

Ghost 95

Chapter 95: the taste

Night descended softly over the imperial palace, wrapping every corridor in a veil of quiet gold. Lanterns glowed faintly along the walkways, their light trembling across the marble floors like ripples of warm water. The air was thick with the aroma of food drifting from the imperial kitchens — roasted duck, lotus soup, and steamed rice fragrant with ginger and wine.

Inside the Empress's courtyard, however, the atmosphere was calmer, almost homely.

Lian An had finished cooking herself. Her sleeves were rolled to the elbow, and the faint sheen of heat glowed along her temples. The kitchen maids had begged to help her, but she had waved them away gently — this meal was hers alone to make.

On the wooden table before her rested a neatly arranged tray: small bowls of golden fish soup, delicate lotus buns, spiced vegetables, and a plate of jasmine rice with thin-sliced beef glazed in honey and pepper. A final dish — a sweet almond pudding — gleamed like moonlight in a porcelain bowl.

It was not the kind of banquet food served in the palace; it was simple, precise, and deeply comforting.

She wiped her hands on a clean towel and smiled faintly to herself. "He sent toys and milk for the kittens. I suppose this much I can do in return."

Her maid stood nearby, carefully wrapping the dishes. "Your Majesty, shall I have the food sent immediately?"

Lian An nodded. "Yes. But be polite when you arrive. If they refuse, don't argue. You must be respectful."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The maid lifted the tray reverently, as though carrying a sacred offering, and hurried out toward the Emperor's quarters.

The Emperor's Courtyard

In the Emperor's grand courtyard, the servants were already setting the table for his dinner. Silver dishes gleamed under the lamplight; two eunuchs whispered softly as they placed utensils, and a pair of guards stood at attention near the door.

Emperor Rong Zhen sat at the low table, his posture straight, his gaze distant. His expression was as unreadable as the still water of a winter lake.

After a long day of court deliberations, border briefings, and treaty discussions with the visiting Eastern Empire, exhaustion lingered around his eyes.

A eunuch approached quietly. "Your Majesty, the evening meal is ready."

He gave a short nod. "Begin."

The eunuch was just about to pour wine when a commotion stirred outside. A maid's voice — young, feminine — was pleading softly yet firmly.

"Please, I beg you, deliver this food. It was made personally by Her Majesty the Empress."

Another voice — sharp and authoritative — replied, "You dare to bring unapproved food to the Emperor's table? Are you mad? What if it's poisoned? The Emperor's safety is not a game."

Rong Zhen's brows knit faintly.

The eunuch standing beside him looked nervous. "Your Majesty, it's likely one of the Empress's servants. Perhaps we should—"

"Bring them in," Rong Zhen interrupted quietly.

The eunuch bowed and hurried toward the entrance.

Moments later, the maid entered, trembling but determined, the tray still balanced in her hands. She knelt deeply, forehead almost touching the floor.

"This humble servant greets His Majesty," she said breathlessly. "Forgive this intrusion. Her Majesty the Empress... wished to express gratitude. She cooked these dishes herself and asked that they be humbly presented to Your Majesty."

Rong Zhen blinked — once, slowly — his gaze falling to the covered tray.

The Empress... cooked for me?

His first thought was disbelief. He had heard countless things about her — her stubbornness, her sharp tongue, her unyielding pride. But this?

His chief eunuch stepped forward immediately. "Your Majesty, this is inappropriate. No dish can be served without proper testing. It could be dangerous. Allow me to—"

The maid raised her head slightly, eyes full of resolve. "It is safe, Eunuch. I saw Her Majesty prepare every dish. She tasted each herself."

Her voice trembled but did not waver. "She said it was to thank His Majesty for sending gifts to the kittens."

A long silence followed.

Rong Zhen's gaze softened briefly — almost imperceptibly. He remembered the small kittens and the dirt under her nails as she buried their mother. He remembered the quiet dignity in her voice when she'd said she needed no help.

Finally, he said, "Let her words stand."

He looked at the eunuch. "Take the tray. Serve it here."

The chief eunuch hesitated. "But—"

"That is an order," the Emperor said, his voice low but final.

The eunuch bowed deeply. "Yes, Your Majesty."

He motioned for the maid to follow, and together they set the tray upon the Emperor's table. One by one, the covers were lifted — and the warm fragrance filled the air.

The scent was unlike the heavy oil and spice of palace cuisine. It was gentle, fragrant, and comforting — the scent of home.

The Emperor's expression flickered — the smallest spark of nostalgia, something buried deep.

He dismissed the maid with a nod. "Tell your mistress... her effort is received."

The girl's eyes brightened. "Yes, Your Majesty!"

She bowed three times and left, her heart soaring.

The Emperor's Meal

For a long moment, Rong Zhen simply stared at the dishes. The faint steam rose from the rice, curling like silk threads.

He picked up his chopsticks and took a bite of the fish soup first. The warmth spread across his tongue — light yet full of depth, perfectly balanced between ginger and salt.

He stilled, surprised.

The second taste — lotus bun, soft and filled with red bean and honey — melted in his mouth. He blinked again, his composure faltering slightly.

The third — the glazed beef. Sweet, spicy, tender. Every flavor sang in quiet harmony.

He set the chopsticks down for a moment, staring at the food as though it were something unfamiliar and precious.

He had eaten in royal banquets all his life — dishes prepared by master chefs, seasoned with the rarest spices of the empire. But this... this was different.

It didn't taste like luxury. It tasted like care.

Like patience.

Like... affection.

He took another bite. And another.

By the time he realized it, he had finished every dish — even the dessert.

The eunuch watching from the side was wide-eyed. "Your Majesty... you've eaten twice your usual portion."

Rong Zhen glanced down at the empty bowls, then cleared his throat softly. "It was acceptable."

The eunuch bowed low, suppressing a smile. "Should I send word to the Empress?"

"No," the Emperor said quickly, his tone curt — though his ears betrayed a faint hint of warmth. "Just... thank her for the effort. That will suffice."

"As you command."

When the servant had gone, the Emperor leaned back in his chair, silent.

His gaze fell to the faint reflection in the polished table — his own face, composed as always, and yet his chest felt uncharacteristically light.

He remembered the Empress's defiant words during her punishment: "I will never beg anyone."

And yet, here she was — quietly sending him food. Not as a gesture of submission, but of something gentler, harder to name.

He exhaled slowly. "That woman..." he muttered under his breath. "Always unpredictable."

He reached for the small cup of tea beside him, but paused before taking a sip. His thoughts wandered again — this time to the kittens.

He could picture them in her lap now, their fur soft and tiny paws clumsy. The way she must have smiled while feeding them.

A small, almost imperceptible smile curved his lips.

"She probably cooked for them first," he murmured. "And gave me the leftovers."

The jest was quiet, but the warmth in his tone betrayed him.

He rose, walking toward the window. The moon was high, its pale light spilling across the courtyard. Somewhere across the vast expanse of the palace, the Empress would be in her chambers — perhaps cleaning up, perhaps already asleep, with two kittens curled by her side.

For the first time in years, Rong Zhen felt something stir in him that was not duty, pride, or irritation.

He couldn't quite name it — but it lingered, soft and persistent, like the aftertaste of her cooking.

The Emperor's Reflection

Later that night, when the palace had gone still, the Emperor remained seated in his private study. The candles burned low, shadows flickering across the floor.

He rested his chin on his hand, deep in thought.

He had never wanted to marry her. That much was true. The Empress had been chosen for him — daughter of the Duke, elegant, educated, the most sought-after woman in the kingdom.

But he had seen her then as proud and distant, with eyes too sharp and words too quick. He had thought her incapable of gentleness.

How wrong he had been.

He remembered her now — kneeling beside a dead cat, burying it with her bare hands. Her quiet strength in the face of humiliation. Her laughter when scolding those invisible companions only she could see. Her unwavering defiance when punished unjustly.

She had fire — and warmth.

And for the first time, he wondered if that warmth had always been there, hidden beneath her pride, waiting for someone who cared enough to look.

He shook his head, half in disbelief, half in amusement.

"She's impossible," he muttered again. "And yet..."

His eyes softened.

Perhaps — just perhaps — those two kittens might indeed become a bridge.

A fragile one, yes. But even the smallest bridge could mend the widest river — if both sides dared to cross.

That night, as the Emperor finally extinguished the candles and lay down to rest, the faint taste of the Empress's cooking still lingered on his tongue — warm, delicate, and unforgettable.

He closed his eyes and thought, Maybe tomorrow... I'll send her something in return.

Across the palace, the Empress slept peacefully, two kittens curled at her feet, their tiny paws resting over the hem of her robe.

And for the first time in months, both husband and wife — separated by pride, circumstance, and misunderstanding — dreamed under the same quiet moonlight, their hearts unknowingly taking a single, tentative step closer.