

Ghost 96

Chapter 96: before the banquet

The night before a state banquet is never fully night. Lanterns burned low under the palace eaves like drowsy moons; kitchen courtyards ticked and hissed as braziers were tested, lids lifted, spices counted aloud. Pages jogged lists from memory. Eunuchs moved like quiet currents through cloisters, arms full of scrolls and lacquered trays. Even the carp in the ornamental ponds swam slower, as if the entire compound were holding its breath.

Beyond the inner walls, where the tiled roofs thinned and bamboo took over, the air was freer, colder. A fox barked in the distance; someone's wind chime fussed in a stubborn draft. And just outside the East Watch Gate, where dead leaves piled up against an old stone lion, a small gathering of the unbreathing had been in raucous spirits for hours.

Wei Rong—once General Wei, breaker of sieges, terror of northern horsemen, now a broad-shouldered ghost with a soldier's impatience—had spent the evening with old comrades. Ghosts of a gate captain and a drummer-boy hovered with him above a forgotten milestone, passing a wine gourd that neither warmed nor wet their mouths but made their stories flow faster. They argued over whose battlefield banners had snapped best in winter wind, who had eaten the worst millet in the worst snows, which general had sworn the filthiest oath before a charge.

"Your oath was filthier," the drummer-boy declared, grinning. "You promised to eat the enemy's tents."

"They looked tastier than the millet," Wei Rong said, deadpan. He rolled his shoulders, the memory of bone-deep aches moving through a body that no longer ached. "Leave it. I'm on palace watch tonight."

"Aren't you always?" the gate captain teased. "You talk like you're paid in rations."

"I'm paid in annoyance," Wei Rong said. "And I spend it all."

The joke thinned in the air. Something in him had already turned toward the palace: that old campaigner's itch between the shoulder blades, the sense that a flank was being tested. He clapped the drummer-boy's shoulder, nodded to the gate captain, and glided back toward the glow of the imperial city.

The bamboo along the eastern approach stirred. Wei Rong flattened his aura to a whisper, slipping over roof spines and down a colonnade until he reached a moon gate carved with clouds. The lantern by it had guttered to a dim ember; the shadow beyond it was thicker, edged with the pale shine of stone.

Voices. Two. Close.

He stilled and sank into the shadow of a pillar. Through the arch he saw a woman's silhouette—slim, veiled, head tilted with practiced poise—and a man wrapped in a travel cloak with a plain black half-mask. They faced each other beside a dry stone basin where rainwater sometimes gathered. The veiled woman lifted her hand; a pearl earring flashed. Wei Rong knew the set of those shoulders without needing to see the face.

Lady Chen.

His mouth tightened.

"...everything is ready for tomorrow," said the masked man, voice oiled like a whetstone. "The serving lists are altered. The stewards think they made the changes themselves."

"Good," Lady Chen murmured. The single word snapped softly, like silk tugged through a narrow ring. "Explain the rhythm again."

"Third toast," the man said. He tapped a bamboo tally against his palm: tok, tok, tok. "During the treaty rite. The lead dancer accepts the cup. A maid from the south wing crosses with the tray from the Camellia Court and swaps the goblet in the moment of bowing. The replaced goblet holds zhè mèi."

He said the poison's name with a quiet pride, as if he'd bottled the moon.

Lady Chen's voice was almost sweet. "Clean?"

"Invisible," the man said. "No scent; no bitter tail. A sip and the throat closes. No convulsions. She will drop like cut silk. They'll think it faintness—until the stillness stays. The envoy will lose face. Panic eats sense. The court screams for a culprit."

"And they will see one," Lady Chen breathed. "They will see the Empress."

"The second maid will make sure of that." The masked man sounded pleased with his handiwork. "She will pitch forward, kneel, beg forgiveness, and say the Empress ordered it—jealousy, insult, whatever story the court wants. We'll 'find' a handkerchief with the Empress's seal in the right place. That will be enough for the first wave. And the first wave is all we need."

For a heartbeat, the garden had no sound. Even the bamboo seemed to hold still.

Wei Rong felt that old, clean anger rise—quiet, flat, and absolute. Not the hot rage of insult; the colder, heavier thing that had steadied his hands when he'd set a charge and known the first spears would break on him. Poison. A girl trained to dance for peace, felled in ritual. Blame poured like scalding oil onto a woman who had already stood too long under it.

Lady Chen's veil stirred. "You'll be paid by dawn," she said softly. "If anyone asks—no one will—but if they do, speak the Empress's name with the rest of them." A laugh, small and bright and hard. "She thinks she can slap me, parade her innocence in white robes, and turn His Majesty's eyes with her sudden airs. Slap me? I will slap back with a city."

Wei Rong did not mean to move. Yet he had already moved.

He stepped out of shadow, planted, and kicked.

It was clean and simple and honest: the boot of a soldier into the spine of a man who sold poison. The masked man bucked forward with a strangled shout, tumbled into the bamboo, and crashed through dry leaves with the flailing indignity of a cat tossed into a pond. The bamboo answered with a rattling hiss, shedding a fine rain of dust.

Lady Chen spun, veil whipping. "Who's there?" Steel rode the edge of the whisper.

Wei Rong was already smoke up the wall and into the beam.

The masked man scrambled, patting uselessly at his back, gaze cutting left and right as if the darkness might be persuaded to give back the shape that had struck him. "Someone—someone—"

"Coward," Lady Chen said, voice returning to its coolness as if it had never broken. "Pick up your feet. Go. You have your instructions. Keep your tongue." She tucked a small weight into his palm that clinked, low and musical. "I will do the rest."

The man fled, cloak snapping like a black fish.

Wei Rong stayed only long enough to memorize the turn of Lady Chen's head, the angle of her chin, the way her shoulders set into satisfaction. Then he spun himself into a thread of night and stitched back toward the Empress's wing.

He slipped through two courtyards like a scent, skimmed a roof, dropped through a lattice, and came to rest in Lian An's chamber.

Peace. Shamefully soft peace. The kind of peace that made you want to throw something just to hear it break.

Lian An was asleep on her side, lashes dark against her cheek, mouth softened by rest. Her hair, loosened for the night, spilled like ink across the pillow. At the foot of the bed, the two kittens had arranged themselves belly-up, four paws limp, tiny pink mouths ajar. On the inner couch, Fen Yu had fallen asleep as dramatically as she did everything else—on her back, one arm flung across her forehead, the ghost of a frown still resting between her brows. Li Shen sat upright in a corner chair, hands folded, head bowed—meditating, or asleep pretending not to be, which was practically the same.

Wei Rong stood with his hands half-raised, poised to shout. He hesitated. Shouting would wake someone. Would it wake them fast enough? Would the noise travel down the corridor, draw a stray guard, a curious maid, a question? He needed all of them awake now—no questions, no dithering, no fluffed hairpins.

His gaze snagged on the large glazed jar by the table. Half full. Catching a slice of moon in its open mouth.

He smiled.

"Forgive me, Majesty," he said to the room, and did not mean it.

He lifted the jar in both hands and poured.

The night erupted.

Cold water slapped the quilt, doused the bolster, sheeted across Lian An's ankle, and ricocheted in a sparkling arc that smacked directly into Li Shen's composed face. The scholar flung backward with a very dignified yelp. One kitten made a sound like a squeaky hinge, flipped upright, and skittered in place as if running on polished jade; the other bolted under the bed and began mewling accusations at existence.

Fen Yu sat up like a jack-in-the-box, hair flying, eyes wide and wild. "AAAAAAA—! WHO—WHO PEED ON ME?!"

Li Shen flailed, dripping. "I—! No—! This is—! I do not—!"

Lian An came up fighting the quilt, hair pasted wet to her temple, one hand braced as if she meant to strike a ghost. "What—what—what—" She blinked water off her lashes, sputtered once, and then found her voice. "WHO DID THIS?"

"HE DID!" Fen Yu screeched instantly, stabbing an accusing finger at Li Shen. "He pees when he sleeps! I said so! He's a night-river!"

Li Shen's dignity tried to climb back onto his face and slid off, sodden. "I do not," he said, biting every syllable like a word in a legal petition. "I am a person of letters."

"You are a puddle," Fen Yu shot back.

"Enough!" Lian An snapped, shaking water from her sleeve like an offended swan. She executed a hand's breadth of a breath, the kind that took a boiling pot down from furious to merely dangerous. "Who."

Wei Rong planted his feet, jar tucked proudly under one arm like a conquered city. "I."

Silence.

Three pairs of eyes turned toward him. Two went round. One went narrow.

Lian An's hand closed around the nearest weapon—a lacquered hairpin box. She hurled it.

Ghost or not, Wei Rong flinched. The box passed through his shoulder and smacked the screen hard enough to bounce. The latch sprang; a ribbon leapt out and wrapped Fen Yu's wrist. She stared at it as if it had assaulted her honor.

"You sand-brained, thunder-footed barbarian!" Lian An said, standing on the mattress now, soaked and furious, the very model of an Empress who had run out of patience with the afterlife. "Am I a vegetable patch that you water by moonlight?"

"Emergency protocol," Wei Rong said stoutly.

"Whose emergency?" Li Shen asked, wringing his sleeve over the floor with the meticulous despair of a scholar rescuing ruined paper.

"Yours," Wei Rong said. The humor vanished from his face as if a visor had dropped. "All of ours. I came back through the east gardens. Lady Chen met a masked man. They spoke of poison at the treaty rite. Two maids. One switches the goblet at the third toast. The cup is laced to kill. The dancer falls onstage. The second maid will throw herself forward and cry that the Empress ordered it. A planted handkerchief. A prepared confession. They intend a death and a scandal in the same breath."

Fen Yu's mouth fell open. Even anger forgot itself. "Death?"

"Fast," Wei Rong said. "No foam, no drama. A drop and done."

Li Shen's brows knit into a painful line. "The envoy would see insult. Ministers will scramble to look righteous. The court will howl for punishment before the truth has time to lace its boots."

"And the punishment will be me," Lian An said. The words were even, but the muscles in her jaw feathered tight.

For three heartbeats there was no sound but the soft tick of water dripping from the quilt to the floor, and the tiny rustling mew of the kitten under the bed gathering courage to exist again.

Then Fen Yu found her voice and her rage in the same instant. "I will find the maid who plans to confess. I will make her confess to me."

"You will not terrify pawns," Lian An said, low. "Not yet." She shook her hair off her cheek, smoothed a hand down the wet fabric of her sleeve, and somehow, in the soaked wreck of a nightshirt and with an overturned pillow at her heel, became entirely regal. "We move when we choose, not when fury pushes."

Wei Rong set the jar down gently, as if it were now a witness and deserved respect. "I had to wake you. I had to do it fast."

"You did it like a storm with bad manners," Lian An said. But the edges of her voice had cooled; the fury had folded into focus. She looked at the floor, at the droplets darkening the wood, at the little paw prints the kitten had left between the bed and the brazier. Then she looked up at Wei Rong, and the look said report.

He stood straighter.

"Tomorrow," he said, "during the treaty drum. Third toast. South-wing maid switches the dancer's cup with the prepared goblet. The poison is clean. The dancer dies. The second maid cries your name and holds a planted handkerchief. I kicked the man. He fled. Lady Chen smiled and paid him."

Fen Yu swore softly, a word that would have gotten her thrown out of any temple choir.

Li Shen set his hands together, not in prayer, but in the old habit of gathering himself the way you do before giving counsel to a lord who may or may not listen. "We must—"

A small, wet sound interrupted him. Lian An and Fen Yu both looked down. Two damp noses and four cautious paws had emerged from under the bed. The kittens—still somewhat damp, but full of courage again—darted toward the basket by the brazier and burrowed into the towel there with the entitlement of small creatures who had not been poisoned by the world yet.

Fen Yu's wrath hiccuped into a coo. "My brave dumplings." She scooped one, kissed the air above its forehead (her lips would pass straight through), and glared at Wei Rong over the kitten's ear. "If they sneeze tonight, I will haunt your spear."

"I accept all consequences," Wei Rong said solemnly.

Lian An pressed the heel of her hand to her brow and exhaled. The exhale sounded like a woman setting a sword on a table after deciding to use it tomorrow.

"Enough," she said. "We will—"

She stopped herself, jaw tightening. Not yet. If she started issuing orders now, she would not stop, and the night would gallop away with her. She needed the picture whole. She needed the names, the corridors, the lists of who had been reassigned to which wing for service. She needed to know which steward had been leaned on, which maid had received a sudden gift from nowhere.

All that would come next.

For now—

"Who did this prank?!" Fen Yu suddenly remembered to yell, late, for the joy of it, jabbing a ghostly finger at Li Shen again. "Say it! Admit it! Your bladder is a liar!"

Li Shen closed his eyes briefly, did a full-body sigh, then opened them with saintly patience. "General," he said, tone dry as old parchment, "would you like me to fetch another jar so you can baptize her again for that accusation?"

Wei Rong, traitor to his own sternness, chuckled.

Lian An, who had begun to shiver now that the adrenaline was ebbing, reached for the towel on the chair. She rubbed her hair briskly, then tugged the towel around her shoulders. Her bare feet left prints like small petals across the floor as she stepped down from the bed.

She bent, picked up the empty jar, weighed it, and then looked up at the general with a long, steady gaze.

"Next time," she said, voice calm as a blade laid flat, "use a bowl."

Wei Rong opened his mouth—perhaps to argue, perhaps to agree—and never got the words out.

Because in that same breath, Lian An pivoted on the heel of her wet foot and threw the jar.

It sailed through the general's chest like a shot through fog and smacked the lattice with a thunder-crack that sent the two kittens scrambling back into their towel bunker and Fen Yu shrieking, "MY NERVES!"

The jar bounced once, miraculously did not shatter, and rolled in a circle like a drunk beetle.

Wei Rong blinked. Then he set his jaw, bowed from the waist—the bow of a soldier taking a deserved reprimand—and said, "Understood."

Lian An's nostrils flared. For a moment she looked like she might throw the bed next. Then the breath went out of her, not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh. She plucked a hairpin from the floor, set it absently on the table, and climbed back onto the mattress on her knees, towel still over her shoulders.

"Everyone," she said, softer. "Get dry." A beat. "Then—"

She stopped herself again. Not yet. Tomorrow's plan belonged to tomorrow's Chapter. Tonight's truth had been delivered—cold, shocking, necessary.

Fen Yu, mollified by kittens, grumbled and began to shake water from her sleeves like a dog. Li Shen folded the edge of his robe over his knees and dabbed meticulously at the floor with a rag as if rescuing a library one plank at a time. Wei Rong righted the jar and set it, with exaggerated reverence, back where he'd found it.

Lian An stared at the lattice where the jar had struck. A faint white crescent mark glowed on the wood. She touched it with one finger, then withdrew her hand.

Outside, the lantern beyond the eaves sputtered and steadied. Somewhere in the palace, a bell rang once, marking the hour between deep night and the earliest stirrings of dawn kitchens.

Inside, a drenched Empress pulled her towel tighter and looked at a soldier who had been dead too long and still remembered how to move before thinking.