

## **Ghost 113**

Chapter 113: contract

Morning arrived like a thunderclap over the Whisper Bowl.

The sun barely climbed above the rooftops when the street outside the restaurant turned into a river of people. Carts rattled. Vendors shouted. Fresh fish glistened on woven mats. Baskets of peaches were unloaded from wagons. Horses snorted as stable boys hurried past.

But inside the Whisper Bowl—

it was chaos multiplied by ten.

The moment the doors opened before dawn, customers flooded in as if driven by a storm.

Some carried baskets.

Some carried children.

Some came in silk.

Some in patched clothes.

Yet all of them said the same things—

"Move, move! The Whisper Bowl will run out of food!"

"I heard they serve lotus duck!"

"They say the Empress herself tasted their dishes!"

"Let me in first!"

The twins, Lin and Lian, were running like wild cats.

"Lin! Faster!"

"I AM running faster!"

"Not fast enough!"

Wei Jie moved like a quiet mountain, carrying trays full of bowls without spilling a single drop of soup.

Yao Qing was yelling orders left and right.

And behind the counter—

stood the Empress.

Her hair pulled back, sleeves rolled up, wearing a simple brown working robe. Steam clung to her cheeks. Her fingers moved swiftly as she sliced vegetables, stirred broth, and arranged garnishes.

Anyone who walked in would never imagine she was the Empress of the Central Empire.

She was simply—

The owner of the Whisper Bowl.

While she plated a dish, a loud gasp came from the doorway.

Yao Qing rushed toward the entrance.

"AN! AN! HE'S HERE!"

The Empress didn't even turn. "Who?"

"The merchant! The merchant who wants to open Whisper Bowl outlets across the kingdom!"

Before the Empress could respond—

A luxurious carriage halted in front of the restaurant.

Not like yesterday's simple ones.

This one was elegant:

Dark blue lacquer.

Polished brass wheels.

Two attendants in matching robes.

And a horse embroidery stitched into the curtain — the emblem of the Merchant Guild.

The street turned silent for a moment.

People whispered.

"Which noble is that?"

"That carriage costs fifty silver taels!"

"Is someone from the palace coming?"

Then the curtain lifted.

A young man stepped down.

He was tall, well-built, and dressed in a deep ocean-blue robe. His boots were spotless, and his hair was tied with a jade clasp. His features were sharp — calm brows, clear eyes, and an expression that measured everything around him with quiet confidence.

Merchant Zhou.

His eyes swept over the crowd, the restaurant, the street...

and he nodded.

"So the rumors were true."

Just then, Yao Qing grabbed the Empress's wrist and dragged her out of the kitchen.

"Stop slicing! Stop cooking! Come out right now!"

"I'm working—"

"You're signing a contract that will change our lives! MOVE!"

The Empress let out a deep sigh but followed.

Merchant Zhou spotted the two women approaching and straightened.

Yao Qing nearly tripped as she hurried forward.

"Merchant Zhou! Welcome, welcome!"

He gave a polite bow.

Then she grabbed the Empress's hand and almost shoved her forward.

"And THIS... is the owner!"

Merchant Zhou's expression shifted immediately. His posture straightened, his gaze sharpened, and he gave a deep respectful bow.

"It is an honor to meet you, Owner Lian."

The Empress inclined her head politely. "Welcome to the Whisper Bowl."

Yao Qing whispered excitedly, "He is very rich... and very serious... and very handsome."

The Empress elbowed her gently.

Merchant Zhou gestured toward the entrance.

"Would you prefer to discuss business inside? It is quite crowded here."

"Yes," the Empress said. "Upstairs will be quieter."

Yao Qing turned toward the twins.

"LIN! LIAN!"

CLEAN THE PRIVATE ROOM NOW!"

"Yes, Manager!"

They tripped over each other and disappeared up the stairs.

Merchant Zhou waited patiently, hands folded behind his back.

Then, when the room was ready, they walked inside.

The private room was modest but bright — wooden floors, a long table, and sunlight coming from a window overlooking the street. Tea fragrance lingered from the early morning preparation.

Merchant Zhou sat on one side.

The Empress and Yao Qing sat opposite him.

He opened his lacquered case, removed a long scroll, and unrolled it across the table.

The blueprint stretched from one end to the other.

Yao Qing's jaw dropped.

The Empress lowered her gaze thoughtfully.

Merchant Zhou spoke calmly.

"These are the twenty major cities of the kingdom. My guild intends to open a branch of the Whisper Bowl in each one."

He pointed to each location:

"The Northern trade city.

The border city.

The coastal port.

The central plains crossroads.

The merchant capital.

The capital's outer districts.

And more."

His voice remained steady.

"This restaurant — your restaurant — will be the headquarters."

The Empress remained silent, letting him continue.

"We will send forty people — cooks, servers, managers — to learn every dish served in the Whisper Bowl. Once trained, they will travel to the new branches."

He added:

"If other nobles wish to open a branch under your name, they must pay a franchise fee — we will supervise, but all rights belong to you."

Yao Qing covered her mouth.

"This... is massive."

Merchant Zhou nodded.

"It is rare for one place to gain such attention so quickly. If we move now, we dominate the market."

The Empress leaned forward slightly.

"And the partnership proposal?"

Merchant Zhou removed another scroll — a contract.

"Forty percent for me.

Sixty percent for you."

Yao Qing nearly fainted.

"S-sixty percent!?"

"That is fair," Merchant Zhou said. "You provide recipes, training, the brand name, and this location. I handle expansion costs, documents, workers, taxes, supplies."

The Empress remained calm.

"I accept—

but I want to add another partner."

Merchant Zhou blinked.

"Who?"

The Empress turned slightly, pointing to Yao Qing.

"She runs this restaurant. Without her, nothing would function. I want her to have ten percent."

Yao Qing froze.

Her eyes widened.

Her lips trembled.

She looked like someone had pulled the floor from under her.

"An... you— you don't have to—"

"Yes," the Empress interrupted. "I do."

Merchant Zhou considered it.

His gaze slid to Yao Qing — observing her discipline, intelligence, steady posture.

Then he nodded.

"Then the split shall be:

50% to you,

10% to Manager Yao Qing,

40% to me.

Accepted."

Yao Qing burst into tears.

"I think I'm dreaming..."

"Stay awake," the Empress murmured. "We need you."

Merchant Zhou raised his hand.

"Bring the writing set."

Three tables away, one of his subordinates immediately stepped forward with ink, brushes, and blank sheets. Another subordinate followed with wax and seal tools.

Merchant Zhou dipped his brush into ink.

"Write exactly as I say," he instructed the two subordinates.

They obeyed immediately — their handwriting elegant and swift.

Merchant Zhou wrote his own version with practiced ease.

The room was quiet except for the scratching of brushes.

After several minutes, he finally set the brush down and handed the finished documents to the Empress and Yao Qing.

"There are three copies," he said. "Two for you, one for me. Please review them carefully."

The Empress took her copy.

Yao Qing took the second.

For ten minutes, the room was silent.

They read every line.

Every detail.

Every clause.

Every number.

The Empress compared her copy with Yao Qing's.

Then compared with the subordinate's writing.

Then with Merchant Zhou's.

Three times she checked everything — calm, meticulous, careful.

After reviewing, she nodded.

"It is good."

Yao Qing nodded too.

"Yes. Everything is fair."

Merchant Zhou placed the inkstone forward.

"Then let us sign."

The Empress signed first — clean, elegant strokes.

Then Yao Qing — hands still slightly shaking.

Then Merchant Zhou — steady, practiced strokes.

He gathered the papers neatly.

"These two copies are yours," he said. "Keep them safe. I will take mine to the government office to get the official seal."

"When will it be ready?" the Empress asked.

"Tomorrow morning," he replied.

Yao Qing nearly squealed again.

Merchant Zhou stood, bowing respectfully.

"Congratulations. Three months from now, we begin expansion across the entire kingdom."

The Empress rose as well.

"Thank you."

"Until tomorrow," he said, stepping out with his attendants.

The moment the door closed—

Yao Qing screamed.

"WE SIGNED!! WE SIGNED!!! AN WE SIGNED A REAL CONTRACT!!!"

The twins downstairs heard and screamed too.

"WE'RE OPENING TWENTY RESTAURANTS!!!"

"WE'RE GOING TO BE FAMOUS!!!"

"LIN DON'T JUMP ON THE TABLE—"

Wei Jie simply sighed, but even his lips curved into a small smile.

Fen Yu, the mischievous ghost, twirled in the air.

Li Shen nodded like a satisfied scholar.

Wei Rong grunted approvingly.

And the Empress—

for the second time since her marriage—

smiled truly from her heart.

Because for the first time ever—

She had signed something...

that belonged only to her.