

Ghost 201

Chapter 201: name written in future fire

Morning light spilled gently into the Empress's courtyard, soft and warm, chasing away the lingering tension of the previous days. For once, the palace felt calm—not the fragile calm before a storm, but the steady kind that came after hard work began to bear fruit.

The Empress sat at the low table with her friend, the twins, and the new man. Tea steamed quietly between them.

For a moment, none of them spoke.

Then Yao Qing leaned back, folding her arms with a satisfied sigh.

"Who would have thought," she said, smiling, "that a month ago we were just opening a small restaurant... and now we're talking about branches across the kingdom?"

The Empress curved her lips. "The Whisper Bowl is no longer small."

The twins grinned proudly.

"Queues start before sunrise."

"People argue over seats."

"Some even bribe the servers."

The Empress raised a brow. "And?"

The twins coughed in unison.

"We rejected the bribes."

"Strictly."

Yao Qing laughed. "As you should. Reputation is everything."

The Empress nodded. "Which is why today, we settle something important."

She reached for a fresh scroll, spreading it open on the table. The paper was clean, the inkstone prepared.

"Up until now," she said calmly, "we've been working together without clearly defining names and roles. That ends today."

The new man straightened instinctively.

"You deserve recognition," the Empress continued. "All of you do."

She turned to him first. "From now on, your name will be written officially."

He hesitated for a fraction of a second, then spoke clearly, "Lin Yue."

The Empress dipped her brush.

"Lin Yue," she repeated, writing his name carefully. "You oversee logistics, contracts, and security. Every branch that opens will answer to you."

Lin Yue's breath caught slightly. He stood and bowed deeply.

"I will not fail you."

Then the Empress looked at the twins.

"You two," she said, eyes amused, "stop speaking together for once and tell me your names properly."

They glanced at each other, then spoke—separately this time.

"I'm Lin Chen," said the elder twin.

"And I'm Lin Feng," said the younger, grinning.

The Empress wrote both names side by side.

"Lin Chen. Lin Feng. You are the heart of operations—training staff, maintaining discipline, ensuring consistency. Without you, the Whisper Bowl would lose its soul."

The twins stared at the ink, then at each other.

"We... have names on paper now."

"Official ones."

Their eyes shone.

Yao Qing cleared her throat dramatically. "And what about me?"

The Empress smiled at her—warm, sincere.

"You were there from the beginning. Whisper Bowl exists because you trusted me."

She wrote Yao Qing's name boldly.

"You manage the main branch. Profits, staff welfare, supplier relations. When I'm not present, you speak with my authority."

Yao Qing's usual teasing expression softened. "You really trust me that much?"

"I do," the Empress said simply.

Silence fell—heavy, meaningful.

Then Yao Qing laughed, blinking hard. "Fine. Then let's make this empire flourish."

She leaned forward excitedly.

"The second city outlet already has land secured. The third is negotiating rent. Merchants are lining up to buy franchise rights."

Lin Yue added, "The trained staff we sent out have adapted quickly. Reports say customers already recognize the Whisper Bowl name."

The twins chimed in:

"They ask for dishes by name now."

"They know our logo."

"They say it feels the same everywhere."

The Empress closed the scroll gently.

"That is what I wanted," she said. "Same taste. Same warmth. Same integrity."

She looked at each of them in turn.

"We are not just running a restaurant," she said quietly. "We are building something that will last—beyond power, beyond titles."

Outside, the sounds of the palace drifted faintly—maids passing, guards changing shifts—but inside the courtyard, something stronger settled.

Belonging.

Fen Yu's voice floated softly near the roof beam, audible only to the Empress.

"She's smiling like she did at the Whisper Bowl."

Wei Rong murmured, "Because this is where she feels strongest."

Li Shen concluded calmly, "Where effort becomes meaning."

The Empress lifted her teacup.

"To the Whisper Bowl," she said.

They all raised theirs.

"To flourishing business," Yao Qing added.

"To honest work," Lin Yue said.

"To growing bigger," the twins finished.

Their cups touched.

Clear. Certain.

And somewhere far away, in markets yet untouched and cities yet unnamed, the name Whisper Bowl was already on its way to becoming legend.

The Empress sat alone in her courtyard, the unfinished crochet scarf resting in her lap like a quiet accusation.

Red and black threads tangled unevenly, some stitches too tight, others loose and crooked. She stared at it for a long time, fingers unmoving. For days now, she had tried—truly tried—but the more she worked, the more she felt how clumsy her hands were at this art. Cooking came naturally to her; flavors spoke, heat listened. But thread and needle demanded patience she was still learning.

A sigh slipped past her lips.

"So ugly," she muttered softly.

Fen Yu hovered nearby, upside down on a tree branch, peeking at the scarf.

"...It has character?" she offered weakly.

Wei Rong crossed his arms. "It looks like it survived a battlefield."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves thoughtfully. "Failure is an essential stage of mastery."

The Empress shot them all a look. "None of you are helping."

Fen Yu pouted. "I was trying."

She set the scarf aside and leaned back against the pillar, closing her eyes. For the first time in days, exhaustion crept in—not the physical kind, but the dull ache of discouragement. The festival was approaching fast. Everywhere she looked, women in the palace were excelling—embroidered silks, painted fans, carved ornaments. And her?

A crooked scarf.

"What if Dawager laughs again?" she thought.

"What if everyone does?"

Her chest tightened just slightly.

At that moment—

Footsteps rushed into the courtyard.

"Lian An!"

The Empress opened her eyes just as Yao Qing burst in, breathless but smiling wide. Behind her came Lin Yue and the twins, Lin Chen and Lin Feng, carrying parcels and grinning like they were hiding good news.

"What are you all doing here?" the Empress asked, surprised.

Yao Qing didn't answer immediately. Instead, she strode straight over and plopped down beside her, peering at the scarf.

"...Okay," Yao Qing said carefully. "Who made you sad?"

The Empress scoffed lightly. "The thread."

Lin Feng leaned in. "It attacked first?"

Lin Chen nodded solemnly. "Unprovoked violence."

Despite herself, the Empress let out a small laugh.

"That's better," Yao Qing said. Then her expression softened. "We came because you looked miserable yesterday."

"And," Lin Yue added calmly, reaching into his sleeve, "because we received this."

He handed over a sealed letter.

The wax seal bore the unmistakable imperial mark.

The Empress froze.

"...From the Emperor?"

Yao Qing nodded. "He sent it to the Whisper Bowl. Specifically addressed to you."

Her fingers trembled just slightly as she took the letter. Fen Yu floated closer, eyes wide. Wei Rong straightened. Li Shen's gaze sharpened.

Slowly, the Empress broke the seal.

The paper was simple. The handwriting—firm, familiar.

> Lian An,

I heard from the court maid that crochet lessons have not been kind to you.

You once told me that not all skills are learned the same way, and that mastery does not define worth.

If thread refuses to listen, rest your hands. Even the sharpest blade dulls when forced too often.

I know you try harder than anyone realizes.

—Do not let small stitches wound a steady heart.

The Empress stared at the words.

For a moment, she forgot how to breathe.

Yao Qing watched her carefully. "Well?"

"...He knows," the Empress whispered.

"Of course he does," Yao Qing said gently. "That man notices things when he wants to."

A strange warmth bloomed in the Empress's chest—soft, unexpected. Her fingers curled around the paper unconsciously.

Tingling.

Right there. Right where she least expected it.

Fen Yu covered her mouth dramatically. "Oh no. That's the look."

Wei Rong frowned. "What look?"

Li Shen replied calmly, "The look of someone whose morale has been restored."

The twins exchanged glances.

"Is this what romance looks like?"

"It's quieter than I imagined."

The Empress flushed. "Don't say nonsense."

But she couldn't stop rereading the letter.

Yao Qing leaned closer, voice teasing but warm. "You know, he didn't have to write this."

"I know," the Empress said softly.

"And yet he did."

Silence settled—not awkward, but gentle.

Lin Yue cleared his throat. "There's more."

He gestured to the parcels they'd brought.

"We brought snacks from the Whisper Bowl," Lin Chen said proudly.

"And tea," Lin Feng added.

"And—" they said together, "—moral support."

Yao Qing grinned. "Also, we officially ban self-pity today."

Fen Yu cheered. "I second that motion!"

They laid everything out—warm buns, sweet pastries, fragrant tea. The Empress found herself smiling again, the heaviness lifting.

As they ate, Yao Qing nudged her lightly. "You don't have to be perfect at everything."

"I know," the Empress said. "I just... didn't want to embarrass myself."

Lin Yue shook his head. "You built a business empire in weeks. Anyone laughing at a crooked scarf is blind."

The Empress laughed quietly.

She looked down at the scarf again—still imperfect, still uneven.

But now, it didn't look like failure.

It looked like effort.

Fen Yu floated down and tugged playfully at the thread. "Finish it. Even if it's ugly."

Wei Rong nodded. "Completion matters."

Li Shen added, "And meaning."

The Empress picked up the scarf once more.

Her hands still ached. The stitches were still wrong.

But her heart felt lighter.

And somewhere deep inside, that warm tingling lingered—not loud, not overwhelming—but steady.

Like something quietly growing.

She folded the letter carefully and tucked it close to her chest.

"Alright," she said, picking up the needle again. "Let's try one more time."

They stayed with her until the sun dipped low, laughter echoing softly through the courtyard.

And for the first time since the crochet lessons began, the Empress believed—

Even crooked threads could lead somewhere beautiful.