

Ghost 75

Chapter 75: wines whisper

The banquet reached its golden hour.

Lanterns glowed in every corner of the Duke's hall, painting the guests in molten light. The air was rich with music, laughter, and the scent of roasted duck and sweet lotus soup. Crystal cups clinked like chimes. Servants hurried through rows of noble guests, pouring warm plum wine and setting out dish after dish that shimmered with color.

It was a picture of wealth and peace—except that half the credit belonged not to royal chefs, but to a small restaurant that no one expected to outshine the palace kitchens.

The Feast of Praise

"Magnificent!" exclaimed Lord Zhang, pounding his cup on the table. "I've eaten at the Imperial Banquet, and still this stew—this stew!—tastes like home and heaven mixed together!"

"Try the fish," Lady Ming cried. "The sauce has ginger, yes, but something else—something bright! What is it?"

"Citrus peel and honey," answered the Duchess, pleased as she gestured toward the dishes. "Our household chef worked with cooks from a new restaurant in the city. My daughters discovered it during the festival."

Whispers darted down the tables.

"A restaurant?"

"In the city?"

"How bold of the Duke's family!"

The Duke chuckled, raising his cup. "My daughters and nephew have rather adventurous tongues. They insisted these cooks be brought for tonight. The place is called The Whisper Bowl."

"The Whisper Bowl?" echoed half the nobles. "What a curious name!"

Lian An hid her smile behind her cup. Her heart thrummed with delight. Her restaurant—her little secret—was being praised by ministers and noble ladies who once turned up their noses at common fare.

Across the table, her sister Lian Hua winked at her. "See, Sister," she whispered, "your plan worked better than any advertisement scroll!"

Even Lian Ruo allowed a small, knowing smile to play on his lips. He didn't expose the truth, only lifted his cup toward his cousin in quiet acknowledgment.

The Duchess's Announcement

When the music softened, the Duchess rose from her seat, the emeralds on her sleeves glittering. "Since everyone enjoys the meal," she said warmly, "I have decided something. The Whisper Bowl shall be our household's official caterer for festivities. And I suggest my friends here try them for their own gatherings."

A delighted murmur swept the tables.

"Splendid idea!" cried one lady.

"I'll send for them next week!" said another.

"My son's wedding feast shall have their dishes!"

Lian An's fingers tightened around her cup. Pride filled her chest so fast she nearly laughed aloud. This will make the restaurant famous overnight! she thought. Father and Mother will be proud—though they'll never know it's mine.

She felt lighter than she had in weeks—until a sudden chill rippled through the room.

The Return of the Uninvited

It began with a flicker of candlelight. Then a faint sound—a spoon clinking where no hand moved.

Lian An stiffened.

"Oh no," she whispered under her breath. "Not now."

From the far end of the hall, a wine jug floated several inches above the table, tilting gently as if trying to pour itself. The servant nearest it blinked twice, rubbed his eyes, and looked around. "Too much wine," he muttered.

But the jug didn't stop. It glided across the table, refilling three cups neatly before vanishing into thin air.

Next came the dumplings—five of them levitating one by one, as if snatched by invisible hands.

Lian An knew those hands all too well.

Her ghost companions had returned.

A Chaotic Reunion

Fen Yu, the fiery ghost girl, spun gleefully above the dessert table, her translucent skirts flaring. "Food! Real food!" she squealed. "The Whisper Bowl never disappoints!"

Beside her, Wei Rong, the old general ghost, was gulping down invisible wine, his booming laughter shaking the lanterns. "Ah, the Duke throws a fine feast! Not as grand as the battlefield banquets, but close!"

Li Shen, the scholarly ghost, hovered behind a group of poets, stealing their ink to dip a dumpling in soy sauce. "A perfect balance," he murmured critically. "Perhaps a note of star anise too strong—but impressive."

Lian An covered her face with one hand. "Why—why now of all nights?"

Her ghosts didn't notice her distress. They were far too busy causing what could only be described as polite pandemonium.

One noble lady shrieked when a dumpling flew off her plate. Another complained that someone had tugged her braid. A third suddenly sneezed because Fen Yu's cold aura brushed past her neck.

"Who opened a window?" Lord Zhang muttered, rubbing his arms. "It's freezing!"

The Duchess looked around. "Window? All are closed."

Then came the final straw: the main course—a golden roasted duck—rose majestically from its tray, spun once in the air, and landed neatly in front of Wei Rong, who tore into it with gleeful abandon. The servants screamed. The musicians stopped mid-song.

For a second, everyone stared at the floating duck.

Then someone slurred, "Ha! The wine's too strong tonight!" and started laughing.

The entire hall followed suit. Laughter erupted, glasses clinked again, and soon half the guests were toasting the "dancing dishes" as a new party trick.

Lian An exhaled in disbelief. They think it's part of the entertainment... thank the heavens.

The Drunken Delight

As the wine flowed, the chaos grew merrier.

Fen Yu twirled above the dancers, whispering jokes that made them giggle without knowing why. Wei Rong arm-wrestled a ghostly echo of a chair leg. Li Shen recited verses no one could hear, sprinkling ink in patterns that looked suspiciously like flowers across the tablecloth.

The nobles were far too tipsy to care.

"This hall is blessed!" cried one merchant. "Even spirits have come to dine with us!"

"Spirits, indeed," murmured Lian An dryly.

Her sister leaned close, whispering between giggles, "Why are you smiling at the air, Sister? Are you that drunk?"

"Something like that," Lian An sighed.

Wei Rong's booming voice echoed faintly in her ear. "Your Majesty! We bring good news—your restaurant is magnificent!"

"Shh!" she hissed under her breath, fanning herself to hide her whisper. "Don't call me that here!"

Fen Yu giggled. "Oh, relax! Everyone's too drunk to notice anything but the dessert."

And indeed, half the hall was clapping along to the musicians again, toasting endlessly to the Duke's health and the Duchess's beauty.

Ghostly Antics

At one table, Wei Rong decided to "help" by pouring wine for a nobleman who already had too much. The cup overflowed, the man blinked at it, then roared, "The jug obeys my will! I am blessed by fortune!"

At another, Fen Yu danced over the dessert trays, making the candied fruits spin like tiny comets. Children squealed in delight. One shouted, "Look, Mother! The fairies are playing!"

Even the Duchess laughed, clapping her hands. "What wonderful trickery these cooks brought with them! Such entertainment!"

Lian An dropped her head onto her folded hands. "I can't believe this," she muttered.

Her ghosts ignored her completely.

Li Shen had commandeered a chopstick and was using it like a quill, scratching invisible poetry into the air above the wine steam. "An ode to roast duck," he murmured. "Tragic and beautiful..."

"Enough!" Lian An whispered, glaring at the air beside her. "If you're caught—"

"Relax," Fen Yu interrupted with a grin. "No one can see us. Besides, everyone's far too happy to care."

And she was right. The nobles had surrendered to laughter and wine; servants whispered about miracles, children chased glowing lanterns across the floor, and music rose again, wild and free.

The Aftermath of Joy

By the time the last toast was made, even the Duke was laughing so hard he had to wipe tears from his beard. "Never have I hosted such a lively feast!" he declared. "If this is what happens when we hire the Whisper Bowl, then they shall cater every festival henceforth!"

"Agreed!" chorused the guests.

Lian An's friend—the true head cook from the Whisper Bowl—bowed deeply, her face flushed with pride. "We are honored, my lord."

From her seat, Lian An smiled softly, eyes glimmering with secret satisfaction. Her restaurant was now the most talked-about place in the capital.

Fen Yu floated close, whispering, "Your empire grows, Empress."

"Hush," she whispered back, pretending to sip wine. "Or I'll assign you dish-washing duty for eternity."

Wei Rong chuckled. "She means it, girl. Retreat before she drafts us as kitchen help."

The three ghosts dissolved into laughter, their forms flickering in and out of sight like sparks in the air.

A Quiet End

As the guests drifted out, the courtyard filled with warm night air and the scent of jasmine. The musicians packed their instruments, and servants began clearing dishes.

Lian An lingered at the edge of the garden, watching the reflection of lanterns ripple across the pond. Somewhere behind her, the faint laughter of her ghostly trio echoed—happy, harmless, and a little tipsy on spirit-wine.

Her sister joined her, cheeks flushed. "Sister, that was the most fun banquet ever!"

"It certainly was," Lian An said with a faint, amused sigh.

The Duchess approached then, her smile gentle. "Tomorrow will be your last day here, my dear. Rest well tonight. The journey back to the palace will come too soon."

Lian An nodded, the weight of duty settling slowly over her joy. "Yes, Mother."

She glanced once more toward the moonlit pond where three faint ripples disturbed the surface—nothing anyone else could see.

Her troublesome companions, celebrating in their own ghostly way.