

Ghost 71

Chapter 71: the dancer

The crowd buzzed like a hive as the veiled girl stepped onto the floating stage.

Children climbed onto their fathers' shoulders to see better.

Vendors stopped shouting about skewers and sweets.

Even the river seemed to pause, its ripples catching light like scattered coins.

The announcer spread his arms dramatically.

"Ladies and gentlemen! A volunteer joins us from the audience! Let us welcome this brave young lady!"

Cheers rose at once. Some laughed, others whistled.

"She's too small to dance!" a man shouted playfully.

"She looks barely grown!" cried another.

Lian An kept her head bowed, her light blue veil fluttering with each breeze. Beneath it, her lips curved in that half-smile she wore whenever she planned mischief. Let them underestimate me, she thought. It will make this easier.

Questions and a Quick Lie

The announcer, delighted with the crowd's teasing, leaned toward her and asked loudly,

"Tell us your name, young lady! So everyone knows who dances among the flames!"

Lian An pretended to hesitate, lowering her voice in a shy tone that carried perfectly over the water.

"I am Heira," she said. "From the neighboring village across the east ridge. My family runs a small restaurant called The Whisper Bowl."

The audience murmured approvingly.

"A restaurant girl!"

"Maybe she'll cook for us after she dances!"

Even the announcer blinked in surprise at how quick her answer came. "Ah—The Whisper Bowl! What a fine name! Are you here to bring us food or show us rhythm?"

Lian An tilted her head sweetly. "A little of both. If I dance well, perhaps you'll visit my restaurant later."

Laughter broke out through the crowd—good-natured, delighted laughter.

Across the river, hidden among the people, Emperor Rong Zhen pressed a knuckle to his mouth to hide a grin.

The Whisper Bowl? he thought. That woman could talk the moon out of the sky if she tried. Advertising a fake restaurant in front of half the city—what a liar.

Beside him, Lady Chen laughed brightly, clapping her hands. "She's clever! A girl with a tongue like that must do well at trade."

"She does well at everything," the Emperor murmured, mostly to himself.

"What was that?" Lady Chen asked.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Enjoy the show."

When the Music Began

The drummers struck the first rhythm—deep, rolling beats that echoed against the water.

Lian An took the silk ribbon the lead dancer offered and stepped to the center of the stage.

A hush fell.

Her first movement was small: a turn of the wrist, a step, a tilt of the chin.

Then another—smooth, deliberate, graceful.

Each motion drew a new rhythm from the drums until her veil swayed like mist and the ribbon traced arcs of light through the air.

"She can dance!" someone gasped.

Within moments, disbelief became admiration.

The crowd that had teased her now watched in stunned silence as she moved—not like a nervous girl, but like a wave given form. Her sleeves brushed the firelight, her steps matched the drums, her ribbon

sliced patterns across the smoke. Every motion balanced grace with strength, as though she commanded the very rhythm of the river.

Even the professional dancers onstage slowed their movements to follow her lead, their eyes bright with awe.

The Emperor Watches

Rong Zhen forgot to breathe. He had seen Lian An dance once before—years ago at a palace banquet, when she was still new to him, still shy behind ceremony. That night her movements had been perfect, practiced, regal.

But this?

This was freedom.

Here she danced like laughter given shape, like light escaping its own cage. Her smile—hidden beneath the veil but flickering at its edges—was real, unguarded, alive.

He felt an unfamiliar ache in his chest.

You little liar, he thought. A restaurant girl, are you?

Still, the corner of his mouth curved again, helpless against his own amusement.

Lady Chen beside him clapped with delight. "Oh, she's marvelous! Look how smooth her steps are—like she's floating!"

"She has talent," Rong Zhen said quietly.

"And beauty," Lady Chen added. "Her outline—even with that veil—you can tell she's lovely."

He gave a faint smile. "Yes... lovely indeed."

Lady Chen was too charmed by the performance to notice the warmth in his voice.

A Crowd Enchanted

The music swelled to its final chorus. Lian An spun once, twice, then dropped into a bow so graceful it looked rehearsed.

For a heartbeat there was only silence.

Then thunderous applause broke out. Coins clattered onto the stage. Flowers flew through the air.

"She's brilliant!"

"Better than the dancers from the capital!"

"I'm visiting her restaurant tomorrow!"

From the willow's shade, Lian Hua leapt and cheered, her voice cutting through the noise.

"That's my sister! The Whisper Bowl's Heira!"

Even Lian Ruo, usually calm, was on his feet clapping. "You're going to regret that lie when people start looking for your restaurant," he muttered under his breath, laughing.

Lian An bowed again, cheeks burning beneath the veil, and fled from the stage as the announcer declared,

"Friends! Let us thank the dancer from The Whisper Bowl! May her feet stay light and her bowls full!"

The Emperor's Thought

Rong Zhen sat back as the applause rolled over the water.

"She's something else," Lady Chen said, still clapping. "If she truly runs a restaurant, it must be the liveliest in the kingdom."

He couldn't help the quiet chuckle that escaped him. "It would be. She's very good at stirring things."

"What do you mean?"

"Just... observation."

Lady Chen tilted her head but let it pass. Her eyes glowed with admiration. "What a charming girl."

Rong Zhen's gaze remained fixed on the departing figure under the willow, the faint blue veil fluttering like a banner of victory.

Trouble, he thought fondly. Pure trouble.

After the Performance

Lian An rejoined her sister and cousin, who both attacked her with words before she could even sit.

"You were perfect!" Lian Hua cried. "I didn't know you could move like that!"

Lian Ruo added, "If the Emperor ever needs a festival dancer, he'll have competition."

"Stop it," Lian An said, though her laughter betrayed her. "My heart's still racing. And Hua, don't ever volunteer me again!"

Her sister looped an arm through hers. "You're famous now! Half the city believes in The Whisper Bowl!"

"I'll have to actually open one," she said dryly.

Lian Ruo stood, brushing his robes. "Come on, the crowd's breaking apart. Let's go before they ask for encores."

They blended back into the market streets, the air still humming from the performance. Vendors resumed shouting, musicians tuned their flutes, children spun with paper windmills. The siblings laughed, stopping at stalls to try candied fruit and handmade jewelry. For a while it was just sunlight and noise—no palace, no titles, no weight.

Lady Chen's Boredom

Across the river, Lady Chen fanned herself lazily. The show had ended, the crowd already thinning.

"I'm tired of sitting," she said. "We've been watching since morning. Let's walk the market."

Rong Zhen looked thoughtful, still half-lost in his private amusement. "You go ahead. I'll send a guard—"

"No!" She caught his sleeve with a smile that was all charm and insistence. "You promised today would be for us. You'll come with me."

He sighed in mock surrender. "Very well."

Lady Chen brightened instantly and tugged him to his feet. "Good! We can try the foreign stalls—spiced tea from the south, glass jewelry from the north. Oh, and those painted masks! You'll look frightening in one."

He raised an eyebrow. "That's your idea of flattery?"

"Of honesty," she said, laughing.

They melted back into the stream of festivalgoers, unaware that only a few streets away the Empress and her family were wandering the same alleys—each step drawing all of them closer to the next twist of fate.

Evening on the River

As the sun tilted westward, the water caught fire again—this time in reflection. The crowd had thinned to couples buying lanterns, families watching performers on small boats.

From somewhere in the distance came the faint cry of a vendor:

"Lanterns for wishes! Lanterns for love!"

Rong Zhen turned slightly, hearing laughter echo from a familiar voice somewhere behind the press of people. He did not see her face, only the glint of a blue veil disappearing down the market lane.

He smiled to himself.

"Until next time, little liar from The Whisper Bowl."