

Ghost 123

Chapter 123: stupid ghost

The back kitchen of The Whisper Bowl was hotter than any summer noon.

Steam curled from three great iron pots; oil crackled in a wide pan; the fragrance of bone broth, stir-fried garlic, and roasted chili wrapped around the room like a warm cloak.

Lian An stood at the center of it all, sleeves tied up, hair pinned high, apron neatly fastened. If any court lady saw their Empress now—sweating in front of stoves, ladle in hand—they would probably faint.

She, however, looked perfectly at home.

"Salt," she said.

Wei Jie silently handed over the jar.

She pinched exactly three fingers into the bubbling broth, then stirred.

The main pot held pork bone soup—milky white, boiled for hours the night before using low flame until the marrow had melted into the water. She added ginger slices and crushed white pepper, then tasted it with a small porcelain spoon.

Almost.

She tossed in a handful of chopped scallions, waited three heartbeats, then smiled.

"Good. This will be the base soup for their training lunch," she said.

On the side stove, another pot simmered with chicken—ginger, cooking wine, star anise, and a dash of soy. Next to it, a wok spat happily as thin slices of beef met hot oil, quickly seared with garlic, onions, and green chilies.

She moved between them like she'd been born in a kitchen, not a palace.

"Lin! Check the buns in the steamer," she called.

"Yes, Sister An!" the girl twin answered, hopping across the room. She lifted the bamboo lid carefully. A white cloud puffed out, revealing layers of plump steamed buns, their tops shining slightly.

"They're ready!" Lin grinned.

"Good. Take half down to the training hall later, and leave the other half for our soldiers and workers," Lian An said.

Lian, the boy twin, was washing greens in a large basin, humming off-key.

"Lian, wash them twice. The sand hides," she reminded.

"I know, I know~" he sang.

She rolled her eyes fondly and moved on to the next pan.

A large tray of sliced potatoes waited nearby. She tossed them into the wok, added a spoonful of chili bean paste, stirred until it stained everything red, then sprinkled crushed peanuts and sesame seeds over the top.

The entire kitchen smelled like heaven and sin combined.

Outside, hammering and shouting echoed from the other side of the wall—the renovation work on the three new shops was in full swing. Fifty workers were smashing walls, raising beams, and shouting measurements. Inside the restaurant, the new staff and freed slaves were practicing greetings and balancing trays.

It was chaos.

But a useful chaos.

Just as she flipped a thick slab of marinated pork belly onto the grill, a knock came from the back door.

"Delivery!" someone called.

Wei Jie went to open it.

Two men stood there with baskets and sacks slung over their backs. The warm smell of earth and plants drifted in.

"Seeds from the agricultural estate!" the lead one declared. "Cabbage, spinach, radish, spring onions, chili, eggplant, melon, and some fruit seedlings."

Lian An brightened immediately. "Bring them in. To the backyard."

The back garden had been a wild, neglected patch when she first bought the shop. Now, thanks to Wei Jie's daily cleaning, the soil had been turned, stones moved aside, and neat rows dug.

Today, it would finally receive its first proper seed.

Everyone was busy. The twins were still running back and forth. The trainees were practicing in the main hall, bumping into each other with trays. Her friend Yao Qing was shouting about hand-washing and clean aprons.

The one person who wasn't doing anything at that exact moment...

Was standing in a corner, watching everything with too much interest.

To everyone else, he was just a tall, handsome man in ordinary clothes.

To her, he was Rong Zhen—the Emperor, her husband, currently disguised as a commoner and pretending to be a guilty, lovesick husband begging forgiveness.

He had already done a hundred squats in the courtyard shouting, "Wife, I'm wrong." The workers had nearly cried at how devoted he seemed. She had nearly stabbed him with a chopstick.

And now... he was peering toward the backyard.

The Emperor's gaze fell on the sacks of seeds and the patch of soil outside.

His fingers twitched.

"Go," she said without turning, flipping the pork belly. "If you want to."

He blinked. "What?"

"You keep staring at the garden. Go. Plant. We won't stop you."

He looked almost embarrassed at being caught. "I... was only thinking it looked... poorly arranged."

"Then arrange it," she replied, still facing the stove. "We have enough chaos inside."

Yao Qing glanced out, snorted quietly. "Yes, yes, let him help. Free labor from the heavens."

They shared a quick grin and returned to work.

The Emperor stepped outside.

As his boots hit the loose soil, the smells of kitchen disappeared, replaced by the clean, honest scent of dirt and fresh air. For a moment, the noise of the restaurant faded, replaced by a memory.

A garden, years ago.

His father in simple robes, sleeves rolled, kneeling in the dirt. The late Emperor had always loved the earth—said it reminded him who he served.

"If you want fruit, you plant," his father had told him, fingers carefully pressing a seed into the ground. "If you want flowers, you tend. If you want loyalty, you earn it. Nothing comes by decree alone, son. Not even a peach."

"Why do we have to wait so long?" the younger Rong Zhen had grumbled. "We're the royal family. Can't we just order a tree to grow?"

His father had laughed. "You can order people to pretend. But you can't order life to bloom."

Now, standing in a back alley restaurant's yard with a handful of seeds, he found his hands moving exactly as his father's had.

He knelt, smoothing the rows of soil, spacing each furrow evenly. He checked the sunlight angle, the water drainage. He planted the cabbage at one end, the chili where the sun was stronger, the radishes in cooler corners.

He moved with surprising ease, muscles used to sword training now handling the gentleness of earth.

Inside, one of the trainees peeked out the back window.

"Look at him," she whispered. "That husband is amazing."

Another middle-aged woman nodded in agreement. "He did a hundred squats saying sorry, and now he's gardening too? If my man did that, I'd marry him twice."

A younger man added, "He looks serious too. Not like he's doing it for show."

Soon a small group had gathered at the back door, watching quietly as the disguised Emperor worked in the soil with a focused expression.

Word spread like fire.

"That's Sister Lian's husband."

"Did you see him kneeling outside the shop earlier? Such a devoted man..."

"Unlike some who just drink and gamble."

Someone sighed. "No wonder Sister Lian is so fierce. A good man invites thieves—she has to protect him."

Inside the kitchen, Yao Qing snickered when she heard.

"Listen to them," she nudged the Empress. "They think he's a perfect husband."

The corner of Lian An's mouth twitched as she salted the grilled pork belly. "Let them keep dreaming."

"Still," Yao Qing added, "it's kind of nice. At least we don't have to hire a gardener."

"That part I approve," the Empress said dryly.

They both laughed and went back to work.

She sliced the pork belly into thin strips, brushed them with sweet sauce, and put them back on the grill until the edges crisped. The aroma rolled across the kitchen, making even her own stomach rumble.

She tossed chopped greens with sesame oil and garlic, set a pot of rice to steam, and checked the chicken soup one more time.

If she kept her hands busy, she wouldn't think about the very inconvenient reality that her cheating, lying, annoying husband also looked strangely... right... kneeling in the soil, carefully covering seeds like they were precious jewels.

No. Not thinking about that.

She was just flipping the pork when a piercing wail cut through the air.

"Your Majesty—!!!"

The voice wasn't human.

Her blood chilled for precisely one heartbeat.

Then her eyes narrowed.

Oh no.

She hadn't seen her ghosts in hours.

A kitchen knife thumped safely into the cutting board as she turned.

From the shadowed corner of the kitchen wall, three shapes burst through the plaster like a badly thrown stone.

But this time, they were not gliding elegantly.

General Wei Rong was flying forward with murder in his eyes, one ghostly hand clamped firmly in the long hair of Fen Yu, the female ghost. In his other hand was a spiritual rope binding her wrists behind her back.

Scholar Li Shen floated behind, face exhausted, his own sleeves tied in a neat knot around Fen Yu's ankles—dragged and bouncing in the air.

Fen Yu herself...

Looked like a disaster.

Her usually shiny hair was wild, a few strands standing straight up as if electrocuted. Her clothes, normally spotless, were torn at the sleeve and hem, with ghostly "dust" smudged across her face. Her nose was red, eyes puffy, and she let out another dramatic sob, complete with snort.

They burst fully into the kitchen above the stoves, an invisible screaming bundle to everyone else.

To the normal workers, it just looked like their Empress suddenly fumbled the ladle and stared at empty air.

To Lian An, it looked like her spiritual support team had been dragged through a war.

She blinked once.

Then snorted so hard she almost choked.

Fen Yu saw her and wailed even louder. "Your Majestyyyyy—he's bullying me—!"

Wei Rong yanked her hair lightly. "Shut up."

"OW! I'm a delicate beauty!" she cried.

"You look like a chicken after first plucking," Li Shen muttered, adjusting his glasses that did not exist. "Don't say beauty in this state."

If Fen Yu could see herself in a mirror right now, she really would faint.

Lian An put down her chopsticks, crossed her arms, and gave them a long look.

"What," she said slowly, "happened?"

Fen Yu tried to speak first. "Your Majesty, I—"

"You, be quiet," the Empress cut in. "If I listen to you first, I'll get a headache."

Fen Yu's jaw dropped. "Your Majestyyy!"

Wei Rong and Li Shen both looked quietly satisfied.

"General. Scholar. Report," she ordered like a commanding officer.

The two male ghosts straightened.

Wei Rong bowed mid-air. "Your Majesty, this... thing—" he shook Fen Yu's hair for emphasis— "stole your ring and gave it to a ghost man she met last time we came out."

The kitchen air turned cold.

My ring?

The simple jade band she wore daily—one of the few personal things she kept from her past... gone?

Lian An's eyes narrowed to slits. "Explain. Slowly."

Li Shen pushed his non-existent glasses up his nose and spoke calmly.

"After we finished stealing the fake plague powder from the apothecary, Fen Yu slipped away. She claimed she was going to 'scout' for handsome ghosts in the city."

Fen Yu sniffled. "He was handsome..."

Wei Rong glared. "He was a walking red flag."

Li Shen continued, ignoring the interruption.

"She met a ghost man near the old well in the eastern alley. We sensed something... off. His aura was unstable, like someone who has cheated many times before. We warned her."

"We told her," Wei Rong added flatly, "he smelled like trouble."

Fen Yu promptly started crying again. "You two don't understand love—!"

The Empress tapped the table with her finger.

"Continue."

"She refused to listen," Li Shen said patiently. "She said he was her fated one. He praised her eyes, her hair, her voice, her talent, her 'spiritual curves—'"

"Enough," Lian An said, face blank.

"Then he noticed your jade ring," Li Shen went on. "She bragged that it belonged to 'her most important living person'—you—and that you trusted her with it."

Lian An's lips thinned. "I should never have trusted you with anything."

Fen Yu wailed louder.

"And then," Wei Rong said, voice cold, "he told her he wanted something to remember her by. She took off the ring and gave it to him."

Heat flared straight up the Empress's spine.

"In my defense—" Fen Yu tried again.

"You have no defense," Lian An said without looking at her.

Li Shen sighed. "We tried to intervene. We told her he was lying. We told her he had the aura of someone already bound to another family. She called us jealous."

"I am not jealous," Wei Rong growled. "I have standards."

"Then," Li Shen said, almost tired now, "tonight we discovered the truth. The ghost man is married. To another female ghost. They have two ghost children. He has done this before—taking gifts, flattering foolish girls, then vanishing."

Fen Yu hiccuped. "He said I was unique..."

Wei Rong gave her hair another tug. "Unique in stupidity, yes."

"He tricked her and kept your ring," Li Shen finished quietly. "We confronted him. He laughed and said what can three stray ghosts do?"

Fen Yu's tears briefly turned into rage. "So I slapped him!"

"And then," Wei Rong said flatly, "his ghost wife appeared. Very strong. Very angry. She threw powder that temporarily blinded us."

"Choking powder," Li Shen clarified. "Superior grade. I inhaled some. It was unpleasant."

Fen Yu sniffed. "She pulled my hair—"

"And they beat us," Wei Rong said without shame. "Three against two. They had the home advantage. Then they tossed us into the lower dungeon area near the old city walls."

"The dungeon?" Lian An frowned.

"The one where bound spirits get locked," Li Shen explained. "We were trapped until I remembered an old friend from the fourth underlayer. He owed me a favor from a past life. He loosened the binding chains."

He lifted his ghostly arms, showing faint marks that were already fading.

"We escaped and came straight to you," he finished.

The Empress was silent for a long moment.

Fen Yu took that as a chance. "So you see, Your Majesty, I am actually the victim—"

"Shut. Up," Lian An said softly.

The kitchen fire crackled.

She took a breath in.

And a long breath out.

"You," she said, pointing a finger at Fen Yu, "gave my ring to a married scumbag ghost, ignored two warnings, got yourself and your teammates beaten, lost something important to me, and still dare to cry like you're the one wronged?"

Fen Yu opened her mouth.

Closed it.

Sniffled.

"...yes?" she whispered.

"Do you," the Empress asked very calmly, "have any idea how hard it is to buy a decent jade ring in this dynasty with my taste?"

Fen Yu's eyes filled with tears again. "I'm sorrrrryyy..."

In the doorway, one of the human workers peeked in, saw their "head chef" glaring at empty space, decided this was none of her business, and quietly backed away.

Wei Jie pretended not to notice. He was used to Lian An talking to walls by now.

The Empress walked slowly around the ghosts, looking them over like a general inspecting soldiers after a humiliating defeat.

Li Shen ducked his head slightly, ashamed they'd lost the ring.

Wei Rong stayed grim but straightforward.

Fen Yu just sniffed and snorted, tears and snot both running, resembling a tragic opera heroine after falling off the stage.

If she could see herself, she truly might die again.

"Punishment," Lian An finally said.

All three ghosts braced.

"For the next month," she began, staring straight at Fen Yu, "you are not allowed to approach any man—living or dead, human or ghost—within ten paces. If you do, I will personally find a monk to stuff you into a warded lantern for a year."

Fen Yu let out a strangled squeak.

"No flirting. No touching. No batting your eyelashes. If you even call someone 'handsome', I will have you patrol public toilets at night. For a decade."

"A decade?!" Fen Yu gasped.

"Also," Lian An continued mercilessly, "no desserts for seven days."

Now she collapsed in the air, clutching her chest. "NOOO—!"

Wei Rong and Li Shen both looked mildly satisfied at that part.

"You two," she turned to them, "are responsible for getting my ring back."

Li Shen nodded solemnly. "We will."

"Can it be taken by force?" Wei Rong asked.

"Yes," she said. "Preferably with minimal... property damage. I don't want a ghost war in my city. But I want that ring. I don't care if you have to threaten his ghostly cooking pots."

Wei Rong actually smirked. "Understood."

Li Shen added, "I will prepare a counter-powder for his tricks."

"As for you," she turned back to Fen Yu, who was still sobbing dramatically.

"You are confined to the restaurant grounds. No wandering off. During the day, you help in the kitchen—silently—by stirring pots and carrying plates. At night, you help Wei Rong watch the surroundings. You will not complain. You will not pout. You will not say the word 'fate' for one whole month."

Fen Yu's jaw trembled. "B-but, Your Majesty, that's a violation of my romantic spirit—"

"If you say one more word," the Empress said sweetly, "I will make Li Shen write 'I will not give away rings' on the wall a thousand times using your finger."

Fen Yu slapped both hands over her mouth.

Li Shen was already mentally calculating how many characters that would be.

"S-so harsh..." Fen Yu mumbled into her palms.

"Harsh is when I decide to ask a temple to exorcise you. This is mercy," Lian An replied.

Then, to the two male ghosts, her tone softened slightly.

"You did well to come back. Rest for a while. Tonight, you two will go plan how to retrieve the ring."

They bowed.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She nodded once and turned back to her stove, picking up the ladle again.

Broth still needed stirring. Pork belly still needed flipping. Rice did not care about ghost drama.

As she resumed cooking, the three ghosts drifted to the far corner.

Fen Yu continued to sniff softly, wiping at her ghostly nose.

Wei Rong loosened his grip on her hair but didn't let go completely. "Try using the head for more than decoration next time," he muttered.

Li Shen looked at her kindly but tiredly. "Love that starts with theft rarely ends well."

She glared weakly. "You're both mean..."

Outside, the disguised Emperor stood up, brushing soil from his hands.

He looked through the open kitchen window.

He saw his wife stirring a pot, scolding... no one.

From his perspective, she was talking fiercely to the empty air, lecturing shadows, rolling her eyes, pointing her finger at whichever invisible thing irritated her.

Somehow...

He smiled.

Even like this... even when she's angry at things I can't see...

She's still glowing.

He turned back to the rows of newly planted seeds and pressed the last one into the soil.

His father's voice echoed in his memory again.

"If you want fruit, you plant. If you want love, you work."

He straightened and looked at the back door.

Lunch time was near.

Soon, soldiers, trainees, and workers would all sit around common tables, eating the Empress's food—his Empress, who was building a food empire and scolding ghosts in the kitchen.

He dusted his hands off and smiled faintly.

"Fine," he murmured to himself. "I'll work too."

Inside, Lian An added the final sprinkle of herbs to the soup and shouted,

"Lian! Lin! Carry the dishes. Lunch!"

Her voice carried through the whole building.

From the rafters, Fen Yu sniffed one last time and whispered, "At least... the punishment includes staying near food..."

Li Shen sighed. "That's the only reason you're not howling."

Wei Rong just snorted.

The day at The Whisper Bowl rolled on—seeds in the soil, soup in the pot, ghosts on punishment duty, and an emperor in disguise quietly planting himself into his wife's world.

For now.

That was enough.