

## Ghost 110

Chapter 110: the three shop

Morning sunlight poured into the Whisper Bowl, spilling across the freshly scrubbed floors and steaming pots.

The smell of ginger, soy, and sesame oil filled the air.

For the first time in a long while, Lian An—the Empress of the realm—was not wearing silk.

She had tied her hair into a simple knot, rolled up her sleeves, and stood beside the stove, carefully stirring lotus soup with a wooden ladle.

The warm air fogged her lashes, and a small smile curved her lips as she tasted the broth.

Yao Qing stood across from her, hands on hips, shaking her head.

"If the palace saw you now, they'd faint," she said. "An Empress cooking with her own hands."

"I'd rather stir soup than politics," Lian An replied, her tone dry but content.

The twins were rushing about, one carrying dumpling dough, the other bringing herbs. Wei Jie was cleaning the floor, his sleeves rolled to his elbows.

Even the ghosts, unseen to mortals, hovered in the air—Wei Rong watching the doorway like a guard, Li Shen inspecting the accounts book with a scholar's precision, and Fen Yu licking invisible sauce off her fingers while floating upside down.

"Your Majesty," Li Shen murmured softly, "your stirring technique lacks rhythm."

Lian An sighed. "You're haunting a woman's ladle now?"

Fen Yu laughed. "He's right! You're too gentle. Soup likes confidence."

Yao Qing frowned, oblivious to the unseen chaos. "What are you muttering about now?"

"Just fighting with invisible critics," Lian An said lightly.

Yao Qing snorted. "I swear the air around you argues back sometimes."

They both laughed.

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By the time the first customers arrived, the Whisper Bowl was already buzzing.

People from nearby markets and even the outer villages crowded outside, their chatter spilling into the street.

"Try the Empress's dish!" one man shouted jokingly.

"The one who's sick?" another teased.

Everyone laughed, completely unaware that the woman behind the counter was the very Empress they pitied.

Lian An helped serve tea, her hands steady, her eyes bright. She looked like an ordinary young woman enjoying a busy morning—no crown, no attendants, no expectations.

It felt right.

Then, as the sun climbed higher, a shadow fell across the doorway.

A man entered—tall, in plain merchant robes, with calm, calculating eyes. His beard was neatly trimmed, his posture confident.

He bowed slightly. "Manager Yao?"

Yao Qing came forward, wiping her hands. "You must be Mister Han, the merchant who sent word about the shops."

He nodded. "Indeed. Are you ready to discuss the purchase?"

"Yes," Yao Qing said. "Please—this way."

But before she could lead him, Lian An set down the teapot and straightened.

"I'll join you," she said quietly.

Yao Qing blinked, surprised, then quickly nodded. "Of course. This is my partner."

The merchant's eyes flicked briefly to the disguised woman beside her, noting her calm, composed bearing. Something about her posture—straight-backed, steady—made him bow slightly lower.

"A pleasure," he said politely.

Lian An returned the nod. "Let's see what you've brought."

They entered the back room, where the merchant placed a rolled blueprint on the table. When he spread it open, it revealed three rectangular plots—each representing the shops adjacent to The Whisper Bowl.

"These," he explained, pointing, "are the three properties. Each has a storage room, a small back entrance, and shared access to a garden behind. The current owners are willing to sell together."

Yao Qing leaned forward. "All three?"

"Yes. But they want to sell quickly, so they're offering them as a single lot."

The Empress studied the parchment, her eyes tracing every line, every measurement. "We'll have to see their condition first," she said. "Blueprints don't show leaks."

Mister Han smiled faintly. "Wise words. Allow me to escort you."

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Outside, the twins trailed behind excitedly as the group crossed to the neighboring building.

The first shop had once been a tailor's. Dust clung to the shelves, but the structure was sound. The walls were intact, the floor smooth beneath the grime.

The second was emptier—its wooden beams showing signs of age but no decay.

The third shop, however, opened into a surprise.

Behind it stretched a garden—wide, sunlit, and full of potential. Wild grass had taken over, but the soil looked rich. A few flowering shrubs still grew along the edge, stubborn and bright.

Lian An stepped into the garden slowly, the breeze catching the hem of her sleeve. "This could be beautiful," she murmured.

Yao Qing smiled. "It's larger than I imagined."

The merchant nodded. "Yes. Many owners never used it—too much trouble to maintain."

The Empress turned to him. "How much are you asking?"

"For all three shops and the garden, 300 silver taels," he replied.

Yao Qing's brows lifted. "That's fair."

But Lian An tilted her head slightly. "You've undervalued the land," she said evenly. "The garden alone could feed half a kitchen. You're asking for 300, but I'll offer you 350."

The man blinked in surprise. "More?"

"Yes," she said with quiet authority. "In exchange, I want them renovated before delivery. Connect the three shops to The Whisper Bowl next door. Build a full first floor—private cabins for nobles who wish to dine unseen. The ground floor will remain open seating."

She gestured to the back of the plan. "And here—add four rooms behind the kitchen with attached washrooms and resting areas for staff. They'll live here. No one works well without rest."

Yao Qing's eyes widened, impressed. "You've thought of everything."

Lian An smiled faintly. "People serve better when they feel human."

The merchant listened quietly, then bowed slightly. "You have vision. Renovation will take coin and time."

"I'll pay half now—150 silver taels," she said. "Once the registration is complete and renovation done, you'll receive the rest."

He considered, calculating in silence. The Empress stood steady, her calm gaze unwavering. Finally, he nodded. "Agreed."

Yao Qing clapped her hands once. "That's perfect. We don't have to do the renovation ourselves."

The merchant rolled up the plans. "We'll begin registration immediately. My scribe will prepare the documents."

"Good," the Empress said. "I want it ready within a fortnight."

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An hour later, they reached the Registrar's Hall, a modest building filled with scrolls and ink.

The registrar—a thin, spectacled man—looked startled when the merchant placed the contract before him. "Three properties at once? That's unusual."

Lian An handed over a small wooden chest. The faint sound of silver filled the room.

"Payment in full for the deposit," she said evenly.

The registrar's eyebrows rose slightly at her tone. Something about this plainly dressed woman carried quiet command—the kind that didn't need to shout.

He cleared his throat and began writing. "Names for the ownership papers?"

Yao Qing spoke before the Empress could. "The Whisper Bowl Holdings, under joint management of Yao Qing and—" she glanced at her friend, who smiled faintly— "An Lian."

The Empress inclined her head. "That will do."

Within the hour, the paperwork was done. Seals were pressed, ink dried, and the Whisper Bowl now officially owned not one, but four connected shops and a garden.

As they stepped out of the Registrar's Hall, the afternoon sun shone bright.

Yao Qing exhaled, her shoulders easing. "I can't believe it," she said. "We actually own this whole block."

Lian An smiled softly. "You've earned it. And this place will grow more than either of us imagined."

Fen Yu twirled lazily in the air, invisible to all but her. "You're such a business genius, Your Majesty. Who needs a crown when you can buy half a street?"

Li Shen looked thoughtful. "An investment that multiplies stability—wise."

Wei Rong, ever practical, added, "It's good ground. Strong foundations."

The Empress glanced at the parchment now rolled under her arm. "That's the plan—strong foundations. For all of us."

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They returned to the Whisper Bowl as the day began to wind down. The street outside glowed in the late light, merchants packing up, children chasing kites through the square.

Inside, Yao Qing was already planning aloud. "We'll need carpenters, painters, and at least two more cooks when this expands."

The Empress smiled. "Hire people who need a chance, not just experience. This place was built on second chances."

Yao Qing nodded firmly. "I will."

As she turned to shout at the twins—who were chasing each other with dough—the Empress looked once more toward the garden beyond the wall.

Soon, it would be filled with green shoots, laughter, and life.

For the first time in years, she was building something that would last—not out of politics or duty, but from her own hands.

She thought briefly of her parents at the Duke's mansion, of their worry and faith. She would visit soon. For now, this was her peace.

The merchant would begin renovations tomorrow.

The Whisper Bowl would soon double in size.

And the Empress, hidden behind the name An Lian, smiled quietly at the thought.

"From whispers," she murmured, "to an echo across the kingdom."