

## **Ghost 98**

### Chapter 98: the goddess in red

The last pin slid into place with a musical click.

"Done," the maid whispered, stepping back so the light could take its turn at admiring. The red bell-sleeved gown lay on Lian An like a poem that had finally found the right reader—silver cloudwork at the collar, a quiet blaze along the hems, and a fall of silk that moved as if it remembered the river.

Lian An drew one breath to test its weight, another to steady her heart. The bronze mirror returned a woman she knew and did not know: the same spine that had endured the ancestral hall, yet cloaked now in a radiance that made endurance look effortless.

"Your Majesty..." The maid's eyes shone. "Today, even the wind will stand up when you pass."

"Let's make it bow instead," Lian An said dryly, but a smile touched her mouth.

She lifted the door screen and stepped into the corridor.

They were there already—her mother, father, sister, and cousin—arranged like a private constellation outside her threshold. The Duchess Lian Xiu, in pearl and plum; the Duke, his color—praise the ancestors—returned to his face; Lian Hua vibrating like a lute string pulled too tight; and Lian Ruo steady as a drawn line.

For a heartbeat no one remembered rank or rules. Lian Hua ran first, flinging her arms around her sister's waist so hard the silver blossoms in Lian An's hair chimed.

"Sister! Look at you! You're a phoenix lantern. You're— you're—"

"A person who needs to breathe," Lian Ruo said, gently peeling the girl away, though his own eyes were warm with astonished pride. "Cousin," he bowed, mock-formal, "you outshine half the court by accident."

"Then the other half must try harder," Lian An said, and turned to her parents.

The Duchess took her hands—those hands the palace had tried to tire—and held them on her open palms, as if weighing blessings. "You are well," she murmured, a prayer disguised as a statement. "You are well."

"I am," Lian An said. "Because of you."

The Duke's gaze, clear again after days of pain and fever, softened into something he had not always known how to show. "My daughter stands straight," he added gruffly. "Let the court learn their posture from you."

She bowed her head, but inside some knot eased. How many times had she stood alone under gold ceilings, armor made of courtesy, while affection lived a day's ride away? To stand here and be touched without suspicion felt like drinking water after salt.

"Come," said the Duchess, though none of them wished to move. "If we arrive late to our own joy, joy will scold us."

They set out together, four footsteps and hers, the rhythm of family. Court corridors were never truly empty; even today, servants threaded past with scrolls and banners, and the smell of lacquer mixed with the richer tide from the kitchens—ginger, duck fat, plum wine warmed just enough to loosen its sweetness.

By the time they reached the Pavilion of Harmonious Seas—the great banquet hall chosen for history to enter—sound had gathered like a storm. Drums practiced patience behind curtains; musicians tuned a scale that promised applause before a single step; officials rehearsed greetings as if each syllable might break if mishandled.

At the outer threshold, etiquette's invisible hand intervened. Family must separate from Empress; kinship must bow to duty. The Duchess's fingers squeezed Lian An's once, swift and firm, before releasing. The Duke gave a nod meant for military courtyards and daughters alike. Lian Hua mouthed a last, irreverent, I'll be watching. Lian Ruo's look said what men rarely say aloud: I'm by your side even when I am not.

Then they turned toward the tiered seats assigned to the Duke's house, and she toward the center where eyes collect like coins.

The flanking doors eased open.

She stepped through.

The air of the hall altered.

Whispers are a currency in palaces; some spend them quickly, some hoard them for winter. Today they were minted and spent at once.

"Is that—" "The Empress—" "Heaven help us—" "—like a goddess come down—" "—like cinnabar flame—" "—no one in our kingdom rivals—"

Not loud enough to be disrespectful. Quite loud enough to make a path.

She walked it without hurry. When silk knows its work, it asks nothing extravagant of the one who wears it. The bell sleeves rippled against her wrists like obedient water; the red skirt carried her as if it had promised to long before it was sewn.

Beneath the central dais where the imperial seats rose, ministers halted mid-conversation, wives straightened as if recalled by a teacher's bell. The foreign envoys, already seated in their blue and silver, turned as one body. Some blinked. One forgot, briefly, to mask delight.

On the dais, the Empress Dowager sat like a gold thought that refused to become kindness. On her right, the Emperor.

Rong Zhen had been attending to the envoy from the Eastern Empire, answering some courteous question with one of his characteristic half-smiles that felt like a sword made into courtesy for an afternoon. He turned because the air itself had turned.

He saw her.

And his practiced composure misstepped, only a little, the way even a flawless dancer can find his foot not where he expected when the drum does something impossible.

She was a red comet drawn in human scale—cool-browed, not flaunting herself, and thus the more dangerous. Something caught behind his ribs. He had seen her angry, stubborn, proud, laughing privately; he had not seen her like this, as if beauty had outgrown ornament and decided to be a kind of gravity.

He did not notice he was staring until the envoy beside him said lightly, "Your Majesty is fortunate."

Rong Zhen's hum could have been agreement or warning. He pulled his gaze back through an effort that felt strangely like returning from a dream.

Lian An did not look up at him yet. Protocol first; breath later. She reached the dais and sank into the bow a lifetime of masters had carved into her bones.

"This daughter-in-law greets the Mother of the Empire."

The Dowager's fan moved once, an indecipherable bird turning in a tight sky. "Rise."

No welcome, no warmth. A nod that acknowledged the existence of a red robe.

Lian An rose, neither shorter nor taller than before.

She turned to the Emperor and inclined again, precise to the angle that says respect without performance. "Your Majesty."

A heartbeat's suspension—would he speak?

"Empress," he said. No more. But his eyes, betraying him for once, completed the sentence he refused: You are— He closed the door on the rest.

Only then did she face the visiting sovereign.

The Eastern Emperor was younger than rumor had made him, laughter at easy reach, beauty so precise it would have seemed fragile if not for the steady way he held his shoulders. His entourage glittered with restrained wealth: silk that glowed when it moved, metal worked to look like moonlight. When his gaze landed on Lian An, the calculation that lives in royal eyes melted into something closer to astonishment.

He stepped forward just enough to share air and ceremony. "To witness such grace," he said in a northern dialect shaped into their tongue, "one believes the poets again."

Murmurs stirred like fish under a bridge.

"Your Majesty flatters the host," Lian An answered evenly. "Our court welcomes you."

"Your court," he returned, with a look that could have been mistaken for play if it were not shaped like a compliment aimed carefully. "If I stood where your lord stands, I would be accused of neglect should I ever leave your side."

A ripple went through the hall—the sharp intake of breath that follows any arrow flying too close to protocol. A few wives smiled into their sleeves. A few ministers pretended to examine the banners. The Dowager's fan stilled.

On the Emperor's right, a small, polite cough. Rong Zhen's mouth remained composed, but something ancient and disobedient tightened in his jaw. He felt the jealousy—a rare, unwelcome heat—then the discipline that had trained him since boyhood poured over it like cool water. His response was to do nothing so visible as frown. He only let his gaze rest, for a fraction longer than courtesy demands, on the Eastern Emperor's hand—close, then properly returned to his side.

Lian An's expression did not change. Handsome men and sharp words do not alter a woman who has learned to live with knives. She inclined again, controlled as the tilt of a vessel that knows exactly how much wine it will pour. "We hope your path here was clear," she said, and stepped back to give place to the next greeting.

The master of ceremonies—who knew how to catch a faltering rope and make it a ribbon—announced the next arrival before whispers could choose mischief.

"Lady Chen of the Inner Court."

Heads turned as a wash of teal entered the doorway, peacock blue deepened to oil-slick richness, gemwork bright at collar and sleeve. Lady Chen moved with a trained softness that spoke of years spent perfecting the art of seeming effortless. A veil of gauze lay over her hairpins, a nod to humility that invited curiosity to pull it away.

She crossed the hall under a rain of admiring glances. She knew how to catch them and return them polished.

At the foot of the dais she bowed—elegant, correct—and looked up just enough for her eyes to shine.

The Dowager did not wait for the speech that custom would put into any other woman's mouth. Her fan opened in a bloom of welcome that had been denied the Empress.

"Rise, child," she said, with a warmth meant to be seen as well as heard. "You look well. Teal suits you almost as much as kindness suits you. Sit—" and here the fan tipped toward the Emperor's left, the place that announces more than proximity—"near His Majesty. These eyes are old; let them rest on pleasant things."

The line of sound that ran through the hall now had another tone—satisfaction in some, thin triumph in others, hunger in a few. The Emperor's jaw tightened one grain and loosened again. Lian An did not so much as blink.

She took the seat assigned her—slightly lower than the Dowager, slightly higher than the ministers' wives, exactly where a queen who is not a mother is meant to sit when politics wishes to say: we remember your title and we remember our preferences.

The servants approached with the dance of trays. Cups of plum wine—Central red, Eastern blue, and a third blended hue—were presented along the front with hands that wove reverence and timing. At Lian An's elbow, a girl no older than Lian Hua set the first dish and nearly tripped over the emotion caught in her throat.

"Steady," Lian An murmured without moving her lips.

The girl's eyes flicked up—met kindness, not scorn—and steadied.

Across the dais, Lady Chen accepted her cup with a smile that went up to the Dowager first and then toward the Emperor second, as if to say: I know where favor stands and I stand there with it. The Dowager's fingers brushed hers a moment longer than they had brushed anyone else's. This is how palaces speak when they wish to deny they are speaking.

The musicians began. Silk sleeves unfurled on the performance floor below, the first dance of welcome drawing two colors across one stage. The choreography had been revised for this day; the braid of Central and Eastern steps looked easy because eight people had bled from their feet to make it so.

Lian An watched with the attention of a woman who enjoys beauty and the vigilance of one who refuses to be fooled by it. At the edge of her hearing, the court exhaled, tension released into admiration. She allowed herself one breath that was not an argument with her body.

A murmur brushed her from the left, not quite addressed to her and meant for her anyway.

"Her Majesty is luminous."

The Eastern Emperor again, voice pitched to offer compliment without forcing reply. He did not pretend not to look. He also did not lean; he respected the geometry of distance. It was, she admitted, a talent—to court a room without crowding it.

She inclined her head a fraction. "Your Majesty is generous to a fault."

"A fault?" he returned softly, amused. "Then let me keep at least one."

Down the table, Rong Zhen set his cup down with a quietness that drew the Dowager's eye. She mistook his restraint for satisfaction and smiled, minuscule, to herself.

Servers moved; dishes changed; the audience swayed with the subtle weather of a great occasion finding its balance. The Empress ate enough to respect the cook and not enough to be slowed by it. Lady Chen laughed at something said too softly to be quoted and arranged her sleeves with a practiced sorrow that promised to turn into joy at the right word. The Dowager studied the hall like a gardener measuring where each plant throws shade.

Beneath the easy conversation, a sillier conversation ran among noble girls: whose dress, whose hairpin, whose glance. Lian An felt the current touch her ankles and passed through it as a ship passes through reeds. Beautiful, yes; dangerous, certainly; interested, not particularly.

Once, when the applause rose and people dared to look where they liked rather than where they should, she let her gaze travel the tiers, found her family with a speed that surprised her. The Duchess held a fan badly; it trembled with the effort not to weep. The Duke composed his face into neutrality and failed at the edges. Lian Hua waved her sleeve like a contraband flag until Lian Ruo pressed her hand down with a look that said: I would do worse if I could get away with it.

The moment steadied her more than any cup of wine could have done.

She turned back in time to see the Dowager tip her fan toward Lady Chen again, to hear—because the hall wanted it to be heard—"Child, later you will sit nearer; the light flatters you." The sort of praise that is also a leash.

Lian An's plate reflected the lantern's light into her eyes. It stung and then cleared. So this is the play, she thought. The old script, performed before a new audience. A queen is acknowledged; a favorite is warmed; a mother pretends she is a mountain and not a person with preferences.

Not new. Only sharp today because of the treaty and the red dress and the man from the north who had called her grace a poem he could believe in.

She lifted her cup, tasted the plum wine—soft, tart, honest—and set it down. No scene. No sulk. Not even that small stiffening of the neck that feeds a court for a week. She would not give them the meal.

Instead, she leaned slightly to the servant girl at her elbow. "When the fish course comes," she said, "ask the chef to send the head toward the Eastern envoy's table. In their custom, that is honor."

The girl's eyes widened—gratitude, fear at misstep, relief at being guided. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Across two seats and a lifetime, the Emperor heard, did not look, and something in his mouth softened that the envy had hardened. He did not know whether to be grateful or annoyed that she continued to be herself: capable, observant, impossible to categorize as merely wounded or merely proud.

The dance ended in a sweep of sleeves like a flock changing direction. Applause rose; the master of ceremonies took the air back in hand. "A toast," he announced, "to the river that knows how to carry two boats."

Cups lifted. Even the Dowager's did, lightly. The Eastern Emperor's smile reached his eyes; Lady Chen's reached her plan; the hall tasted plums and politeness.

Lian An let the wine touch her mouth and stopped it there, as one does with a word that does not require speaking.

The favoring of another woman had been performed in front of a treaty and a nation. It would be spoken of tonight in bedrooms and tomorrow on paper fans. Let them. The dress does not make the spine; the seat does not make the queen.

She folded her hands within her sleeves and, under the hum of triumph and envy, wrote a quiet promise to herself where no one could edit it:

I will not be moved by their weather. I will be my own season.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the Eastern Emperor's glance return and slide away—respectful, amused, not done yet. From the edge of memory, she felt the ghost of two small paws pressing into her lap this morning as if kneading luck into her skirt. From nearer than breath, she sensed the old woman's fan stir—measure, count, apportion.

Red silk settled around her like courage turned visible.

History, which rarely attends to private vows, drifted a little closer to listen.