

## Ghost 147

Chapter 147: spreading whisper bowl

The Whisper Bowl buzzed with an energy unlike any other morning.

Fresh banners fluttered above the entrance. The scent of herbs and simmering broth drifted into the street, luring passersby to slow their steps. Inside, workers moved in coordinated rhythm — some arranging tables, some polishing bowls, others rehearsing greetings under Lian Rou's calm supervision.

The Empress stood near the counter, quietly observing.

She wore simple commoner clothes, yet her presence carried authority. Even without a crown, people instinctively straightened when she passed.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed the three ghosts hovering nearby.

Fen Yu leaned against a beam, arms crossed, suspiciously quiet after her earlier scolding.

Wei Rong stood like a shadowy sentinel near the doorway.

Li Shen floated beside a stack of account books, scanning them out of habit.

Just then, the sound of a carriage stopping outside drew attention.

Yao Qing looked up sharply.

"That must be him."

Moments later, Merchant Yu Mian stepped inside.

He wore a neat blue robe, his expression sharp and businesslike, yet his eyes brightened the moment he took in the scene — the organized staff, the clean space, the disciplined movements.

He smiled slowly.

"It seems I arrived at the right time."

The Empress turned toward him, nodding politely.

"Merchant Yu."

Yu Mian clasped his hands in greeting.

"I came to discuss the next phase. Things are moving faster than even I expected."

They moved to a quieter table near the window. Tea was poured, and the bustle of the restaurant softened into background noise.

Yu Mian unrolled a scroll onto the table.

"I've secured locations in three towns already," he said. "All are trade hubs. Good foot traffic. Stable markets."

Yao Qing leaned forward.

"That quickly?"

Yu Mian chuckled.

"When people hear 'The Whisper Bowl,' doors open on their own."

The Empress glanced at the scroll.

"And manpower?"

"That's the key issue," Yu Mian replied seriously. "We cannot rely on local hiring alone. Quality will suffer."

He tapped the parchment.

"My proposal is this: we send trained workers from here to each new town. Two cooks. One service lead. One logistics hand."

Li Shen raised a brow.

"A standardized structure."

Yu Mian nodded appreciatively, unaware he was responding to a ghost.

"Yes. Exactly. They will train locals, maintain standards, and report back."

The Empress's fingers tapped lightly against the table.

"How many workers can we spare?"

Yao Qing answered quickly.

"From the freed slaves and current trainees — at least twelve are ready. More within days."

Yu Mian smiled wider.

"Perfect. I'll arrange travel documents and housing. The first group can leave within a week."

Fen Yu suddenly perked up.

"So... our people get to go see the world?"

The Empress ignored her comment but felt the same thought quietly settle in her chest.

The Whisper Bowl was no longer just one place.

It was becoming something larger.

Yu Mian continued, his tone shifting to strategy.

"These branches will operate under the same rules. Same menu. Same greeting. Same uniform. Any deviation — we shut it down."

"Agreed," the Empress said firmly.

"And profits," Yu Mian added, "will be reported monthly. Transparency is essential."

Yao Qing smiled.

"You're serious about this."

Yu Mian met her gaze.

"This isn't just business anymore. This is a foundation."

The Empress looked out the window, watching workers laugh as they carried crates inside.

Sending laborers to other towns meant opportunity.

It also meant responsibility.

"Make sure they are protected on the road," she said quietly.

"None of them have easy pasts."

Yu Mian nodded solemnly.

"I'll assign escorts. No risks."

Wei Rong folded his arms, satisfied.

"At least this merchant knows how to protect assets."

Li Shen hummed thoughtfully.

"A wise expansion. Controlled growth."

Fen Yu grinned.

"And more kitchens means more food."

The Empress sighed.

"That is not the point."

Yu Mian rose, rolling the scroll back up.

"I'll return in three days with finalized lists. By then, the first branch renovations will begin."

He bowed slightly to the Empress.

"This empire of bowls... is only starting."

After he left, the restaurant returned to its rhythm.

Yao Qing exhaled.

"Can you believe this? A month ago we were just trying to survive."

The Empress smiled faintly.

"Now we're building something that reaches beyond us."

Fen Yu floated closer.

"You're going to change the kingdom, you know."

The Empress didn't answer.

But somewhere deep in her heart, she already knew.

The Whisper Bowl's flame had been lit —

and soon, it would burn in every town.

The afternoon light slanted through the wooden lattice windows of the Whisper Bowl, painting long golden lines across the floor. The noise of training had softened into steady rhythm — the clatter of bowls, quiet instructions, murmured repetitions of greetings.

Merchant Yu Mian remained seated even after the discussion ended.

He did not rise immediately like before.

Instead, his gaze lingered on the Empress.

Not with suspicion — but with careful curiosity.

Yao Qing noticed it first.

She nudged the Empress lightly with her elbow.

"He's staring again," she whispered.

The Empress ignored her and continued reviewing a ledger. But Yu Mian finally spoke, his voice measured.

"May I ask you something... personal?"

Yao Qing stiffened.

The Empress looked up calmly.

"Go ahead."

Yu Mian hesitated, then smiled faintly.

"I've traveled across many cities. I've negotiated with nobles, guild leaders, even ministers."

He paused.

"But you... don't move like a commoner."

Silence fell.

The twins slowed their movements nearby, pretending not to listen.

Yu Mian continued gently, not accusing.

"Your posture. Your speech. Your decisions. Even the way people obey you without realizing why."

He folded his hands.

"And your husband... the way he carries himself — even dressed as a commoner — his presence is unmistakable."

The Empress closed the ledger.

Yao Qing's heart thumped.

Yu Mian lowered his voice further.

"I do not believe you are ordinary people."

For a moment, the only sound was the simmering pot in the kitchen.

Then the Empress stood.

She walked to the window, ensuring no one stood close enough to overhear. When she turned back, her expression was calm — but firm.

"You are right," she said.

Yu Mian's breath caught.

She met his eyes directly.

"I am not a commoner."

His mind raced, but he did not interrupt.

"My husband is not an ordinary man either," she continued evenly.

"We are hiding our identities for reasons that concern the palace and the kingdom."

Yu Mian slowly stood and bowed deeply.

"Then I apologize for overstepping."

The Empress lifted a hand.

"You noticed because you are observant. That is not a fault."

She stepped closer, her voice lowering.

"But this truth must not leave this room."

Yu Mian straightened, eyes serious.

"I swear it won't," he said immediately.

"On my reputation. On my family name."

Yao Qing finally exhaled.

Yu Mian hesitated, then added quietly,

"Thank you... for trusting me with this."

The Empress studied him for a moment.

"Honesty earns honesty," she replied.

"You've treated this business — and the people within it — with respect. That matters."

Yu Mian smiled, something sincere softening his sharp features.

"I won't disappoint you."

From the beam above, Fen Yu whispered smugly,

"Told you he was smart."

Li Shen nodded thoughtfully.

"A calculated risk... but a necessary one."

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

"If he betrays us, I'll haunt his bloodline."

The Empress ignored them.

Yu Mian bowed once more.

"I'll proceed as agreed. Expansion plans, worker placement, and documentation will continue as discussed."

He paused at the door.

"One more thing," he said lightly.

"No matter your status... this restaurant exists because of your vision. That doesn't change."

The Empress inclined her head slightly.

After he left, Yao Qing collapsed into a chair.

"I thought my heart would stop."

The Empress allowed herself a small smile.

"Sometimes the truth is safer than a lie."

Outside, the Whisper Bowl hummed with purpose — unaware that within its walls, an emperor, an empress, and a merchant had just sealed a pact built on trust rather than titles.

And for now...

That was enough.

The Whisper Bowl was louder than usual that afternoon.

The final preparations for reopening had begun — tables scrubbed again and again, banners checked, shelves wiped until they shone. The air carried a mix of anticipation and steam, of fresh wood and simmering broth.

Merchant Yu Mian stepped inside just as laughter rang from the courtyard.

He paused.

Standing near the long preparation table was the Empress — dressed simply, sleeves rolled, hair tied back — and beside her stood a group he had not seen before.

An older man with a dignified bearing despite his plain clothes.

A gentle woman whose calm eyes watched everything closely.

A young girl full of energy.

And a tall young man with a sharp, protective gaze.

They did not look like commoners.

They looked like people accustomed to respect.

The Empress noticed Yu Mian at once.

She set the ledger aside and walked toward him.

"You came at the right time," she said. "I was just about to make introductions."

Yao Qing raised a brow, already sensing something important.

The Empress turned to the group behind her.

"Father. Mother. This is Merchant Yu Mian — my business partner."

Yu Mian's breath caught.

Father. Mother.

His spine straightened instantly.

The older man nodded first, his gaze sharp but fair.

"So you are the one expanding the Whisper Bowl across the kingdom."

Yu Mian bowed deeply.

"Yes, sir."

The Duchess smiled warmly.

"Our daughter has always been decisive. Anyone she chooses to work with must be capable."

"I will do my best not to disappoint," Yu Mian replied sincerely.

The Empress gestured next.

"This is my younger sister, Lian Hua."

Lian Hua stepped forward, eyes bright.

"So you're the merchant who dared sign contracts with my sister without knowing who she was?"

She grinned. "You're brave."

Yu Mian let out a small laugh.

"Or foolish."

The tall young man inclined his head next.

"Lian Rou," he said calmly. "Her elder cousin."

Yu Mian bowed again.

"It's an honor."

Lian Rou studied him for a moment before nodding.

"You seem steady. That matters more than wealth."

The Empress watched the exchange quietly.

She had grown up surrounded by titles, by rigid hierarchy.

Here, dressed as commoners, her family felt... closer. Real.

Yu Mian glanced back at her.

"I understand now," he said softly.

"Why this place feels different."

She met his gaze.

"It was never meant to be just a business."

Yao Qing crossed her arms proudly.

"Careful, Merchant Yu. You're standing among people who raised a very stubborn woman."

Yu Mian smiled.

"I'm beginning to see that."

From above, Fen Yu leaned over the beam.

"They look scary but kind," she whispered.

Li Shen nodded.

"Strong roots."

Wei Rong added, dryly,

"Explains everything."

The Duchess stepped closer to the Empress, lowering her voice.

"You've built something good here."

The Empress felt warmth spread through her chest.

Yu Mian bowed once more — not out of fear, but respect.

"I'll make sure the Whisper Bowl grows without losing what makes it special."

The Duke nodded slowly.

"Then we will attend the opening. As commoners."

Lian Hua clapped excitedly.

"I'll help serve!"

Lian Rou sighed.

"She absolutely will."

The Empress laughed — a sound easy and unguarded.

For the first time since stepping into this new life, she felt something rare:

Her worlds — palace, family, business — standing together in one place.

And none of them needed titles to matter.