

## Ghost 105

Chapter 105: silver pouches

The night outside the Whisper Bowl was still, almost reverent.

Moonlight draped the rooftops in silver, and the narrow market street glimmered faintly with puddles from the evening rain. The lanterns above the doorway swayed, their soft light painting fleeting ripples across the wooden signboard where the golden characters — The Whisper Bowl — gleamed quietly in pride.

Inside, the restaurant was hushed. The laughter of guests had faded, the tables were cleaned, the scent of sesame and rice lingering faintly in the air. Only one room still glowed — the small chamber at the back where Lian An sat on the edge of the bed, drying her hair with a towel. Her borrowed robe was simple, its cotton collar loose around her neck.

For the first time in weeks, she felt calm. Away from court. Away from eyes that measured everything she said.

The door slid open.

Yao Qing stepped in, her face flushed and her arms burdened with something wrapped in dark cloth. Her figure had changed since their youth — stronger now, her movements confident, but the familiar spark in her eyes was the same. Without a word, she crossed the room and dropped the bundle on the bed with a solid thud.

Lian An raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound like something light."

"Because it isn't," Yao Qing said breathlessly, sitting beside her. With quick hands, she untied the knot and folded the cloth back.

Twenty thick pouches, neat and identical, glimmered under the lamplight. Silver. The weight of hard work, stacked in quiet triumph.

Lian An blinked, momentarily stunned. "What is all this?"

"Your share."

"My—"

"Yes, your share," Yao Qing said firmly, her tone leaving no room for protest. "You told me to run this place honestly, so I am. Every coin is accounted for. This—" she gestured to the pouches "—is what we earned in just half a month."

Lian An's lips curved faintly. "Half a month? You've done well."

Yao Qing smiled, but her eyes shimmered. "No. We've done well. You built the foundation. I only followed your lead."

She took the Empress's hands and pulled her down to sit opposite. Her voice softened, trembled slightly. "Lian An... when my family fell, everyone disappeared. You didn't."

The towel slipped from Lian An's hands. "Qing—"

"They said my father was a traitor," Yao Qing continued quietly, her words coming slow, steady. "They seized everything. Our name, our lands, our home. People crossed the street to avoid us. When the officials came to take me away, you were the only one who stood there — in front of them. You gave me a land deed and said, 'Build something that's yours.'"

Her throat tightened. "And now... now I have this. Because of you."

For a heartbeat, the Empress couldn't speak. She only reached forward, resting her hand over Yao Qing's. "We both survived, Qing. That's enough for me."

Yao Qing's eyes softened with old affection. "Still the same. You never take credit for anything."

She laughed under her breath, wiping a tear with the back of her hand. Then, as if scolding herself for sentiment, she straightened and exhaled. "But that's not the only reason I called you here."

She opened her sleeve and pulled out a folded sheet of parchment. "Look."

Lian An leaned closer. It was a business plan — written in Yao Qing's neat, practiced hand.

"The merchants came today," she said, excitement creeping into her tone. "They want to open Whisper Bowl branches across the whole kingdom. North, west, east — even near the sea. They'll handle the investment. All we must do is train a hundred men and women — cooks, servers, apprentices — to follow our recipes exactly."

Lian An blinked, taken aback. "So soon?"

Yao Qing nodded quickly. "The Duchess's banquet changed everything. When you mentioned our restaurant that night, every noble wanted to try it. The next morning, they came one after another. The merchants saw the crowd and came to me before dusk."

"When will they come to speak?" Lian An asked.

"The day after tomorrow," Yao Qing said proudly. "They want to meet the owner — that's you."

The Empress laughed softly. "You said that?"

"I did," Yao Qing replied, her chin lifting with mischief. "You may hide behind your palace robes, but this restaurant is yours as much as mine. You created its taste."

Lian An's smile lingered. "You always were bold."

"And you always liked that about me," Yao Qing teased, then quickly pulled another parchment. "One more thing — look here."

It was a map of the market street, drawn carefully in ink. She pointed at three small squares beside the restaurant.

"These shops," she explained. "Every night, customers wait outside because we have no space. If we buy the next three, we can connect them. On the second floor, we'll build private cabins. Nobles will pay extra for privacy. And we'll hire more staff."

The Empress studied it, eyes thoughtful. "That's clever. Expansion with elegance."

Yao Qing grinned, her old merchant spirit shining through. "Once you sign the deal, the Whisper Bowl will spread everywhere — and our name with it."

Lian An nodded slowly. "I'll be here when the merchants come."

"Good."

The tension melted. Both women exhaled, relief softening the air between them.

On the table, steam curled from the dishes Yao Qing had set aside earlier — dumplings, sweet buns, hot soup fragrant with ginger.

"Eat," Yao Qing said, pushing the bowl toward her. "Before it gets cold."

Lian An smiled and obeyed. They ate together, the sound of chopsticks clicking softly, the lamplight dancing between them like an old friend.

When the bowls were empty, Yao Qing stood and brushed her hands. "You're still wet from the rain. Rest. Tomorrow will be busy."

The Empress smiled faintly. "Still bossy."

"Someone has to keep you in line," Yao Qing shot back, grinning. "Now sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

When she left, the door slid shut with a quiet click.

Silence fell — soft, steady, comfortable.

Then, from the corner, a spoon clinked against a bowl.

Lian An sighed without turning. "You three can come out now."

From behind the shelves, three faint forms shimmered into view — Wei Rong, the stoic General; Li Shen, the scholar with sharp eyes; and Fen Yu, the ever-troublesome spirit with a mischievous grin.

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves with dignity — though he was holding a half-eaten bun. "These mortals have improved their cooking."

Fen Yu floated above him, licking her fingers. "Better than those bland palace cooks. Maybe we should stay here."

Wei Rong folded his arms. "We're not here for your gluttony."

Lian An gave a small laugh. "Then be useful."

That caught their attention.

"I need your help," she said. "The merchants arrive soon, but I can't return to the palace tomorrow. If I vanish for days, there'll be questions. I need a reason no one will challenge."

Li Shen's brow furrowed as he thought. Then his expression brightened, a spark in his ghostly eyes. "There's a harmless toxin — used by actors. It brings red marks on the skin that look exactly like

chickenpox. They fade within two hours, but anyone who sees it will panic. No one will dare approach you."

Fen Yu clapped her hands, laughing. "Perfect! The mighty Empress, struck by a fake plague. Even the Dowager will stay miles away."

Lian An smiled — slow, approving. "A brilliant idea, Li Shen. I'll finally have peace."

She stood, her shadow long in the lamplight. "Find that powder."

Wei Rong nodded curtly. "We'll be back before dawn."

The three spirits vanished through the wall, soundless as mist.

Outside, the city was asleep. The rain had stopped, leaving the cobbles slick and reflective. A cat darted across an alley; a lantern flickered in the distance.

The apothecary's shop lay on the corner — its door half-open for the cool night air. Inside, the owner, a young scholar of medicine, sat dozing over his counter, spectacles tilted, ink stains on his fingers. A candle burned low beside him, its flame trembling.

The ghosts slipped in easily.

"There," Li Shen whispered, scanning the shelves. "Blue jar. Second row."

Wei Rong nodded and went to guard the door.

Fen Yu, however, drifted closer to the sleeping man, curiosity glowing in her eyes. "He's cute," she murmured. "I like his hair."

"Fen Yu," Wei Rong warned.

She ignored him. "Just one little look..."

"Don't—"

Too late.

She leaned down and pressed a cold, playful kiss to the man's cheek.

The effect was instant.

The man jerked awake, knocking his chair over. A vase on the counter crashed to the floor, scattering porcelain across the tiles.

"Who's there?!" he shouted, eyes wide.

Li Shen snatched the blue jar and hissed, "Got it! Go!"

Fen Yu dissolved into helpless laughter. "Oops—my bad!"

Wei Rong growled, grabbed her by the hair, and dragged her toward the wall. "You're an embarrassment."

"Ow! Gentle! My scalp's sensitive!"

"You don't have a scalp!"

They vanished just as the apothecary lit his lantern, blinking around the empty room. He frowned at the broken vase, muttered about "rats," and sat back down, soon asleep again.

Outside, under the paling sky, the ghosts gathered near the Whisper Bowl's gate.

Li Shen held up the small jar triumphantly. "Mission complete."

Fen Yu pouted, rubbing her head. "Mean general."

Wei Rong glared. "Flirt later, haunt never."

By the time they slipped back into the restaurant, dawn's first light was brushing the rooftops.

Lian An sat waiting at the table, her robe drawn loosely around her shoulders. When she saw the jar, she smiled faintly — calm, satisfied.

"Well done," she said softly.

The glass caught the lamplight, glimmering faint blue — the color of secrets.

"A week of peace," she murmured. "That's all I ask."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Then we've bought you seven days of freedom."

Outside, the horizon lightened into gold.

Inside, The Whisper Bowl lay in gentle stillness — warm, safe, alive.

And for the first time in many moons, Lian An felt what the palace had long stolen from her — the simple, priceless peace of her own breath.