

Ghost 100

Chapter 100: poison

Musicians changed to a lighter mode. Laughter loosened. The master of ceremonies lifted his tablet and called, "Wine for the performers of peace!"

Servants stepped from the shadowed wings carrying slim-necked ewers. Their movements were trained to disappear: pour, incline, retreat. The Eastern troupe—six dancers whose silk had been fire one hour, river the next—knelt gracefully at a long side table to receive the liquor.

"On behalf of the Eastern Realm," the lead dancer said, voice bright enough to carry, "we salute the two emperors and bless the river between us. May it never run red again."

The hall clapped, pleased at the tidy poetry of it. Cups were set before the dancers. A pale-gowned maid at the back of the line reached for the decanter, lifted it to fill the lead dancer's cup, then set it down with hands a little too careful and eyes a little too lowered.

No one saw—no one human saw—how her thumb trembled after the pour.

The lead dancer rose slightly, lifted her cup toward the dais. "To peace," she said, smiling at both thrones, "and to prosperity that walks on two good legs: trade and trust."

The court loved a neat line. Even the Dowager Empress's fan stilled, which in this palace counted as approval.

The troupe drank.

They barely had time to set the cups down.

The lead dancer swayed. A blink—just one—too slow to be mere fatigue. Her fingers, still poised above the lacquer, missed the rim. Silk whispered as she tried to steady herself. Then, with a sound no louder than a dropped petal, she folded and fell across the mat.

For a heartbeat the hall did not believe what it saw.

Then the sound arrived—benches scraping, silk rushing, a thousand intakes of breath stitched together. A flute squeaked and died. Someone dropped a spoon. The Dowager's fan snapped shut.

The two emperors half rose at the same time. Rong Zhen's gaze cut toward the collapsed woman, then—only for a fraction—to the Empress in red. The Eastern Emperor's jaw tightened; his hand went to the arm of his chair, knuckles whitening once, then releasing.

Before the nearest eunuch could move, a young maid—in plain blue—fell to her knees in the open space between tables and struck her brow to the floor.

"This lowly one—this lowly one confesses!" she cried, voice cracking into panic's high register. "It was poison! I—I poured it—because Her Majesty the Empress ordered me to!"

The hall exploded.

Chairs toppled. A minister's wife clapped a hand to her throat. Courtiers turned like a field of reeds in a sudden wind, every gaze spearing red silk.

The Dowager's eyes flashed with cold, avid light—the look of a hawk that has spied movement in the grass. Lady Chen's lips parted around a swift breath that she caught and shaped, with practiced speed, into a mask of shocked sadness.

Lian An did not move.

The maid babbled on, forehead thudding against the floorboards. "Her Majesty sent me gold—promised more—said to ruin the Eastern dance, to avenge the Duke's injury—said—said—"

She choked on her own words, then pressed both palms to the floor as if trying to push away the gravity of her lie.

The court, for once, agreed on something. Words rose like arrows:

"Sin!" "Treason!" "Strike her name!" "Punish the Empress!"

The Duke's family—those who had the right to rise—half stood, faces blazed with protest. Two senior ministers on the aisle stepped smartly into their path with polite bows hard as shields. "My lords, not now. Let law speak first."

Across the dais, Rong Zhen's face had gone still as winter water. In that stillness lay calculation and disbelief, anger and something like dread—then discipline, pressed into place.

He drew breath to speak—

"Permit me."

The interruption was courteous and clean. The Eastern Emperor stood, his smile a tempered thing, neither warm nor cold. His Central speech was flawless.

"Before your court condemns your own Empress on the word of a single maid," he said, voice carrying without force, "allow mine to say: Her Majesty has shown me nothing but propriety, intelligence, and a calm that does not match the heart of an assassin."

A ripple of discomfort moved through Central ranks at the foreign defense.

Lian An turned her head and bowed from the waist, exactly what courtesy demanded and not one hair's breadth more. "Your Majesty honors me beyond merit."

Her eyes lifted, clear and steady. "If this lowly Empress had ever wished a dancer dead, would I not also have the wit to instruct the maid to hold her tongue? Or to flee? This one"—she nodded toward the kneeling girl—"declares she has met me. My own attendants will tell you she has not set foot near my threshold."

The blue-robed maid—sweat soaking her hairline—licked her lips. "I—I—she—"

Her gaze slid, seeking anchor, finding none.

At the women's tier, Princess Zhi pressed both hands to her belly and whispered to her maid, "It's a frame." Her eyes shone with a heat that had nothing to do with fever. "Heaven help her."

At the men's side, a chair scraped. A long figure stood—gray robe, jade girdle, a face made for smiling that never reached the eyes. Prince Liang, second son of the late emperor, younger brother to Rong Zhen, husband to Princess Zhi—second in power only to the throne.

His voice was mild. "Even a fool knows not to leave her own footprints in wet clay."

A few ministers winced. The barb wore silk, but it struck iron.

Prince Liang stepped forward two paces, not enough to challenge, just enough to be heard. "Elder Brother," he said, inclining his head toward Rong Zhen, "if a dancer falls at a feast, who decides cause? Not rumor. Summon a healer. Let hands learn what tongues pretend to know."

The Eastern Emperor's mouth curved, faint and approving. "Agreed."

Rong Zhen's fingers flexed once against the throne's armrest. He had not looked away from Lian An since the collapse. Her calm did not read as indifference. It read, to a man who had learned her tells, as anger under discipline—a storm bridled.

He lifted his hand. "Fetch the court healer."

The command unfroze the room. Eunuchs ran. The master of ceremonies found his tablet again and remembered how to breathe. Guards closed ranks—politely—between the dais and the accused maid.

Within moments the chief imperial physician, aged and sinewy as bamboo, arrived with two apprentices. He knelt beside the dancer, fingers finding pulse, lids lifted, tongue examined, breath weighed by a palm over the lips.

"Quiet," he ordered without looking up.

Silence obeyed him. Even the Dowager's fan refused to stir.

A minute passed. Then another. The physician pressed a thumb to a point at the dancer's wrist, another below the ear. He took a small vial from his sleeve, passed it under her nose, then sat back on his heels.

"She has fainted," he announced, voice flat as mortar. "Pulse thin with fatigue, breath sweet with wine—no stench of venom, no convulsion. She will wake when her body remembers it may."

The hall fell into a bewildered murmur—a sound like ten thousand bees realizing they have no single queen to follow.

A small, sharp sound escaped from somewhere in the women's tier—a bitten-off breath that tried to be a laugh and refused. Lady Chen's fingers whitened on the edge of her fan. For one bare instant, fury stripped her face to bone and will. Then the mask returned, perfect as ever, a petal pressed back into place.

On the red-tiered seat below the dais, Lian An's mouth tilted—not into mirth, but into the cool relief of a chess player watching a trap's spring snap on empty air. She smoothed her sleeve as if it had always lain flat.

Rong Zhen stood.

He did not descend the dais—not yet—but his presence filled the few steps between judgment and act.

"Bring the maid," he said.

Two guards lifted the blue-robed girl by the arms. She came like a puppet whose strings had been swapped mid-play—legs moving, mind gone to ground.

She collapsed again at the foot of the dais, forehead knocking the step. "Mercy—this lowly one—" She lifted her head and met the Emperor's gaze—and whatever lie she'd been built to carry melted.

He did not shout. His voice dropped instead, low enough the room had to lean toward it. "Who sent you to speak my Empress's name?"

Her throat worked. She looked right—toward the women's tier. She looked left—toward the servants' door. Her lips parted.

And closed.

Something in her cheek moved—the tiny clench of a jaw placing a hidden seed between molars.

"Hold—" barked the physician, already reaching—

Too late.

The girl jerked, eyes rolling white. A spasm passed through her like a shadow dragged by wind. Her body slackened in the guards' grip, breath fleeing as if it had somewhere better to be.

The physician pried her jaws apart, cursed softly, and sat back. "Suicide tooth. Curare mix. Dead before regret."

Shock went out from the dais in concentric rings. Some covered their mouths; others stared because they had not yet learned, or had forgotten, how to look away.

For the briefest fraction of a blink, a thread of raw anger showed in Rong Zhen's eyes—the kind that does not break apartments or smash cups but rewrites orders. He breathed it down with an old soldier's control. When he looked up, his face was once more the country's weather.

He turned to the Eastern Emperor and lifted both hands in apology. "Brother of the East, you see what we see. Someone sought to stain tonight and chose the most foolish brush."

The Eastern monarch spread his palm in the slight arc that meant trust. "It failed. I will not let a dead liar stand between us."

Prince Liang moved then, slow and satisfied as a knife sliding fully into its sheath. He knelt a fraction, palm outward to both thrones. "Your Majesties—let the dead be carried out, let the living be fed, and let the guilty learn that Heaven never favors clumsy hands."

Rong Zhen's gaze returned to the woman in red.

She had not asked for a single mercy since the uproar. She had argued only with sense, not with tears. The memory of her kneeling in the ancestral hall flashed across his mind, uninvited and unwelcome as a truth that ruins a simpler lie: that she was only pride and thorn.

He stepped down one step. Then the next.

Facing the court—not merely his wife—he bowed his head just enough to change the air.

"Tonight," he said, "I owe my Empress an apology. I did not speak swiftly enough against a fool's accusation. Lian An—" He turned to her, and the murmur he stilled by will alone. "State your wish. I will grant it."

A hiss of surprise cut through the hall like a silk tear.

Lian An rose to her feet—pain invisible, composure not—and bowed. "Your Majesty's apology is a balm. My wish is small. Find the hand behind the hand." Her eyes moved, a feather's breadth, toward the shadowed ranks of maids and the places in the hall where nothing seemed to stand but something certainly watched. "Let the snake be drawn into sun. That will be enough."

"It shall be done," Rong Zhen said.

He turned to the ministers—the most vocal of whom were already beginning to edge their cups behind their sleeves as men hide faces in a sudden squall.

"Those who called for the Empress's punishment," he continued, not loudly and therefore more dangerously, "shall send written apologies and gifts to the Empress and to the Duke's house by tomorrow's bell. You will also contribute to the expense of the Eastern troupe's rest and care."

A rustle of bowing, of compliance feigned into sincerity, moved like grain bending in wind. A few looked nearly sick with regret; a few looked furious; the wisest looked blank.

Rong Zhen faced the Eastern Emperor once more and bowed from the waist. "Forgive my hall its wicked surprise."

"It will make a better story," the Eastern ruler said dryly, and some tension unhooked its fingers from the room's throat.

The master of ceremonies, grateful for a structure to grip, clapped his tablet lightly. "By imperial command: remove the body; bring gentle soup to the dancers; pour new wine for both courts."

Movement resumed, choreographed by relief. Eunuchs carried the maid's small, spent form away with the same dignity accorded a princess—death erases rank in corridors. The dancers were led to a side pavilion where broth steamed in bowls the color of rivers in winter. The lead dancer coughed, blinked, and sat up like someone waking from the wrong dream.

At the women's tier, Lady Chen held her smile until her lips trembled with the effort. Inside her mouth, she bit the side of her cheek until she tasted iron. Her glance, quick as a thrown needle, flicked toward Prince Liang. He had spoken too cleanly, too quickly. Why would he speak for Lian An? The question burned like a lamp from inside her skull. She lowered her eyes a beat too late to hide the thought.

Princess Zhi, who had been praying under her breath with ferocity and poor theology, exhaled and leaned into her maid's steadying hand. "Good," she whispered. "Good." Her eyes sought Lian An and found her; the Empress dipped her chin by the width of a grain of rice. Sisters, that movement said, where others would prefer enemies.

Rong Zhen returned to his throne and sat. He did not look toward his mother. He did not look toward Lady Chen. He did look toward the woman in red, once, openly, and then away again before their gazes could be caught and made currency by a hundred watching eyes.

"Music," he said.

The musicians obeyed with the gratitude of men spared a public drowning. A warm, unthreatening air settled—low strings, soft flutes, rhythms that reassured the heart it still knew how to count.

Servants moved with trays; wine found cups; the hall, which had soared and dropped and bucked in the space of a dozen breaths, found the floor again.

Empress Lian An remained very still for three counts past courtesy, then lifted her cup. Her hand did not shake. She drank once, coolly, as if rinsing her mouth of smoke. In the reflection of the wine, a red sleeve trembled like flame and then lay down again, tamed.

She did not look at Rong Zhen.

He did not ask her to.

The banquet continued. Not as if nothing had happened—no hall that keeps true memories can lie so brazenly to itself—but as if something dangerous had glanced off iron and, finding no purchase, slid away.

Ministers recalculated. Nobles edited their opinions with the same neat hand they used to annotate poetry. Oaths had been made; wine had been tested by fear and found still sweet.

On the outer edges of seeing, a soldier's ghost folded spectral arms and eased his stance by half a degree; a scholar's ghost traced, in air no breath could fog, three characters—seen, stayed, saving; and a girl-ghost with a crush on a foreign general sulked over a stolen dumpling she had prudently (and resentfully) returned.

At the center of it all, the woman in red sat calm—not untouched, but unshaken—wondering at one quiet thing that had not fit the shape of her expectations:

The Emperor had apologized in public, promised an investigation, and offered her a wish.

Lian An did not trust gifts that came wrapped in power.

But she could not deny—between the bells, the poison, and the breathing of the hall—something in the man on the throne had moved. Not toward her, not away—simply moved, as if a stone long fixed had found water beneath it and learned it could float a finger's width off the river's bed.

She set down her cup.

Her smile, when it came, was a thin, red thread—not triumph, not forgiveness. Just the knowledge of a board where the next move, for once, belonged to her.