

## Ghost 145

Chapter 145: a noble family in commoner

By dawn the Duke's residence was in chaos—

but not the usual aristocratic sort.

This was chaos of powder, hairpins, plain robes, cloth shoes, and four distinguished nobles arguing over which commoner outfit looked "less suspicious."

The Duchess sighed dramatically while checking herself in the mirror.

"My dear husband, are you sure this robe fits the common folk aesthetic? It looks much too clean."

The Duke grunted, tugging the rough cloth on his sleeve.

"I do not understand how commoners walk in such thin fabric. I feel... breezy."

Lian Hua burst out laughing.

"Father, that's the POINT! You're blending in!"

Lian Rou tied his hair with a simple hemp ribbon and looked annoyingly perfect even in plain clothes.

"If I walk outside like this," he said flatly, "women will still chase me."

"Shameless," the Duke and Duchess said together.

Meanwhile, the Empress hid her smile behind her hand. This was her family—dramatic, chaotic, but genuine.

"All of you look perfect," she said finally.

Lian Hua grabbed her arm instantly.

"Then let's go! Whisper Bowl won't prepare itself!"

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The Journey to Whisper Bowl

They traveled secretly, two carriages with no family crest.

Inside, Lian Hua and Lian Rou peeked repeatedly through the curtains.

"Look at us," Lian Hua whispered. "We're like spies!"

The Duchess huffed.

"We are not spies. We are simply... supporting our daughter in her new venture."

The Duke folded his arms in noble seriousness even while wearing plain brown cloth.

"It is our duty."

The Empress couldn't stop a warm laugh.

Even disguised, they were still themselves.

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Arrival — Whisper Bowl Becomes Livelier

The moment they stepped off the carriage, the busy sound of construction and training filled the air.

Workers carried planks, painters coated the new signboard, cooks practiced chopping, and the new trainees recited greetings loudly.

"WELCOME TO WHISPER BOWL—"

Lian Hua and the Duchess flinched.

"So loud..." the Duchess whispered.

Lian Rou grinned.

"It's spirited."

But the Duke only nodded approvingly.

"A strong business atmosphere."

Then—

"SISTER AN!! YOU'RE BACK?!"

Yao Qing rushed forward, waving her hands wildly.

Then she froze.

Because behind the Empress stood:

A refined woman pretending to be a commoner. A towering noble man pretending to blend in. A handsome cousin trying to look humble. And a little sister glowing like sunshine.

Yao Qing blinked.

"...Did you start a noble parade?"

The Empress sighed.

"These are my parents and cousin and sister."

Immediately Yao Qing bowed gracefully—it was such a deep bow that the commoner robe nearly slipped off her shoulder.

"Duke! Duchess! Young Master Lian Rou! Young Miss Hua!

I—I didn't know you were coming! Did we offend you? Is something wrong? Did someone report us??"

The Duchess quickly lifted her up.

"No, no, child. We came to help! An'an told us everything. And we are proud of both of you."

Yao Qing stared, stunned.

"...You're proud of us?

Of... opening a restaurant?"

Lian Hua hugged her.

"Of course! Sister An trusts you the most. So WE trust you!"

Yao Qing blushed so quickly her ears turned red.

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Helping With the Opening Preparations

The Duke immediately inspected the renovations.

Strong wood.

Clean layout.

Efficient workers.

"Yes," he said to the carpenter, "this beam needs reinforcement. Add one more support here."

The carpenter blinked.

"...Are you a builder?"

The Duke stiffened.

"...I am a man of many talents."

Lian Rou helped adjust the training posture of new servers.

"No slouching. Shoulders back. Walk lightly, but don't wobble."

The trainees nodded quickly.

"Yes, Instructor!"

Lian Hua joined the recipe testing team, sampling broth after broth.

"This one is too salty. This one too plain. Add star anise here. MORE chili there—no, not THAT much—  
AHHH!!"

The kitchen staff adored her immediately.

The Duchess helped Yao Qing check the uniforms.

"These stitches are too loose. Bring me a needle. We will fix it properly."

The Empress watched them with silent warmth.

Her chaotic, loving family...

working together with her friend...

helping Whisper Bowl rise.

It felt surreal.

Beautiful.

Blessed.

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Yao Qing Pulls the Empress Aside

When everyone spread out to help different parts of the preparation, Yao Qing leaned close to Lian An and whispered,

"Your family is amazing."

The Empress nodded softly.

"They always support me... no matter how strange my decisions are."

Yao Qing smiled warmly.

"They don't see your restaurant as a shame. They see it as your strength."

Lian An exhaled slowly.

Her heart softened.

"So how are preparations?" she asked.

Yao Qing grinned proudly.

"We're almost ready. In two days, Whisper Bowl reopens!"

The Empress felt a ripple of excitement.

Two days.

Two days until her new life expanded again.

Two days until the empire tasted the best food she could create.

Two days until the Emperor discovered what chaos she'd prepared for him next.

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The Family Continues Helping

The Duke oversaw craftsmen.

The Duchess organized recipes.

Lian Rou managed workers.

Lian Hua helped the kitchen.

Yao Qing directed everything like a general.

The Empress handled training and quality checks.

Together...

They were unstoppable.

The workers whispered among themselves:

"Who are these commoners? They're so refined..."

"That man has the aura of a noble general!"

"That woman looks like a queen from a storybook!"

"That young miss is prettier than any noble lady!"

"Is that handsome man even REAL?"

The Empress covered her face.

Her family was causing trouble without even trying.

But she didn't mind.

This was happiness she had not experienced in the palace.

This was a life she could build with her own two hands.

The Whisper Bowl courtyard had never been this lively.

Workers hammered beams, trainees practiced greetings, cooks stirred broth under Yao Qing's strict supervision, and the Duke's family—still in commoner disguises—blended in surprisingly well.

The Duke corrected the angle of the new door frame.

The Duchess was stitching uniform hems tighter.

Lian Hua was bossing cooks like a tiny general.

Lian Rou was overseeing trainees, correcting postures with calm authority.

And the Empress?

She stood in the center, her presence grounding the entire place.

Just as the sun dipped and the lanterns were lit...

A shadow slipped into the courtyard.

A presence that made the air subtly shift.

The Emperor had arrived.

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The Emperor Stops Walking

He froze the moment he saw her.

Lian An stood talking to her sister, her cousin adjusting a signboard behind them. The Duke and Duchess were helping Yao Qing with ledgers.

The Emperor blinked once.

"...Her entire family came?"

He entered quietly, wearing his usual commoner disguise, but noble blood always betrayed itself in his posture. Workers glanced, whispering:

"There he is—the husband who gives flowers!"

"He's so devoted..."

"No wonder Sister An glows!"

The Empress didn't even see him yet.

But her family noticed instantly.

The Duke straightened.

The Duchess's eyes softened.

Lian Rou's expression shifted to impressed neutrality.

Lian Hua gasped too loudly.

"B—brother-in-law!"

The Emperor winced.

The Empress slowly turned.

Their eyes met.

A brief, complicated silence.

Then the Emperor stepped forward and bowed slightly—not like a ruler, but like a respectful son-in-law greeting elders.

"Father-in-law. Mother-in-law. Hua. Rou."

The Duke nodded back with dignified grace.

"You came to help An'an?"

The Emperor smiled politely.

"Yes. I... visit often."

Lian Hua giggled. "We noticed."

Workers whispered more fiercely.

"He visits every day?"

"He must love her deeply!"

"They look GOOD together!"

"I want a husband like that~~"

The Empress nearly coughed blood.

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The Duke and Duchess Step Forward

The Duchess took the Emperor's hand warmly.

"We heard about the... plague situation. We worried you were stressed."

The Emperor's eyes flicked toward the Empress, who stiffened.

"Yes... it was stressful."

The Duke added calmly,

"We trust An'an, Your Majesty. She will not bring shame to you."

The Emperor's gaze softened.

"She never has."

For one heartbeat, the Empress's chest tightened.

Then she quickly looked away.

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Lian Rou Steps Closer

The handsome cousin gave a perfectly calculated bow.

"I greet His Majesty. If I may say... thank you for allowing Sister An some freedom."

The Emperor raised an eyebrow.

"She takes freedom. I simply endure."

Lian Rou smirked.

"I assumed as much."

The Emperor gave him a knowing look.

These two men understood each other instantly.

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Lian Hua Grabs the Emperor's Arm

Lian Hua always had no fear.

"Brother-in-law! Our family is here to help Whisper Bowl prepare for its opening. You better appreciate Sister An more!"

The Emperor coughed awkwardly.

Workers giggled behind their sleeves.

The Empress covered her face again.

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The Emperor Turns to Her

Finally, he faced Lian An.

"You have gathered quite the army."

She shrugged.

"They came to help."

He looked at her a beat too long.

"You look different."

She stiffened.

"Different how?"

"Brighter," he said softly. "Healthier."

The Empress quickly looked away.

From behind her, Yao Qing muttered:

"It's cultivation, idiot."

The Emperor blinked.

"What?"

"NOTHING!" the Empress snapped.

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Workers Surround the Emperor Again

The same group who witnessed his flower-giving and squatting apology came running.

"Brother An's husband!"

"You came to help again?"

"You're planting trees today too?"

"Please teach my husband how to apologize nicely!"

The Emperor, the ruler of the empire, became speechless.

The Duke hid a laugh.

The Duchess pretended to cough.

Lian Hua openly snickered.

Lian Rou smiled faintly in amusement.

The Empress pinched her forehead.

"...Stop bothering him. He's busy."

The workers bowed deeply.

"We understand! Thank you for loving Sister An!!"

The Emperor turned red to the tips of his ears.

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Duke and Duchess Share a Look

"He truly cares for her," the Duchess whispered.

The Duke nodded.

"More than he realizes."

The Empress heard them and almost tripped over her own feet.

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The Family Invited Inside

The Emperor gestured politely.

"Shall we sit? There is something I must discuss with An'an."

Lian Rou instantly took control.

"We will continue working outside."

Lian Hua dragged the Duchess away.

Yao Qing grabbed the Duke to help check the accounts.

The Empress was left standing alone with the Emperor.

She sighed.

"You came again?"

He smiled, small but warm.

"I always come."

Her heart skipped one beat—just one—but she quickly ignored it.

"We have a restaurant to finish," she said. "Work, not talk."

The Emperor followed her inside the new kitchen.

He didn't mind.

He liked watching her work.

He liked seeing her with her family.

He liked this life she built—

the life she allowed him to enter piece by piece.