

Ghost 116

Chapter 116: uniform

The sun had dipped low, painting the rooftops of the capital in amber light when the Empress and her group returned to The Whisper Bowl. The air was cooler now, carrying the faint scent of roasted chestnuts from nearby stalls.

As soon as they entered, a quiet sense of calm settled over the restaurant. The noise of hammers and saws had faded with dusk, and instead, the newly freed workers filled the upper floor — resting, washing, and changing into the clean clothes delivered earlier.

When the Empress climbed the stairs to check, she stopped at the sight before her.

The people who, only hours ago, had looked broken — their faces dull with fear and hunger — now sat together, freshly bathed, dressed in soft linen clothes, eating small bowls of rice and soup. The dim lantern light made their eyes glimmer with something almost forgotten: hope.

Yao Qing came up beside her, smiling faintly. "They look human again."

"They are human," the Empress said softly. "The world just forgot that."

Downstairs, the smell of freshly cut wood and glue still lingered from the renovation. Workers' tools were stacked neatly near the door; tomorrow, they'd continue building the second floor cabins. For now, everyone deserved rest.

"Let's close for the night," Yao Qing said.

The Empress nodded. "Yes. But first, let's let people know we'll reopen soon."

Pamphlets and Plans

The twins — Lin and Lian — were already jumping with energy despite the long day. The new man, Wei Jie, stood beside them with a bucket of paste and a roll of papers.

The Empress sat with her friend at one of the tables, writing by lamplight. Her brush moved swiftly across the page in graceful strokes:

> "The Whisper Bowl is under renovation.

Grand Reopening in 10 Days!"

They made copies — fifty of them — and handed them to the twins and Wei Jie.

"Stick them around the market, near the main street, and by the tea stalls," Yao Qing instructed. "Make sure they're visible."

"Yes, ma'am!" the twins chorused, racing out the door with Wei Jie following, holding the paste.

As their laughter faded down the street, Yao Qing turned to her friend with a sigh. "Finally, some peace."

The Empress smiled. "You say that every time before something loud happens."

"Don't jinx us."

But the evening stayed quiet — at least for a while.

Dinner for a Hundred

Together, they began cooking.

The kitchen filled with movement and sound — the rhythm of knives on chopping boards, the bubbling of soup, the hiss of oil.

The Empress tied her sleeves and began preparing vegetables, slicing lotus root and tofu with precise, swift motions. Yao Qing kneaded dough for buns, humming softly.

"You're working too hard," Yao Qing said without looking up.

"You say that to me every day," the Empress replied.

"That's because you never listen."

"Neither do you."

They both laughed quietly.

When the twins returned from their pamphlet mission, they joined in — carrying trays, fetching bowls, stirring broth. Wei Jie handled the fire, steady and efficient.

Soon, the kitchen turned into a small storm of smells — chili oil, garlic, broth, sesame, and the rich heat of simmering hotpot.

When everything was done, there were over a hundred bowls of food — enough for everyone upstairs and the people downstairs.

The Empress looked proudly at the spread. "It smells good."

"It smells heavenly," Lin said, stealing a bite and yelping when the hot sauce hit her tongue. "Hot!"

"That's the point," Yao Qing said, smirking.

"Send the food to the upstairs workers," she told Wei Jie. "They should eat alone tonight — they're still getting used to this place."

Wei Jie nodded, calling the twins to help him carry the trays.

The Empress watched them go. "They'll rest better with full stomachs."

Yao Qing leaned against the counter, smiling. "You know... for someone who was supposed to be an empress locked in a palace, you're awfully good at feeding commoners."

The Empress's lips twitched. "Maybe I was never meant for the palace."

Late Dinner and Hidden Thoughts

When the food was sent upstairs, the Empress and her friend sat together to eat.

The twins returned soon after, their cheeks flushed from climbing stairs, and joined them eagerly.

"Everyone upstairs said thank you," Lin reported happily. "They were crying while eating."

"Then we did something right," Yao Qing said warmly.

They all began eating together — hotpot, noodles, pickled vegetables, buns — laughter filling the quiet restaurant.

Talk turned to the future — to expansion, to the outlets in other cities, to what they could build.

"It's all happening so fast," Yao Qing said, stirring her soup. "In one month, we've gone from barely surviving to buying three new shops. And tomorrow, we start training forty new workers. If this keeps up, The Whisper Bowl might become the most famous restaurant in the kingdom."

The Empress smiled faintly but didn't speak.

Her eyes drifted toward the window, where the moon hung high and pale.

Her heart felt heavy — not with fear, but with quiet reflection.

Fame. Success. Growth.

All of it was finally within reach.

But her marriage... her crown... her so-called life in the palace — all of it felt farther away with every passing day.

She thought of the Emperor — cold, distant, a man who never saw her as more than a burden forced by politics.

Would he even notice if I never returned?

The thought stung, but not as much as she expected.

Maybe it was time to stop waiting for someone who had never tried to know her. Maybe someday, when her world was strong enough, she could free herself completely.

Divorce the Emperor.

Walk away from the golden cage.

Live as her own person.

Find someone who truly saw her — not as an Empress, but as Lian An.

"An An?" Yao Qing's voice pulled her back. "You're lost in thought again."

The Empress smiled softly. "Just thinking about the future."

"Good thoughts, I hope."

"Yes," she lied gently. "Good thoughts."

The Return of the Market Vendors

They were still clearing the dishes when a sudden murmur rose outside — a wave of voices.

The Empress frowned. "What's that noise?"

The twins peeked out the door and gasped. "It's the stall vendors! The ones from this morning!"

Yao Qing sighed. "Oh no, did they come to fight again?"

But when they stepped outside, the group of fifteen stall vendors looked calmer — tired but determined.

The elderly woman who had spoken before stepped forward. "Lady Lian... we talked among ourselves. What you said this morning — we've thought about it."

The Empress crossed her arms gently. "And?"

"We... want to accept your offer," she said finally. "We'll work for you."

The man beside her nodded. "Eighty silver a month and two meals a day... that's more than we ever earned. We'll do it honestly."

A ripple of relief passed through the group.

The Empress smiled. "Good. Then let's make it official."

Writing the Contracts

She went inside, brought paper, ink, and brush. Wei Jie set the table and rolled up his sleeves.

"I can write," he offered.

The Empress nodded. "Good. Let's draft it together."

Yao Qing stood beside her, voice clear and sharp. "Write this: All workers must not share or teach any recipes or trade secrets. If they do, they must pay a penalty of fifty thousand silver tales."

The vendors gasped in shock.

"That much?" one man stammered. "Fifty thousand?!"

Yao Qing folded her arms. "If you're honest, you'll never need to pay it."

The Empress added gently, "It's not to punish you — it's to protect all of us. Trust is built both ways."

They exchanged nervous glances but nodded.

Wei Jie continued writing smoothly as the Empress spoke:

"All workers must come clean and neat to work. Hygiene matters here. You represent The Whisper Bowl."

The vendors murmured agreement.

"And about uniforms," the Empress added, "I will provide them. You don't need to buy anything. Two summer sets and two winter sets per person."

Yao Qing nodded approvingly. "That's fair. And each will receive food during work hours."

By the time the last word was written, the parchment was full of neat lines and bold promises.

The Empress signed first. Then Yao Qing. Then Wei Jie stamped it with the restaurant's seal.

One by one, each of the fifteen vendors pressed their thumbprints beside their names.

When it was done, the Empress smiled. "Welcome to The Whisper Bowl family."

The group bowed deeply, gratitude shining in their tired eyes. "Thank you, Lady Lian."

"Come back tomorrow morning," she said. "Training begins at sunrise."

They thanked her again and left, whispering excitedly about their new fortune.

Designing the Uniforms

When the door finally closed, Yao Qing leaned back, sighing in satisfaction. "That's fifteen more people we can trust. You handled that perfectly."

The twins cheered, raising their arms. "No more searching for servants!"

The Empress chuckled softly. "No, now we just need to get their clothes."

Wei Jie stepped forward. "I know a tailor in the western quarter. He's fast and honest. I can take him the designs."

"Good," the Empress said, already reaching for paper. "I'll draw them."

She dipped her brush in ink and began sketching.

Her lines were confident and elegant — years of discipline from royal training still lived in her hands.

"For women," she said, sketching carefully, "a long black skirt with a fitted white shirt, full sleeves, and a white apron attached. Gloves too."

Yao Qing nodded approvingly. "Classy."

"For men," she continued, "black trousers, white shirt, same apron, same gloves. In winter, everything the same — but woolen."

She added one final detail — the logo of 'TWB' embroidered neatly on the shirts.

Wei Jie looked impressed. "You draw well, my lady."

The Empress smiled faintly. "I've had practice drawing palace designs."

She folded the paper and handed it to him along with a small pouch. "Give your tailor a deposit — a thousand silver tales. Once everything is done, we'll pay the rest. Tell him we need forty sets for the freed workers and fifteen uniforms for the new hires."

Wei Jie nodded firmly. "Consider it done."

The Empress leaned back, rubbing her eyes as fatigue set in.

Yao Qing stretched, yawning. "We've worked since dawn. I can barely feel my legs."

"Then rest," the Empress said gently. "Tomorrow will be another long day."

The Promise of Tomorrow

Upstairs, quiet murmurs drifted down from the freed workers' quarters — laughter, the soft sound of bowls being stacked, a lullaby hummed by an old woman.

For the first time in years, the building felt alive from top to bottom.

The Empress looked around at her small team — her childhood friend, two mischievous twins, and the loyal soldier-turned-helper.

She smiled. "Do you realize," she said softly, "we've built a family out of strangers?"

Yao Qing smiled back. "No, An An. You built it. We just followed your heart."

The Empress didn't answer. She only looked at the lanterns glowing in the quiet street outside, the gentle hum of the city's night life returning after a long day.

Tomorrow, the renovation would continue.

Soon, new uniforms would arrive.

Training would begin.

And in ten days, The Whisper Bowl would reopen — not just as a restaurant, but as a symbol of second chances.

As she closed her eyes for a moment, the Empress thought to herself:

Every brick, every bowl, every life we touch — it's freedom built with my own hands.