost gone. The omelette had been cut into neat portions. Even the fruit platter was half empty.

The Emperor sat with relaxed posture, his scarf loosely draped around his neck. His expression was calm, softer than usual.

The Empress poured tea for him.

Fen Yu floated near the table, pretending to fan herself dramatically.

"I demand more pancakes. This is unfair distribution."

Wei Rong snorted.

"You already ate three."

Li Shen hovered by the beam, tone neutral.

"Her cooking improves morale. Statistically beneficial."

The Empress rolled her eyes.

"You three are worse than children."

The Emperor raised an eyebrow.

"Three?"

She froze.

Then smiled stiffly.

"Three... plates. I meant three plates."

The Emperor gave her a long look.

Then, surprisingly, he didn't question further.

He picked up his teacup.

For a moment, the courtyard was quiet.

Peaceful.

The Empress noticed the scarf around his neck again.

She tried not to stare.

Her lips curved faintly.

She felt... light.

For the first time in the palace,

she felt safe.

Meanwhile — Dowager's Courtyard

In stark contrast, the Dowager Empress's courtyard felt cold.

Not physically cold — the room was heated properly.

But emotionally, the air was sharp and heavy.

The Dowager Empress sat upright on her seat, jade bracelet clicking against the armrest as she clenched her fist.

Lady Chen knelt before her.

Her back was straight.

Her face calm.

But her hands were tightly clasped in her lap.

"Useless," the Dowager said coldly.

"Absolutely useless."

Lady Chen's lashes trembled.

"In all these years," the Dowager continued,

"I have never seen the Emperor so indulgent toward any woman."

Lady Chen lowered her gaze.

"The Empress," the Dowager scoffed,

"that woman who knows nothing of etiquette, nothing of palace arts, nothing of proper conduct—"

Her voice sharpened.

"—and yet now he eats her food, wears her scarf, and spends his mornings in her courtyard."

Lady Chen's chest tightened.

"Your Majesty..." she said softly.

"I will correct this. The Emperor is simply being kind. He has always been kind to people who are... pitiful."

Pitiful.

The Dowager laughed bitterly.

"Kind?"

"Do not insult my intelligence."

Her gaze was piercing.

"He has never been kind to you like this."

Lady Chen's breath caught.

This was the first time.

The first time the Dowager Empress had spoken to her so harshly.

The first time she felt... unwanted.

"I raised you for what?" the Dowager demanded.

"So you could lose your place to a woman who cannot even embroider a scarf properly?"

Lady Chen's heart twisted painfully.

She bowed her head lower.

"I will regain His Majesty's attention," she said, voice steady.

"Please do not worry."

The Dowager waved her hand dismissively.

"You may leave."

Lady Chen rose slowly.

Her steps were composed.

But inside her chest,

everything was shaking.

Shin Gu's Silent Smile

Shin Gu had been standing quietly near the door the entire time.

She was beautiful in a quiet, delicate way.

Her posture was gentle.

Her eyes lowered respectfully.

No one paid attention to her.

No one ever did.

But she saw everything.

She saw Lady Chen's fingers tremble when she rose.

She saw the humiliation in her eyes.

She saw the Dowager's anger.

And she saw opportunity.

As Lady Chen walked out, Shin Gu followed.

In the corridor, Lady Chen stopped, breathing slowly to steady herself.

Shin Gu stepped forward gently.

"Sister Chen," she said softly.

"Are you alright?"

Lady Chen forced a small smile.

"I am fine."

But her voice was brittle.

Shin Gu lowered her head, pretending to hesitate.

"I heard His Majesty wore the Empress's scarf today," she said quietly.

"The palace is talking about it."

Lady Chen's fingers tightened.

Shin Gu continued in a soft, concerned tone.

"It must hurt... to watch him grow distant."

Lady Chen said nothing.

Shin Gu's eyes darkened for just a fraction of a second.

In her heart,

something twisted sharply.

She had once thought the Empress was insignificant.

A woman with no power.

No backing.

No talent.

Not a threat.

She was wrong.

The Empress was slowly taking everything.

Attention.

Affection.

The Emperor's time.

Shin Gu lowered her gaze.

Her lips curved into a faint, almost invisible smile.

"She must not be allowed to grow any closer to His Majesty," Shin Gu thought.

For the first time,

a clear decision formed in her mind.

The Empress had crossed a line.

Not by ambition.

Not by scheme.

But simply by existing.

Shin Gu turned and walked away quietly.

No one noticed her leaving.

But in her heart,

something dark had already taken root.

Ominous Calm

That night, the palace lanterns flickered gently in the wind.

In the Empress's courtyard, laughter lingered.

In the Dowager's courtyard, resentment brewed.

And somewhere between shadows and silence,

Shin Gu's resolve hardened.

"She was never a threat," Shin Gu thought.

"But now... I will show her who truly rules this palace."

The wind passed through the corridors like a whisper.

Unheard.

Unseen.

But full of danger.