

Ghost 114

Chapter 114: the workers

The sun was high overhead when the morning rush finally slowed. By late afternoon the entire market had fallen into a strange summer stillness — the kind that only came when the heat pressed down hard enough to silence even gossip.

Most of the city's people hid indoors. Only the bravest vendors remained at their stalls, half-drowsy under makeshift cloths that provided shade but not relief.

Inside the Whisper Bowl, the Empress and Yao Qing stood near the doorway, watching as a large group of workers poured into the empty shops next door — the very shops they had bought only a day ago.

Fifty workers. Hammers, ropes, chisels, bamboo scaffolding, buckets of lime plaster, nails and saws.

The street that had been quiet minutes ago was now a storm of noise.

"Break that entire wall first!"

"Lift the beam—don't drop it!"

"Bring water! It's too dusty!"

The first wall came down with a deafening CRASH, sending a cloud of debris rolling out into the street. The twins and Wei Jie, the tall new helper, stumbled back, coughing and waving the dust away.

And yet, despite the chaos, the progress was fast — shockingly fast. The workers were experienced, strong, and clearly motivated by the advance payment the Empress had given.

By the time half an hour passed, two walls were already down and bamboo poles had been set up like the skeleton of a new building.

"Should be done within two weeks," Wei Jie muttered, impressed.

From inside the kitchen, the twins appeared, each holding a huge basket full of steaming buns. Behind them, Wei Jie walked carefully, balancing a large pot of pickle and a tray of tea cups.

"Hot buns for the workers!" Lin shouted proudly.

"Be careful! It's hot!" Lian added, sloshing tea on his sleeve.

They hurried into the renovated shops, weaving around scattered stones and broken bricks. The workers brightened instantly, accepting buns and tea with gratitude.

"Bless the owner!"

"Good food keeps us working longer!"

"Thank your boss from us!"

The twins puffed their chests, feeling extremely important.

Yet the Empress simply smiled from the doorway. Feeding workers wasn't generosity to her — it was respect. A building grew from hands, not money.

Yao Qing turned to look at her friend. The Empress had changed out of her guard uniform into simple linen clothes, tied loosely at the waist, her hair in a soft bun. She looked more like a young businesswoman than a woman the world believed was dying from plague.

"No one would guess you rule the palace," Yao Qing said with a smirk.

"No one must," Lian An replied simply.

Planning the Workforce

When the restaurant closed for the afternoon heat, the two women retreated to the cool inner room. A fan spun lazily overhead. The Empress and Yao Qing sat at the low table, small dishes of pickled bamboo shoots between them.

Yao Qing opened the scrolls. "We need at least ten more people," she said, counting on her fingers. "Four experienced cooks. Six helpers. And at least ten trainees for the future branches."

The Empress nodded. "They must be willing to leave the capital when needed."

"Exactly," Yao Qing sighed. "If we put out a public announcement, people will line up — but training will take weeks. We need workers quickly."

The Empress tapped the table gently, thinking.

"What about buying people from the slavery market?" she asked softly.

Yao Qing blinked — startled at first. "Slaves?"

"Yes. But not for slavery," Lian An clarified firmly. "We buy them only to free them. People with no families, no roots. They've suffered enough. If we give them freedom, work, and food, they'll be loyal. And they won't hesitate to travel for new branches."

Yao Qing's eyes softened. "That... is actually brilliant."

"Freeing someone creates a bond deeper than money," the Empress said. "They will protect our recipes, our business, and they will work with heart."

"And no delays," Yao Qing nodded. "No waiting, no training in loyalty. They've survived worse."

They both sat back at the same time, satisfied.

But before they could discuss further—

A loud commotion erupted outside. Shouting. Arguing. Someone cursing. Someone else crying.

Both women exchanged glances.

"Let's go."

The Marketplace Fight

Outside, the front of the Whisper Bowl was crowded with shouting people. Nearly fifteen vendors from the outer street had gathered — many older, some middle-aged, some looking tired from the heat.

The twins and Wei Jie were trying to keep the crowd calm.

"What happened?" the Empress asked as she and Yao Qing stepped forward.

At once, an elderly woman came to the front. Her hair was half-gray, her eyes tired but fierce. "Madam," she said, bowing slightly to the Empress and Yao Qing, "we came to speak. Please listen."

"Yes," a younger man beside her added angrily. "Because of this restaurant, we are suffering!"

Around them, others nodded.

Yao Qing frowned. "Why? There are dozens of restaurants in the city. Why only ours?"

"Because yours!" an old man snapped. "Your food is too good, too clean, too fresh! Now nobody buys from us."

"Before, we earned enough to feed our families," a woman said tearfully. "Now we go home with empty baskets."

Another voice chimed in. "We used to earn thirty silver a month. Now we earn five—some days none!"

The crowd murmured in agreement.

"We don't ask you to close," the old woman said. "But we want to survive."

The Empress stood quietly for a moment.

Then she spoke, voice calm but firm.

"Every month new restaurants open in the capital," she said. "Yet your stalls survived for years. Why is this different?"

Silence. Embarrassment.

Finally, the man spoke again. "Because the Whisper Bowl is... too good. People stopped coming to us."

Lian An's eyes softened with understanding.

"So you don't want us to close," she said slowly. "You just want to feed your families."

They nodded silently.

Yao Qing looked concerned — but the Empress suddenly smiled.

"Then I have a solution."

Everyone looked up.

"We need fifteen workers," Lian An announced. "And I am offering all of you a job."

They froze — stunned.

"You will earn," she continued, "eighty silver tales per month."

The entire crowd gasped.

"E-eighty?!" the old woman squeaked.

"That's more than double!" another vendor exclaimed.

Wei Jie nearly dropped the tea pot he was carrying.

The twins looked like they'd seen Heaven.

The vendors looked at each other in disbelief.

"No hunger. No sunstroke," the Empress said. "A steady salary. Two meals a day. And when your children grow, they can also work here — wages rise with skill."

"And you will sign a clean contract," Yao Qing added confidently. "No cheating. No fear."

They all looked overwhelmed — tears gathering in a few eyes.

"But..." the elderly woman whispered, voice shaking. "Why would you hire... us?"

"Because you are hardworking," the Empress said simply. "Because you came to speak honestly, not to sabotage us. And because we need people who understand customers, markets, and hunger."

The vendors lowered their heads, touched beyond words.

The Empress stepped back, giving them space.

"Think carefully," she said. "Discuss with your families. Come back tonight or tomorrow. We won't hire anyone else until you answer."

The group nodded slowly — grateful, shaken, hopeful.

They dispersed quietly, whispering among themselves.

After the Crowd Leaves

As soon as they were out of sight, the twins turned toward the Empress and gave her a dramatic thumbs-up.

"Amazing!" Lin whispered.

"You solved everything!" Lian added.

Even Wei Jie nodded respectfully.

Yao Qing smiled, relief softening her shoulders. "You saved them. And saved us too. Now we don't need to search for workers."

"And loyal ones at that," Li Shen murmured invisibly from behind her shoulder.

Fen Yu floated above the door, clapping silently.

Wei Rong just grunted in approval — which, coming from him, meant he was impressed.

The Empress inhaled deeply, feeling the heat of the afternoon settle around her. Dust still hovered in the air from the construction. Workers still hammered away next door, singing as they worked.

The Whisper Bowl was expanding.

Her plans were moving.

People were finding hope.

And all this — all of it — was happening while the palace believed she was bedridden with the plague.

Yao Qing nudged her gently. "Come inside. Let's plan the next steps."

The Empress nodded.

The marketplace, noisy and chaotic, slowly returned to its rhythm.

And the Whisper Bowl — once a tiny restaurant owned by two desperate young women — now stood on the edge of becoming a kingdom-wide empire.