

Ghost 117

Chapter 117: training start

Dawn crept slowly across the sky, staining the horizon peach and gold. At The Whisper Bowl, the lamps were still burning faintly when hurried footsteps approached from outside.

A knock sounded.

"Lady Lian! Lady Yao!" Wei Jie — their new helper — called softly through the door. "I've brought the sample uniforms!"

The Empress rubbed her eyes sleepily and stepped out with Yao Qing beside her. Both women were still tired—the last two days had been nonstop work, meetings, contracts, and training preparations.

Wei Jie stood proudly in the courtyard, holding two bundles wrapped neatly in blue cloth.

"These are the sample sets from the tailor," he announced. "And the winter clothes for all forty workers."

He placed the bundles on the table and carefully opened the first.

Inside lay:

A crisp white shirt

Black trousers

A thick woolen apron

Soft gloves

A neatly embroidered logo: TWB

The stitching was clean, the cloth thick and good quality.

The Empress lifted the shirt, running her fingers over the embroidery. "This is good," she said simply.

Yao Qing nodded in approval. "Better than expected. The tailor really did a fine job."

The twins, who had rushed downstairs half-combed and half-awake, gasped. "It looks so professional!" Lin exclaimed.

Lian tugged the apron. "It even smells new!"

Wei Jie smiled. "The tailor says he can complete everything by tomorrow. He only needs 500 more silver taels to finish the fabric work."

"Good," the Empress said. "You'll get it tomorrow."

She checked the winter clothes next — thick woolen cloaks, inner layers, gloves. Everything was warm and sturdy.

"These will last years," Yao Qing murmured. "They've never worn clothes this good."

The Empress rolled the fabric between her fingers thoughtfully. "Everyone working for us deserves dignity."

Designing the Head Uniforms

The Empress straightened. "Now we design uniforms for the heads — you, me, the twins, and Wei Jie."

Yao Qing blinked. "Uniforms for us too?"

"Of course," the Empress said. "You run the main branch. Wei Jie will manage labor. The twins will lead servers and write orders. You are not servants — you are leaders. Your clothing must be different."

The twins puffed their chests proudly.

"Pen and paper!" the Empress ordered.

The twins sprinted off, returning breathless with the items.

She began sketching rapidly, her brush strokes elegant and confident.

"For men," she said, drawing strong straight lines,

"—beige-brown trousers,

—navy blue shirt,

—and embroidered on the chest: TWB — Head."

"For women," she added,

"—beige-brown long skirt,

—navy blue shirt,

—with the same title."

Yao Qing's eyes sparkled. "An An... these are beautiful! No restaurant gives uniforms to their staff. And certainly not such elegant ones!"

The Empress smiled faintly. "If we expand across the kingdom, we must look worthy of respect."

Wei Jie bowed gratefully. "It is an honor to wear this."

"Good. Now go deliver this to your tailor. Tell him we need—"

She counted on her fingers:

2 sets (summer + winter) for Yao Qing

2 sets for Wei Jie

2 sets for Lin

2 sets for Lian

"Also," she added, "40 sets of winter clothes for the freed workers, if not already done."

Wei Jie nodded, accepting a heavy pouch of 1000 silver taels. "This is the deposit. Give the rest after stitching."

He bowed and left.

Distributing the Winter Clothes

"Twins," the Empress said, "take these winter bundles upstairs. Give everyone one full set."

The twins nodded eagerly and lifted the bundles with Wei Jie helping them carry. Soon the sound of grateful voices filled the upper floor.

"Thank you!"

"These are warmer than anything we've ever owned!"

"Bless you, my lady!"

The Empress heard everything from downstairs and her heart softened.

People who have suffered show gratitude the deepest.

Breakfast for Everyone

The kitchen soon filled with warm smells — the Empress stirred porridge in a giant pot while Yao Qing cracked eggs into another pan. The twins returned and began setting out bowls.

By sunrise, breakfast was served — simple but warm:

thick creamy porridge

boiled eggs

pickles

warm water

The workers and newly hired stall vendors came down slowly, still unsure how to behave in a place so generous.

"Sit," Yao Qing said firmly. "Eat. Training begins after."

They obeyed quickly.

Training Begins

The Empress stood at the front of the hall. Yao Qing beside her. The twins and Wei Jie flanked the sides.

Fifteen stall vendors sat on the left.

Forty freed workers sat on the right.

Everyone looked equally nervous.

Yao Qing began the speech.

"First — hygiene," she said sharply. "Hands must be clean. Clothes clean. Nails trimmed. No exceptions."

The group nodded quickly.

"Second — loyalty. This place freed you, hired you, and feeds you. If anyone tries to steal recipes or betray us, there is a penalty of fifty thousand silver tales."

Many of the workers swallowed loudly.

"Third," the Empress said gently, "you will live here for the next ten days. We will provide shelter and food. You will learn everything — reading, writing, serving, taking orders, cleaning, teamwork, and discipline."

The freed workers exchanged hopeful looks.

Then the Empress continued,

"As for the expansion — for every new branch we open across the kingdom, we will send two of you to cook and manage. You will run the restaurant there, hire helpers, serve food, and earn your future."

A murmur of excitement rippled through the room.

One elderly former-slave raised his hand with trembling fingers.

"My lady... even us? We... who never learned anything?"

The Empress smiled kindly. "Especially you."

Someone sniffled loudly; someone else covered his eyes.

Literacy Training Begins

"Twins," Yao Qing said, "begin teaching them the basics."

Lin jumped up proudly. "Everyone! Get your slates and chalk!"

Lian added, "Today we start with writing your names!"

The workers laughed nervously — some had never held chalk before.

Wei Jie quickly organized the groups. The hall filled with:

the scratch of chalk

twins shouting "No! That's upside down!"

people giggling

some even crying because they finally learned how to write their own name

The Empress and Yao Qing exchanged a proud look.

Discussing the Menu

When the writing lessons settled, the Empress pulled Yao Qing aside.

"Let's finalize the menu for the main branch."

"Yes," Yao Qing said seriously.

The Empress listed:

Snacks (4 items)

1. Golden Fried Lotus Chips
2. Spring Onion Pancake Rolls
3. Crispy Herb Dumplings
4. Spiced River Fish Bites

Main Dishes (8 dishes)

Vegetarian (2):

1. Mushroom & Tofu Hotpot
2. Stir-fried Greens with Sesame

Non-veg (6):

1. Honey Braised Chicken
2. Steamed Fish with Ginger

3. Fire-Spiced Beef

4. Smoked Duck Slice Pot

5. Garlic Pepper Pork

6. Braised Lamb Rib Soup

Drinks (5):

1. Lemon Mint Cooler

2. Herbal Vitality Tea

3. Ginger Honey Water

4. Plum Ice Shake

5. Sweet Milk Brew

Desserts (5):

1. Lotus Cream Bun

2. Honey Rice Cake

3. Caramel Pudding Jar

4. Red Bean Jelly

5. Spiced Sweet Pear

Yao Qing's eyes sparkled. "This menu alone will make nobles kneel."

The Empress chuckled. "Let them kneel. As long as they pay."

They both burst into laughter.

Hiring a Scholar

"How will they learn writing fast?" Yao Qing wondered aloud. "They need it to take orders."

"We'll hire a scholar," the Empress said. "A good one."

"I know someone," Yao Qing said. "Han Shi — he lives near here. Strict, but patient."

"Then go," the Empress said. "Pay him well."

Yao Qing grabbed 80 silver taels and went at once.

The Scholar Arrives

Han Shi was stepping out of his tiny courtyard when Yao Qing reached him. He wore simple robes, glasses pushed high on his nose, and his hands were stained with ink.

"Teacher Han," she called.

He looked up. "Lady Yao?"

She quickly explained the situation — the training, the restaurant, the workers' needs.

"We need you for four days," she said. "Eighty silver tales — twenty per day. Meals included."

He didn't hesitate. "I accept."

She blinked. "Quick decision."

He shrugged. "Teaching is teaching. If they need knowledge, I will give it."

Together, they returned to The Whisper Bowl.

When the workers saw a scholar entering, they straightened immediately, wiping hands and sitting properly.

Han Shi nodded approvingly. "Good. Discipline exists already. Now let us build on it."

He set down his scrolls and joined the twins in teaching the basics. The workers watched him with wide eyes — a mixture of awe and fear.

Within minutes, the hall fell into complete concentration:

chalk tapping

people pronouncing letters

Han Shi correcting posture

the twins running around yelling "Wrong! Try again!"

laughter from adults learning like children

The Empress watched from the doorway, pride warming her chest.

Everything was changing.

Everything was growing.

And for the first time in her life, she felt she was truly building a future with her own hands.