

## **Ghost 101**

Chapter 101: the flashback

The banquet had ended in triumph for one and ruin for another.

The moon rose higher over the palace roofs, washing the courtyards in white quiet. All seemed still — except in the west wing, where behind closed doors, Lady Chen's chambers shuddered with noise.

The first crash came from a porcelain vase.

The second from a mirror.

The third — from her own voice.

"Useless! All of you useless!"

The words lashed across the air like a whip. Servants flinched. One girl ducked too slowly and caught the edge of a flying tea bowl. The shards spun, bright as falling stars, before hitting the wall.

Lady Chen stood in the center of the destruction, breathing hard, her hair disheveled, the jewels she had worn to the banquet still tangled in her hairpins. Her peacock-blue sleeves, torn at one seam, clung to her arms like dying birds.

Her face — that famous, lovely face — had twisted beyond recognition. The smile that charmed emperors and cowed rivals was gone, replaced by something animal and raw. Her eyes, black with fury, glittered as she kicked the overturned tea stand again, just to hear something break.

"Sleep! She only slept!"

Her voice cracked.

"After all my planning — after I placed everything, the poison, the cup, the maid — she just slept like a child!"

She threw the fan in her hand. The golden ribs splintered against the pillar.

"That woman..." she hissed, as if the syllables of Empress Lian An burned her tongue. "She stands there, so calm, while I—while I—!"

Her hand shook, pointing toward the floor, as if the tiles themselves had betrayed her. Her pulse pounded so hard she could feel it echoing in her throat.

The door creaked open.

A young man crawled in — the one she had sent to the poison house two nights ago, the same who had arranged the transfer between servants during the banquet. His forehead touched the marble. He didn't dare rise.

"My Lady," he began, trembling, "I did everything. I swear on my ancestors. I went to the apothecary as you said. The poison was mixed correctly — white scorpion venom, only a drop. I gave it to the maid myself. I watched her take the decanter to the troupe's table. I swear — there was no mistake."

Lady Chen's gaze turned to him like a drawn blade.

"No mistake?"

Her voice was slow now — more dangerous than the screaming. "No mistake, and yet the dancer breathes?"

The servant swallowed, shaking. "I—I saw the cup. It was that same one, the gold-rimmed—"

"Then how did she live?"

Lady Chen stepped forward, the hem of her robe whispering over glass shards. She crouched in front of him, smile cutting like glass.

"Tell me, since you're such an expert in death."

He stammered. "I—I don't know. Perhaps... perhaps someone switched it—"

Her palm cracked across his face before he finished the word.

"Switched?" she snarled. "Who would dare? The Empress cannot know. She's too proud to play at servants' tricks. She would stand and bleed before she dirtied her hands."

She struck him again. "Get out."

"My Lady—"

"Out!"

The word snapped like thunder. He stumbled backward, crawled, and fled through the side door, leaving the scent of fear behind him.

Lady Chen turned away and pressed her fingers to her temples. Her heart hammered until it hurt. The room swayed slightly — a combination of rage, wine, and disbelief.

This wasn't possible. Everything had been perfect.

She had bribed the maid. She had chosen the poison — slow, elegant, undetectable. She had even made sure that the dancer's cup was the one with the hidden mark on the bottom — a tiny crack shaped like a crescent moon. She had done everything herself.

No one could have known.

And yet, the Empress still smiled.

And then — to add insult to her ruin — Prince Liang had spoken in the Empress's defense.

That thought made her tremble with fresh humiliation. Prince Liang — the Emperor's younger brother, the one who never spared her a word except frost — had chosen that woman's side. He had humiliated the entire faction that supported her.

She sank onto her knees, surrounded by shards of glass and broken porcelain.

"Why him?" she whispered hoarsely. "He never defends anyone. He never even looked at her before."

Her reflection stared back from a broken shard on the floor — fractured into five pieces. It made her look like a ghost trying to remember its shape.

Then, slowly, she began to laugh. It wasn't pleasant.

"So be it," she said softly. "Let them celebrate tonight. Let them think they have won."

Her fingers trailed across the lacquered table beside her bed, where the remnants of a shattered mirror glimmered like scales. Her reflection looked like a creature made of ruin.

"I will find another way," she murmured. "A way she cannot see coming."

The candle beside her hissed, guttered, and went out. The room fell into silence, broken only by the sound of her breath — slow, deliberate, poisonous as her thoughts.

In another wing of the palace, the night was entirely different.

The Empress's chambers glowed with warm lamplight. The air was alive with laughter — small, bright, harmless laughter, the kind that heals rather than wounds. The two kittens chased each other across the floor, batting at a dangling tassel. A tray of untouched sweets sat beside the low table.

Empress Lian An reclined against the cushions, robe loosened at the collar, eyes soft with exhaustion and amusement.

"Your Majesty," Feng Yu said between stifled giggles, "Lady Chen must be breaking her mirrors right now."

Lian An smiled faintly. "She has enough mirrors to break for a lifetime."

On the windowsill, Fen Yu, the mischievous ghost girl, sat cross-legged, chewing an invisible chestnut she'd stolen earlier. "I wish I could see her face! The way she must have screamed when the dancer didn't die—oh, priceless! We should have brought the poisoner's tears back as a souvenir."

Across the room, Wei Rong, the soldier ghost, scowled. "You are lucky you didn't spill the cup while you were showing off."

Fen Yu flicked her hand dismissively. "I never spill. My aim is perfect. Ask the general with the scar. I dropped a dumpling right on his shoulder earlier."

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, laughed quietly, the sound like wind passing through an ink brush. "A dumpling marks of war. I shall record it in the Book of Foolish Triumphs."

The Empress shook her head, unable to keep her composure. "All of you," she said with mock sternness, "behaved worse than palace children."

Fen Yu bowed dramatically in midair. "And yet we saved a life and your reputation. Surely mischief counts as virtue when it keeps you on the throne?"

Wei Rong folded his arms. "Virtue is when you follow the plan, not when you dance while switching poison."

"Speaking of which," Lian An said, curiosity glinting in her dark eyes, "how did you manage that so cleanly? No one saw?"

Fen Yu's grin widened. "Shall we show her?"

The memory rose between them like mist, vivid and bright.

It was an hour before the banquet.

The three ghosts had drifted unseen through the servant corridors, thin as candle smoke. The poisoner, a trembling man with a crooked smile, was just stepping out of a narrow alley near the east kitchens, clutching a small pouch.

"Sleeping poison," Fen Yu whispered. "Harmless if used properly. But Lady Chen's version is twice as strong."

Li Shen examined the pouch. "We could replace it with something similar. The difference is scent. Hers smells faintly of almond. The sleeping draught—of lotus."

Wei Rong grunted. "Then we find the lotus."

They glided into the small poison house — a place every palace had, though officially it did not exist. The air there was heavy with the perfume of deadly things: dried scorpion husks, foxglove powder, ground pearl dust. On one shelf, they found a jar labeled Lotus Sleeping Draught.

Fen Yu floated up and sniffed. "Perfect. Smells like boredom."

She poured half into a small ceramic bottle and sealed it again. "There. The dancer will nap instead of die."

Wei Rong nodded, satisfied. "Let's move."

Back at the banquet hall, they waited for the right moment. When the maid with the decanter passed the corner screen, Fen Yu whispered, "My turn."

She appeared just long enough to push a small tray slightly off balance. The maid gasped, set down the decanter to steady the tray—and that was enough.

Li Shen glided forward, elegant as a sigh, and swapped the small flask tied to the jug's neck — the poisoned one replaced with their sleeping draught.

By the time the maid straightened, everything looked exactly as it had.

Wei Rong adjusted the maid's ribbon without touching her, an invisible gesture that drew her eyes upward, away from the flask. She walked off, none the wiser.

Fen Yu turned to her companions, grinning. "Too easy."

Li Shen rolled his eyes. "Do not boast during crime."

"But it was so neat!" Fen Yu said, twirling midair. "I call it Operation Nap Time."

Even the stoic Wei Rong snorted. "Your operations have terrible names."

When the dancer later raised the cup and drank, Fen Yu clasped her hands dramatically. "And thus the empire is saved by style."

The memory faded on their laughter.

In the Empress's chamber, laughter echoed again, softer now, shared and secret. The Empress's eyes gleamed with quiet gratitude.

"You risked much," she said. "If anyone had sensed your presence—"

"They wouldn't have," Wei Rong said. "We move where breath stops."

Li Shen inclined his head, a scholar accepting credit with grace. "It was necessary. You have enough enemies among the living. The dead can afford to take sides."

Fen Yu fluttered down and perched on the arm of the Empress's chair, her translucent fingers twirling the tassel of the cushion. "Besides," she said impishly, "you looked too perfect tonight to die. We couldn't waste that outfit."

The Empress laughed—soft, genuine, the kind of sound that makes ghosts smile.

Outside, the wind moved gently across the bamboo grove. Somewhere in the distance, a bell chimed the hour. The palace slept.

Lady Chen's rage burned itself to ashes far away, but here, in the Red Chamber, peace reigned — not the fragile peace of treaties, but the quiet strength of those who had survived the fire and learned to smile through the smoke.

Lian An lifted her teacup, looked at the clear liquid inside, and murmured, "To sleeping poisons and faithful friends."

Fen Yu raised an invisible cup of her own. "To mischief and miracles."

Wei Rong simply nodded once. "To another victory kept silent."

Li Shen smiled faintly, as if writing the last line of a poem no one else would ever read.

The kittens curled at the Empress's feet, purring like small drums of contentment.

And above them all, the moon poured its silver blessing over the red silk of her robe — as if Heaven itself were quietly amused by how a single woman, three ghosts, and a sleeping potion had overturned a plot meant to destroy an empire.