

Ghost 99

Chapter 99: oath

The banquet hall breathed like a living creature—silk banners inhaling, lanterns exhaling—its thousand tiny flames trembling above a sea of polished heads and gleaming cups. Red draperies framed the high dais; gold-thread tassels lifted and fell in the faint circulation of warm, perfumed air. At the center of the dais, two thrones waited—one lacquered a deep imperial vermilion, the other set beside it for the visiting monarch in serene blue—while below, an avenue of ceremonial mats led to a low stone basin filled at dawn with river water, perfectly still, clear as an eye that misses nothing.

All were seated already. Ministers, nobles, scholars, envoys, clan heads, foreign merchants with special permission and careful smiles. Dowager Empress in pale gold, fan half-open; Lady Chen in peacock teal, jewels trembling at her temples; the great families ranked by favor and seniority in tiles of silk and jade. And there, two tiers down from the dais at the seat appointed for the empress consort, Lian An in red.

A murmur, earlier, had run like a silver fish through the hall when she entered. Then it folded into silence the way a stream folds under ice. Now she sat composed, posture exact, her sleeves like the calm of sunset over water. She watched the hall without leaning, the way a mountain watches weather.

Three gongs rolled once, twice, and a third time. Conversation curled shut. All rose.

Emperor Rong Zhen stepped forward in formal robes edged with black cloudwork, every thread a visible command. Opposite him, the visiting Eastern Emperor descended—broad-shouldered, star-eyed, his blue robes tempered with the sober light of silver dragons along the hem. Between them, the stone basin waited, patient as stone can be, stubborn as rivers are.

The master of ceremonies lifted his tablet. His voice traveled cleanly, polished by years of speaking words that become history.

"On this day, in the Year of Returning Winds, the Central Empire and the Eastern Realm stand to bind an oath of peace. Blood remembers what words forget. Water carries vow to Heaven."

Two eunuchs advanced with a small lacquered tray. Upon silk lay a ritual knife, its edge drinking the lamplight without returning it.

Rong Zhen extended his left hand without hesitation. The Eastern Emperor did the same. The master unfolded the silk and set the knife in Rong Zhen's palm. A winter draft's whisper moved through the nobles: not fear, but attention sharpening.

Rong Zhen turned his wrist. The blade kissed his thumb; a single drop swelled—perfect, round—and fell into the waiting water.

Plink.

He passed the knife. The Eastern Emperor cut with the steadiness of moonrise; his drop struck beside the first. Red met red, mingled, vanished into clear.

Together, at the signal, they set their right palms into the basin. Heat of skin. Chill of river. A vow that knew both.

The master spoke, each phrase a pillar sunk deep:

"We swear—

to break the chain our grandsires forged;

to keep traders safe from ridge to shore;

that fields shall feed and borders sleep;

to punish theft, to share grain, to write law before we raise the spear."

"Let Heaven hear."

Silence listened. Up on the musicians' terrace, a flute answered with a single high note that went where prayer lives when it is done properly.

The rulers withdrew their hands. Silk towels—itsself a ritual—were offered. They ignored the sting where blood had learned obedience. They faced one another and clasped forearms: men born to war, agreeing to be farmers for a while.

"May your mountains keep their snows," the Eastern Emperor said in clean Central tongue.

"And your rivers never forget their beds," Rong Zhen returned.

The master struck a gold bell:

DONG.

DONG.

DONG.

The sound took a shape and lodged itself in the beams. The hall exhaled together. Applause unfurled—careful at first, then loud enough that the lantern cords trembled.

"By decree," the master called, when the clamor softened, "enmity of a hundred years is dismissed to the archive. Trade shall walk where war once ran."

Attendants entered with gifts, their steps counting the distance where respect lives. From the Eastern Kingdom: sea pearls big as a child's knuckle, cool as moonlight; hand-forged steel swords with rain-lines visible in their folded grain; jade ornaments carved like phoenix feathers, translucence caught in stone; packets of their best coastal spices, coils of patterned silk whose blues matched harbor dawns, and chests of mountain herbs signed by their imperial physicians.

Whispers braided the air—admiring the steel, the size of the pearls, the steadiness of presentation that speaks of coffers as deep as harbors.

From the Central Empire: silver jewelry engraved with the dynasty seal, filigree delicate as frost on bamboo; rolls of cloud-brocade from the south looms, a weave famous for making harsh light gentle; gold leaf in travel ingots, not boast but promise, stamped for trade houses; trays of rare fruits and grains grown only in Central fields—winter lotus seed, red millet, white peaches preserved in honey.

The Eastern Emperor bowed once, the controlled short bow of equals. A page stepped forward and recorded the exchange on silk as the master named each with origin and meaning, while the water bowl continued the quiet work of converting spectacle into vow.

On the left tier, the Dowager's fan moved again, slow. She allowed herself one small nod—for control retained, for form fulfilled, for the spine of empire not bent.

At her right, Lady Chen's smile arranged itself like flowers in a vase: perfect, and unable to grow. She shone just enough.

A steward's signal fluttered across the musicians; strings and flutes prepared breath but waited. The master returned to the center once more, tablet lifted.

"After a century of division, peace is declared."

He struck the bell again:

DONG.

DONG.

DONG.

Chairs whispered against reed mats. Everyone sat. Trays flowed forward: river carp steamed with ginger-thread, petals of lotus root stacked like pale coins, duck lacquered to a mahogany crackle that was music when touched by a knife. Wine glowed in crane-painted jars. Perfume of spice and plum and rendered fat rose, tamed by ginger, courted by scallion.

Then the master announced, "To honor alliance, the Eastern Troupe of River-Born Flame will perform the Dance of Returning Days."

Flutes drew a long, braided breath. Drums answered with a heartbeat taught manners.

Six dancers stepped from behind silk screens—three men, three women—costumes a water-blue lit with gold, anklets chiming metal bright, sleeves long as courtiers' rumors. They bowed; the audience leaned without moving.

The dance began.

Sleeves flew and settled like migrating birds deciding to land. Anklets chimed in time with the small clicks of cups against saucers across the hall. The music traced currents: a circle began; a line pierced it; the circle widened to welcome the path; a turn caught light and threw it back as fire.

Movements said: war is a flame; we have taught it to warm the house.

Lian An watched as if reading a text with more than one meaning. Not rapture. Knowledge. The way a blade balances on an open palm if the hand is steady. Her red sleeves rested like closed wings; her eyes did not.

Across the dais, the Eastern Emperor leaned toward Rong Zhen. "In our cities, this dance closes markets each season. Merchants trust that winter ends."

"In ours," Rong Zhen said, "we trust stubbornness."

The visiting ruler laughed under his breath. "May both serve."

They would have said more, but something else arrived—something for which there is not yet a proper word in living tongue: the lightest dip in temperature, the faintest prickle of attention moving without feet.

The ghosts had come.

Wei Rong first, shoulders broad even without weight, passing through the reed screen like night through gauze. Li Shen next, a scholar who had mistaken death for silence but learned otherwise; he slid from shadow like ink finding the correct stroke. Fen Yu last, bright as a thrown spark, curiosity and appetite tied together with a ribbon of pure mischief.

They kept to the visible edge where certainty ends. Their art.

Wei Rong stood where he could see both dancers and guards, a general's mind measuring distances: from pitcher to goblet, from door to dais, from oath to celebration. Twice he found his foot shifting to a guard he had learned in life—reflex, memory, discipline.

Li Shen drifted to the musicians, and their mathematics delighted him until sadness forgot to sit in his throat. He leaned toward a zither, letting its quiet hum move through his ribs like bees in clover. "Exact," he mouthed, content.

Fen Yu saw a man.

He stood near the Eastern dais, tall as a temple door, a thin scar slicing his eyebrow like a punctuation mark, jaw set in the correct angle for command. His armor—formal, polished—caught lantern fire and fed it back as stars.

Fen Yu went around him once like a moth around a lamp, sighed at her own helplessness, and began quite naturally to rob him. A square of lacquered duck slid into air and vanished. He frowned at his plate, counted, then blamed his own memory. A dumpling rose, hovered, and disappeared with the smallest guilty clap of invisible hands. He protected the next chestnut with a palm like a lid.

Across the hall, Lian An's lashes lowered, lifted. A look like a thrown pin: enough to fix cloth. Fen Yu froze mid-thief, dumpling half a thought from her mouth. The Empress's glance gentled: later. The dumpling retreated to its proper country. Fen Yu sulked theatrically, then comforted herself by skating her fingers through the edge of a torch-flame; it flared, respected her, did not burn.

On the floor, the dance entered its heart.

Torches were brought and lit from a single flame a solemn child carried—symbol and child equally grave, which is why it worked. The dancers dipped sleeves; fire ran along silk without consuming it, as if desire had been taught to keep its hands light. Gasps rose. Laughter followed—laughter that arrives when fear realizes it has been understood and does not need to flail.

The master struck his bell once—ritual echo to the oath's sound. The hall seemed to stand taller by a finger's width.

Servants at the margins adjusted trays, replaced cups, smoothed cloth. Ministers relaxed their shoulders by a degree. The Dowager's fan ticked; Lady Chen's smile refined itself, jealous heat banked beneath peacock teal. The visiting envoys watched with expressions that meant both admiration and inventory. The palace itself listened: beams, screens, banners—everything that had swallowed vows before—considered this one with old patience.

The music drew its last question and refused to answer it. The dancers gathered; knees touched floor; sleeves flamed once, twice, then folded like birds choosing to rest. Silence accepted the answer absence of sound can give.

The master rang his bell three times:

DING.

DING.

DING.

Applause rose like weather. Nobles clapped as if their hands might be seen by history. Ladies clapped as if pearls, too, could applaud. The Eastern Emperor stood in honor of his troupe; Rong Zhen stood with him; the crowd rose under the law that asks bodies to follow leadership when it deserves it.

They resumed their seats. Wine moved. The duck—second platter—cracked more music beneath the carver's knife. Servers flowed like water along familiar paths, faces neither too bright nor too blank.

The ghosts stayed.

Wei Rong's head turned once—toward the rear where shadows collect under eaves; toward the west corridor where work-servants staged dishes. No alarm; only catalog. Li Shen noted patterns: which servant favored right or left, who poured with too much wrist, who kept eyes too alert. Fen Yu... Fen Yu abandoned the general only long enough to pirouette through a ribbon of incense and return to hover near his shoulder with a sigh heavy enough to bend reeds.

Lian An sat as one sits when the day is an instrument and you are tuning it: composed, alert, sparing knees that remembered stone. She lifted her cup when a eunuch offered—proper channels, proper

eyes—touched wine to her lower lip, replaced it. She did not look at Rong Zhen. She did not not look at him. She watched the room the way a map watches a traveler.

The master called, "Art has replied to oath. Let joy answer art." Soft laughter in the right places, small toasts in corners. A poet breathed into his sleeve a couplet he might even keep. Someone muttered about tariffs; someone else pretended not to hear. Sleeves arranged themselves. Anklets at dancers' ankles stilled.

At the Eastern table, the scar-browed general laid his chopsticks aside, convinced now of his own appetite's treachery. Fen Yu patted the air near his shoulder with the solemnity of a priest granting absolution, then drifted back toward Lian An—who met her with a look that promised both discipline and, perhaps, later pastry in exactly that order. Fen Yu's face brightened at the pastry part and dimmed at the order part; equilibrium restored.

The hall loosened. Joy did as it is told in ceremonies: it behaved, but with enthusiasm. The water in the stone basin rested, work done; two drops had dissolved and become a new thing with no name anyone could keep in a jar.

The Dowager watched all and gave nothing away. Lady Chen measured expressions like weights on a scale. The Eastern Emperor spoke to a minister about salt; Rong Zhen answered a steward without moving his mouth more than necessity demanded. Lian An's hands lay quiet upon red silk. Lanterns trembled, and trembled again.