

## **Ghost 119**

Chapter 119: the twb franchise

The sun had climbed high above the Whisper Bowl by the time Yu Mian arrived.

Heat shimmered on the street, market stalls buzzed with shouts, and training noise echoed from inside the restaurant.

Inside, chaos reigned in the main hall.

A pot clanged to the floor.

"Hot! HOT! My HAND!" one of the newly freed workers shouted as soup spilled everywhere.

Lin the twin yelled, "I TOLD YOU—hold the ladle from the BACK!"

Lian the twin shouted back, "Why are you shouting?! Even I heard it loud!"

The scholar Han Shi rubbed his temples. "No! That letter is NOT a fish! Stop drawing circles!"

Wei Jie walked past silently with a bucket of clean water, as if used to all disasters.

Fen Yu giggled from the rafters, "Mortals are so entertaining."

But in the private upstairs room, a very different atmosphere filled the air.

A serious one.

A historic one.

A future-changing one.

Empress Lian An sat facing Merchant Yu Mian across a wooden table. Sunlight glowed on the scrolls between them. She was dressed in simple cotton clothes, hair tied with a ribbon, looking every bit the calm commander of an empire she was secretly building.

Yu Mian was handsome in his deep blue robe, holding a long map that stretched nearly the entire table.

"This," he said, tapping the map, "is the plan for the TWB empire."

The Empress leaned in. "Explain."

Yu Mian's eyes gleamed. "Twenty cities. One brand. One taste. One system."

She nodded slowly.

Yu Mian pointed to the red dots on the map. "These cities are the biggest in the kingdom. If TWB opens in all of them, we will rule the food world."

The Empress rested her chin on her hand. "But only if every shop tastes the same."

Yu Mian straightened. "Exactly."

He pulled out a wooden block with the carved logo TWB.

"This," he said, "will be our identity. Every outlet will hang this. This logo will mean: good food, clean kitchen, trained workers, exact same taste."

"It will be like a seal of trust," the Empress said.

Yu Mian's smile widened. "Yes. That is what makes a brand powerful."

He didn't know she had lived in a future world where this system was normal.

But she understood it deeply.

Consistency.

Repetition.

Brand loyalty.

Uniform rules.

Same recipes.

Same taste everywhere.

Yu Mian continued, "People will not fear being cheated. They will know — wherever they see this sign, they can trust the food."

The Empress nodded. "Then what is the structure?"

Yu Mian rolled out a list.

"Profit division:

- 50% Owner – you

- 40% Partner – me

- 10% Manager – Yao Qing"

The Empress tapped her finger thoughtfully. "Change it."

Yu Mian blinked. "Change?"

"Yes," she said. "This restaurant was not built by me alone. Without my people, TWB cannot stand."

She took a brush and rewrote it:

45% — Empress Lian An

40% — Yu Mian

10% — Yao Qing

2% — Wei Jie

1.5% — Lin

1.5% — Lian

Yu Mian stared, stunned. "You want to give your workers... shares?"

"Yes," she replied calmly. "They are the heart of the main branch. When I leave for the palace, I need people I trust to protect the taste and rules. Money motivates loyalty, but ownership grows respect."

Yu Mian stared, unable to speak for a moment.

This woman... was different.

She didn't lead like nobles.

She led like someone who understood people.

"Brilliant," he finally whispered. "I've never seen such distribution before."

The Empress leaned back. "Make the papers."

Yu Mian nodded so fast he looked like he might bow. "Yes!"

Just then—

A wooden bowl flew across the hall outside.

Followed by a scream.

"WHY IS THE FIRE SO BIG?!!!" someone yelled.

Another voice: "Because YOU ADDED OIL BEFORE WATER!"

Han Shi groaned, "Heavens protect me. These are the future chefs?"

The Empress sighed. "Training continues without pause, I see."

Yu Mian chuckled softly. "It is chaotic... but that chaos is proof of growth."

They both stood and looked down from the upstairs railing.

Workers ran around with aprons crooked, uniforms half-tucked, some carrying trays, some trying to spell their names, others spilling flour.

Yao Qing was standing on a stool shouting: "NO ONE TOUCHES THE KNIVES UNTIL I SAY SO!"

The Empress exhaled. "We will need at least four days before they learn basics."

Yu Mian nodded. "Yes. But their hearts are sincere. And your training system... is already legendary."

He lowered his voice.

"And your uniforms are revolutionary."

He pointed to the folded sample on the table.

Navy blue shirt.

Beige skirt for women.

Beige trousers for men.

Aprons with clean pockets.

And the beautiful embroidered TWB logo on the chest.

"This," Yu Mian whispered with admiration, "is identity."

The Empress said, "Workers in every outlet will wear the same."

Yu Mian nodded. "This will spread the brand everywhere."

"And the logo will be carved into wooden boards at each outlet," she added.

He froze, eyes wide. "Carving the logo into wood? So no one can copy it?"

"Yes," she said. "Fake shops cannot steal our name. The magistrate will shut any imitators."

Yu Mian exhaled. "This is... beyond brilliant. You think like a general making battle strategy."

"I have fought many battles," she said quietly.

Just not with armies.

But with palace politics.

He bowed respectfully. "Then let us build the TWB empire."

Just then, twins ran into the office, covered in flour.

"SISTER AN!" Lin yelled.

"THE RICE BURNT!" Lian added.

"We told you to LOWER THE FIRE!" Yao Qing shouted from downstairs.

Yu Mian blinked. "...Should I come back later?"

"No," the Empress said calmly. "This is normal."

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Meanwhile — In the Palace

While the Empress planned an empire...

The Emperor was losing sleep.

Every day, he sent herbs to her courtyard.

Every day, he asked the maid if there was improvement.

Every day, he paced, frowning, distracted during morning court.

Three times a day he walked to her locked gates.

Sometimes five.

Sometimes more.

He stood silently outside her rooms, staring at the door that never opened.

"She is resting," the maid always said.

"She won't see anyone," another added.

"She is weak."

"She is sleeping."

"She must not be disturbed."

The Emperor clenched his fists every time.

He didn't show it on his face...

...but his heart was restless.

Why did she fall ill so suddenly?

Why was she refusing to see him?

Why did she look so pale that day?

He didn't know the truth — that she was gone.

Gone to build an empire.

Gone to live a life outside the palace.

Gone to be free.

But he felt something was wrong.

"Guard," he said one night, voice low. "Prepare my cloak."

The general bowed. "Your Majesty?"

"I am leaving the palace."

"Now?"

"Yes."

He disguised himself as a commoner, wrapped a cloth around his face, and left with only one trusted general.

There had been reports of barbaric men causing trouble in the city.

As Emperor, he wanted to see for himself.

But halfway through the patrol...

He froze.

There, on the street, near the quiet corner of the newly renovated Whisper Bowl...

He saw a young woman in commoner clothes.

Laughing.

Talking.

Standing close to a man.

A man wearing a worker's apron.

The Emperor's pulse stopped.

His breath tightened.

His blood boiled.

"What..."

He stepped forward, heart pounding.

"That looks like—"

His wife.

His Empress.

Laughing with another man.

The general asked, "Your Majesty? Should we—"

"Go," the Emperor said abruptly. "Return to the palace. I will come later."

The general left.

The Emperor covered his face again and walked closer, hiding behind a cart.

He saw the sign on the door:

THE WHISPER BOWL

Closed for Renovation.

His eyes narrowed.

He remembered.

At festival boat dance she was with hai cousin and sister disguised dance in front of people she announced she run the restaurant, his wife had openly said she ran a small restaurant.

He had ignored it then.

But now...

She was here.

Not sick.

Not bedridden.

Healthy.

Laughing.

Standing with a man.

He clenched his fists.

"Why is she here? Why did she lie? And who... is that man?"

His jaw tightened.

The wind brushed against the TWB renovation boards, making them creak.

The Emperor stepped back into the shadows, watching with burning eyes.

He needed answers.

But he would not confront her yet.

First, he would investigate.

Who was this man?

Why was the Empress here?

And why... was she happier here than she ever was in the palace?

Darkness fell across his expression as he turned away.

The storm had begun.