

# Ghost in the palace

## #Chapter 1: Waking in silk - Read Ghost in the palace Chapter 1: Waking in silk

*Chapter 1: Waking in silk*

The first thing Ananya smelled was sandalwood.

It pressed against the back of her throat—warm, expensive, and wrong. Her pillow wasn't cotton; it was a cool, embroidered cloud. Something heavy weighed down her scalp. She lifted a hand and felt a forest of hairpins.

Hairpins?

Her eyes flew open.

A crimson canopy arched above her like a captured sunset. Gold-threaded cranes marched along the silk, their wings stitched mid-flight. Beyond the bedcurtain, a screen painted with peonies glowed in the light of an unseen brazier. Somewhere outside, a qin tested a single, cautious note and then fell quiet, as if even music needed permission to breathe here.

Ananya sat up too fast. The world tilted. She grabbed the bedpost.

Memory came in two clashing waves: a doorway with a jangling bell and the smell of frying garlic—her parents' restaurant—then another life she could not remember living, a palace of cold marble where her name was spoken like a mistake.

"Your Highness?"

A maid knelt at the threshold of the canopy, head bowed so low her forehead brushed the polished floor. Others hovered behind her—three young women, a narrow-faced eunuch, all holding their breath like candles. Their hair was sleek and coiled; their sleeves whispered when they moved.

"Y-Your Highness, shall we summon the physician?" the maid tried again. "You... fainted last night."

Your Highness.

The words landed like a teacup shattering.

"I'm fine," Ananya heard herself say, and the voice that answered was gentle but steadier than her pulse. "Water."

At once, a cup arrived on a lacquered tray. She lifted it—and almost laughed. Her hand wore a ring heavy as a coin, and her sleeve was an ivory waterfall banded with gold. She had cooked through nights in T-shirts and flour; now silk cushioned her skin and refused to crease.

Her heart thudded. Think, Ananya. Read the room the way you read a kitchen—heat, knives, who's hungry, who's lying.

The maids were scared. Of her.

"Where am I?" she asked, and watched their faces.

They flinched in perfect unison. The eunuch's eyes darted to the painted screen, as if it could answer for them.

"Phoenix Hall, Your Highness," the first maid whispered. "The Queen Consort's residence."

Phoenix Hall. Queen Consort.

The cup didn't slip from Ananya's fingers, but only because she set it down very carefully.

"Understood," she said. "Tell me the time."

"The hour of the rabbit, Your Highness," the eunuch replied quickly. "Just before dawn."

So early. In the restaurant, that was when stock finished simmering and deliveries began. In palaces—she had no idea. But she smiled, because calm was a ladle you held even when the pot boiled.

"Then let us begin the day," she said. "Open the lattice. Let in a little air."

The maids stared, startled by the request rather than the tone. One hurried to obey. Frosted light slid over the floor, catching on jade and gilded wood. A square of winter sky appeared, pale as milk.

Ananya took one slow breath. Okay. Breathe. We build from what we know: water, fire, salt, truth.

A whisper tickled her ear.

"Interesting. The phoenix wakes tame."

Ananya went still. The maids hadn't spoken. The eunuch hadn't moved. The voice had come from the space to her left where no one stood—light as dust, cool as a scholar's amusement.

Another voice followed, rough and amused. "Tame? She nearly fainted twice and still didn't scream. I like her already."

A third voice gasped delightedly. "She saw us! No—wait—can she? Oh! She can't. But she feels us!"

Ananya turned her head very slightly. The air seemed thicker there, as if silk hung where nothing should. Three shapes pressed at the edge of sight—smears of moonlight caught in human forms.

Ghosts.

Her blood should have run cold. Instead, relief washed through her—ridiculous, impossible relief. Not alone, then. Not only alone.

"Your Highness?" the head maid whispered, mistaking the silence for distress. "Should I fetch—"

"No." Ananya's smile steadied. "Tea first. Ginger if you have it. And... something light. Rice porridge."

The maid blinked. "For... for Your Highness?"

"For everyone," Ananya said. "Including the laundress who will curse me if I stain these sleeves."

A ripple went through the room that might have been a strangled laugh before fear made it into a cough. The maids bowed, grateful for orders that didn't bite. The eunuch scurried away with relief that left his slippers whispering.

When the screen closed around the bed again, when only the faint winter light and the three not-quite-shadows remained, Ananya folded her hands in her lap.

"All right," she said softly, not moving her lips more than she had to. "If you are here to drag me under the bed, choose another day. I have nothing to bribe you with but porridge and politeness."

The scholar's voice sounded nearest, wry. "We do not eat porridge."

The rough voice snorted. "Speak for yourself. I miss wine."

The delighted voice sighed. "I miss hairpins. And not being dead."

Ananya's gaze softened before she could help it. "I'm Ananya," she murmured. "Apparently your... Queen Consort. Would you like to tell me who you are? Or shall I assign you names like stray cats?"

"Li Shen," said the scholar, with a bow that rippled the air and made the candle flame twitch.

"Wei Rong," said the rough voice, as if daring the brazier to disagree.

"Fen Yu!" chirped the last one. "And I like cats."

"Li Shen. Wei Rong. Fen Yu." Ananya repeated them quietly, as if turning spices in her fingers. "Thank you for not... screaming while I learned to breathe."

Fen Yu drifted closer, her outline a girl of sixteen with laughter pinned into the shape of a mouth. "You don't sound like her," she confided. "The one from yesterday. She shouted. Threw things. Called us demons." A beat. "We are not demons."

"No," Ananya said. "Just inconvenient."

Wei Rong's chuckle was a thunder rolled small. "You'll do."

Ananya let out a breath that could have been a laugh. "You sound like my first head chef."

A rustle at the door; the world snapped back to etiquette. Trays entered, steam coiling from a pot. The head maid poured tea, hands steady now, eyes curious despite herself.

"We brewed ginger, Your Highness," she said. "And prepared congee with scallion. Forgive the plainness—your stomach..."

"It's perfect," Ananya said—and found that it was. The first sip warmed her from tongue to ribs. The first spoon of porridge settled the world in sensible lines.

Fen Yu leaned over the bowl with greedy interest. "I can't taste it," she mourned. "I remember sweetness but my mouth is a wall."

"You remember?" Ananya's spoon paused. "Then you can help me cook it better."

Li Shen made a noise that might have been a smothered laugh. "She bargains with the dead."

"It's either that or cry," Ananya said simply. She set the spoon down. "And I've no time to cry."

The maid's eyes flicked up, startled. "Your Highness?"

"Nothing," Ananya said gently. "Thank you. What is your name?"

The girl startled more at being asked than at the question itself. "Su Mei, Your Highness."

"Su Mei," Ananya repeated. "Please tell me the rules of this morning. Whom must I greet? Whom must I avoid?"

Su Mei glanced toward the door as if the names themselves had ears. "At the first bell, the imperial women attend morning greetings at the Hall of Filial Piety. The Dowager Empress receives us. After... after that, if Her Majesty permits, we may present ourselves at the Lotus Court."

Lotus Court. The words slid through the room like perfume. Even the ghosts stilled.

"Lady Zhen's residence," Li Shen supplied softly.

The mistress, then. The favorite. Ananya didn't need memory for that; she could read it in how the maid's mouth shaped the title: careful, a little bitter, afraid of being overheard.

"Do I normally attend?" Ananya asked.

Su Mei's throat worked. "You... seldom rise so early, Your Highness. And when you attend, Lady Zhen—" She cut herself off, face blanching.

Ananya saved her. "Is dazzling," she said mildly. "I've heard."

Fen Yu huffed, which was impressive for someone who didn't breathe. "She's gaudy."

Wei Rong snorted. "She is a spear pointed at your back."

Li Shen's outline inclined in agreement. "You must stand straight and say little. They will measure your breath."

Ananya looked down at her bowl. In the reflection, a strange woman stared back: palms uncalloused, lips painted, hair a miracle of patience she had not earned. Somewhere in this palace, a man who wore a crown had decided this woman disgusted him. Somewhere else, a woman in silk wanted her gone.

"Very well," Ananya said. She pushed the bowl away and rose, and the maids jumped to help her from the bed, relief and purpose untangling their fear. "Dress me in something I cannot trip over. If I fall at the Dowager's feet, let it be from grace."

Su Mei's mouth twitched—almost a smile. "Yes, Your Highness."

Pins clicked like rain; silk whispered against silk. The mirror showed a stranger becoming a story: white sleeves, pale pearls, a single red thread at the throat like a promise not yet spoken. Ananya lifted her chin to let the last hairpin settle and met her own gaze without flinching.

"Ananya," Fen Yu said softly, as if tasting the name. "Do you think you will stay?"

"I think," Ananya said, "that I will endure."

Wei Rong grunted, satisfied. "Good answer."

Li Shen's voice gentled. "When you cross the courtyard, keep to the flagstones that gleam. The frost hides in the dull ones."

"Thank you," Ananya murmured. She turned to the maids. "Open the door."

Cold air touched her cheeks. Beyond the threshold, the palace waited—roofs like folded wings, corridors like throats that could close without warning. Ananya stepped forward.

The eunuch scrambled to announce her. "Her Majesty, the Queen Consort—"

The title rolled ahead of her like a drumbeat.

From behind, just close enough to ruffle the hair at her neck, Wei Rong's low murmur: "We walk with you."

"And we watch," Li Shen added.

"And we gossip," Fen Yu pro

mised brightly. "Terribly."

Ananya smiled—small, invisible to anyone who wasn't looking. "Then let's give them a morning worth whispering about," she said, and entered the light.

### *Chapter 2: Morning greetings*

The Hall of Filial Piety was colder than the courtyard outside.

Polished stone gleamed like ice, and the air carried the faint scent of sandalwood mixed with old incense, heavy enough to cling to the breath. Painted dragons coiled up the pillars, their golden scales catching pale sunlight that filtered through the high lattice windows.

At the far end, beneath a canopy embroidered with cranes and chrysanthemums, sat the Dowager Empress.

Her back was straight, her hair pinned with silver ornaments heavy as crowns, and her face showed the beauty of age without yielding softness. She looked like a mountain: unmoving, unyielding, and carved into shape by time.

One after another, women of the harem knelt in perfect rows. Their silks rustled like the shifting of distant waves, and the chill silence was broken only by the eunuch's loud voice announcing names.

"Her Majesty, the Queen Consort!"

The title rang through the hall like a bell.

Every head turned.

Ananya walked forward, each step measured. The phoenix embroidered on her pale robe shimmered faintly in the weak sun. The whispers she had sensed all morning seemed to thrum louder now, though no one dared speak aloud.

This is the battlefield, she thought. Every eye is a blade.

She bowed low, forehead nearly touching the cold floor. "This daughter-in-law greets the Mother of the Empire."

The Dowager's gaze flicked toward her. For a long moment, silence held. Then, with the faintest incline of her head, she said, "Rise."

Ananya stood.

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The greetings continued.

"May Your Majesty's health be as steady as the mountain."

"May Your Majesty's blessings stretch beyond the seas."

The concubines' words dripped with honey, yet the Dowager's expression never shifted. She nodded once, dismissing each woman with a flick of her sleeve.

Then the last one approached.

Lady Zhen.

Her arrival was a performance in itself. Robes of peacock blue and jade-green shimmered like rippling feathers. Her phoenix embroidery was bold, sprawling across

her chest and sleeves as though declaring itself supreme. Jewels glittered in her hair; each step was confidence, each glance a promise that she belonged here.

"Daughter-in-law Zhen greets the Mother of the Empire," she said, her voice like sugared wine.

The Dowager's eyes softened the faintest degree. "Rise."

Lady Zhen stood, turned her head slightly—enough that her bright gaze landed directly on Ananya.

There was no warmth in her smile. Only triumph.

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When the ritual ended and the women began to disperse, Lady Zhen moved close, her fan snapping open with a crisp thwip.

"Sister," she said sweetly, "how rare to see you here today. You looked so pale last night—we were worried you might not survive your first evening."

Her words were honey, but the sting beneath was clear.

Fen Yu, practically vibrating at Ananya's side, hissed: "What a snake! If I had hands, I'd pull out her hairpins one by one!"

Wei Rong's voice rumbled low: "One push down those marble steps and she'll stop laughing."

Li Shen's tone was cool. "Patience. She wants a reaction. If you falter, you hand her victory."

Ananya's lips curved faintly. She lifted her gaze, her tone mild but steady. "I thank Sister for her concern. A night of rest was all I needed. Simplicity suits me."

Lady Zhen's fan stilled for half a breath before resuming its lazy wave. She leaned closer, her whisper barely audible: "Simplicity may suit... but the Emperor prefers splendor. Did you not know? He spent the night with me."

Fen Yu gasped. "Shameless! She's boasting about that?!"

Wei Rong spat. "As if lying beside a man makes her worth more."

Li Shen murmured. "She's testing your composure. Do not let her see anger."

Ananya lowered her gaze slightly, concealing the steel in her eyes. "Then I am glad His Majesty had company. A ruler should never be left lonely."

For a heartbeat, Lady Zhen's smile cracked.

Then she laughed too brightly, snapping her fan closed with a sharp sound. "Sister truly has a generous heart. I hope you keep it... for as long as you can."

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The Dowager's voice cut across the space like a blade. "Enough chatter. Attend your duties."

At once, everyone bent low and began to file out in rows.

Ananya turned, her steps steady on the polished stone. Behind her, the ghosts muttered.

Fen Yu pouted. "You let her win! She walked away laughing!"

Wei Rong growled. "Next time, I'll find a way to trip her. Just one good fall."

Li Shen chuckled softly. "No. Ananya won today. Silence can cut sharper than words."

Ananya let the faintest smile touch her lips. Her heart still raced, but she held herself tall.

The court might whisper behind her back. The Emperor might loathe her. Lady Zhen might laugh in her face.

But she would not falter.

The palace was a battlefield, and her first step had already been taken.

### *Chapter 3: Whisper in silk*

By the time Ananya returned to Phoenix Hall, the winter sun had climbed high enough to throw pale light across the courtyard. The maids scurried ahead of her, whispering nervously, though they fell silent whenever she drew close.

The moment she stepped into her chamber, the screen doors slid closed, sealing away the outside world.

And the ghosts appeared.

"Ha!" Fen Yu bounced across the room, her outline flickering like a lantern flame. "Did you see Lady Zhen's face when you told her the Emperor should never be left lonely? Priceless!"

Wei Rong barked a laugh. "I nearly howled right there in the hall. You should've said more—maybe offered her a pillow, since she's so proud of warming his bed."

Li Shen smoothed an invisible sleeve. "It was well-handled. Restraint is worth more than mockery in front of so many eyes."

Ananya exhaled, lowering herself onto the cushioned seat by the window. "It felt like walking on a blade's edge."

Fen Yu dropped beside her, though her weight never bent the cushion. "You didn't slip! You didn't even blink! Honestly, you looked scarier than Lady Zhen in all her jewels."

Ananya chuckled softly. "I wasn't trying to be frightening."

"You succeeded anyway," Wei Rong said with a grin. "She's rattled. That's a victory."

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Su Mei entered quietly, bringing a tray of tea and candied plums. She set it down, stole a nervous glance at Ananya, and withdrew without a word.

The moment the door closed, Fen Yu darted forward, sticking her hand straight through the tray. "Ugh! Still no taste!"

She flopped dramatically onto her back, her outline flickering. "Life is so unfair. Even in death, I can't enjoy plums."

Wei Rong leaned over, pretending to sniff. "Then I'll take your share."

Fen Yu shot upright, outraged. "You can't eat either!"

"True," Wei Rong said, smirking. "But it's the principle of the thing."

Li Shen shook his head, though his mouth curved faintly. "Children."

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Ananya sipped her tea, letting their bickering wash over her like a balm. Strange as it was, their presence made the palace less lonely.

But she couldn't ignore reality.

Her hand drifted to her sleeve, the embroidery of phoenix feathers smooth beneath her fingers. This is the body of the Queen Consort. The Emperor's lawful wife. Yet I am already despised. The court expects me to fail.

Fen Yu flopped beside her again, propping her chin on her hands. "You're thinking too hard. Stop it."

Ananya blinked. "Stop what?"

"Looking like you're planning to fight battles with logic," Fen Yu declared. "That works for Li Shen. You need something else."

Wei Rong snorted. "She needs a weapon. A sword."

Ananya smiled faintly. "I can cook better than I can wield a sword."

Fen Yu's eyes lit up. "Then cook! Imagine—everyone drooling at the scent, Lady Zhen fainting from jealousy because all His Majesty eats is your food—"

"Fen Yu," Li Shen interrupted dryly. "Food will not protect her from the harem's teeth."

"It makes life sweeter," Ananya countered gently.

The three fell silent. Then, surprisingly, Wei Rong chuckled. "Fair point."

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The quiet stretched, broken only by the rustle of wind against the shutters. Ananya's gaze drifted outward, to the pale courtyard where frost clung to the stones.

"I was a daughter in my world," she murmured, almost to herself. "A cook, a sister, a friend. Here... I'm a stranger in someone else's skin."

Li Shen's voice was softer than usual. "Then make it your own skin."

Wei Rong nodded once. "And your own battlefield."

Fen Yu leaned close, smiling. "And your own kitchen. Don't forget that part."

Ananya laughed despite herself. "You three are impossible."

"Correct," all three said in unison.

And for the first time since waking in silk, Ananya's smile was not just for composure—it was real.

#### *Chapter 4: Fire and smoke*

The Emperor's private pavilion smelled faintly of orchids. The brazier glowed, and a painted screen threw warm shadows across the polished floor.

Lady Zhen leaned lazily against Zhao Rui's shoulder, her hand resting lightly on his sleeve as though she had always belonged there. Her laughter rang soft and sweet as she poured him wine.

"Your Majesty," she murmured, "did you hear the gossip? They say Sister Lian appeared at morning greetings today. Some even whisper she spoke without faltering."

Zhao Rui raised his cup, expression unreadable. "Is that so?"

Lady Zhen tilted her head, eyes gleaming. "She is finally learning to act proper, it seems. But still—everyone knows it is only for show. Even the servants laugh behind their sleeves."

Zhao Rui's lips curved, though not with warmth. "Let her play at composure. It does not change what she is."

Lady Zhen's smile bloomed, bold and beautiful. She leaned closer, voice dropping low. "And what she is not... is the woman you favor."

Zhao Rui set his cup down with a soft clink. His gaze lingered briefly on the steam rising from the wine before he said, flatly, "That will never change."

Her laugh spilled like silk, triumphant. She lifted her own cup to his, eyes shining.

But as the wine slid down Zhao Rui's throat, a single phrase returned to him—quiet, measured, spoken that morning in a hall of frost: The Emperor should never be left lonely.

His hand tightened around the cup. He dismissed the thought with a hard blink.

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Far across the palace, Phoenix Hall was a storm of clattering pots and nervous chatter.

"Bring the cabbage closer!" Su Mei barked as two younger maids shuffled in with baskets. "And someone wash the ginger properly this time—Her Highness doesn't like carelessness."

The kitchen smelled of broth, ginger, and woodsmoke. Fire cracked in the stove, throwing sparks of light onto copper pots.

And at the center of the chaos stood Consort Lian.

Her silk sleeves were pinned back neatly, hairpins still glittering in her bun, though her hands moved with the practiced confidence of someone who had chopped vegetables a thousand times before. She leaned over the cutting board, slicing scallions into fine ribbons with a rhythm that silenced the room.

The maids exchanged wide-eyed glances.

"Her Highness... she really knows how to..." one whispered.

"Careful!" Su Mei hissed. "Don't speak too loudly."

Still, their eyes shone with something close to admiration.

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Meanwhile, the ghosts were in rare form.

Fen Yu zipped around the kitchen like a child at play, her faint figure flickering as she reached for baskets and jars. "Ooooh! Dried mushrooms! I can't taste them, but I remember how chewy they were."

With a dramatic wave, she tipped the basket over just enough to send a few tumbling onto the floor. The maids shrieked, dropping their ladles.

"Who—what—?!"

Ananya—Lian An to the palace, but still Ananya to herself—snatched the basket upright, pressing a hand to her temple. "Fen Yu," she hissed under her breath, "stop tormenting them."

Fen Yu pouted, floating closer. "But it's funny! Their faces look like scared ducks."

Wei Rong, grinning, strode straight through the stove's smoke and lifted a ladle with one hand. The poor scullery maid squealed as it rose into the air by itself.

"Ghosts!" she cried, dropping to her knees.

"Enough!" Ananya snapped softly, glaring at the empty air. "If you want to play, do it somewhere else. Here, we cook. Quietly."

Li Shen appeared at her side, his form more composed, his expression tinged with weary patience. "They are incorrigible. But your broth is well-balanced. Add a little more salt."

Ananya's exasperation eased. She stirred the pot, sprinkled in a pinch, and tasted again. The flavor deepened, rich and warm.

She smiled faintly. "Better."

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The maids crept back to work, stealing glances at their mistress as she stirred the soup with calm focus. They had expected tantrums, arrogance, jewels and vanity. Instead, she moved like someone used to kitchens, used to warmth, used to work.

Su Mei pressed her lips together, pride shining quietly in her eyes.

Her Highness was different now.

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Fen Yu drifted close again, peering into the bubbling pot with big eyes. "Ananya, make a bowl for me! Please?"

"You can't eat it," Ananya muttered.

"I can still pretend!" Fen Yu declared, puffing her cheeks.

Wei Rong barked a laugh. "She'll hover over it all night like a starving cat."

Ananya shook her head, hiding her smile behind the ladle. "If I fed you every time you asked, there would be nothing left for the living."

Fen Yu gasped dramatically. "Heartless!"

Li Shen chuckled softly. "On the contrary. It is the kindest thing she could say."

Ananya stirred the pot, the steam curling against her face. For the first time in this cold palace, she felt something almost like home.

Fire, broth, laughter.

And three spirits who refused to leave her side.

### *Chapter 5: Taste of home*

The warmth of the kitchen still lingered in the air when the eunuch's voice rang across Phoenix Hall.

"His Grace, Duke Lian, arrives to greet Her Majesty, the Queen Consort!"

Lian An set the ladle down with trembling fingers. A current of unease ran through her chest. Her father. Her sister. At least, this body's father and sister.

The screen doors opened.

Duke Lian stepped through, his figure tall and broad-shouldered, his steps heavy with authority. His hair was touched with silver, but the lines on his face did not dim his presence. Yet when his sharp eyes fell upon her, the harshness softened—like steel tempered with fire.

Beside him, Lian Hua all but skipped in, her youthful features lit with relief. She was dressed in pale blue silk, her hair pinned with simple jade, but her expression carried a warmth jewels could never buy.

Ananya's heart twisted painfully.

It wasn't exact. But something in their gazes, in the unguarded love written on their faces, mirrored her parents and sibling from her past life. Her father in the restaurant, steady even when debts pressed on them. Her sister laughing, tugging at her apron, stealing bites of freshly fried dumplings.

They don't know their daughter is gone. And yet... how can I see them and not think of my family?

She drew a steady breath and bowed low. "Father. Sister."

Duke Lian inclined his head with grave dignity. "My daughter."

Lian Hua forgot protocol entirely. She ran to her sister and clasped her hands. "You look so well! I worried night after night—what if the palace was too harsh? But you're radiant!"

Lian An smiled faintly, though her throat ached. "I am well." And from this moment on, I will be your daughter. Truly.

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They sat at the low dining table. Steam curled from the dishes—ginger broth, scallion pancakes golden and crisp, sautéed vegetables glistening with sesame oil.

Lian Hua inhaled deeply and blinked. "Sister... did you—?"

"Yes," Lian An answered gently. "I cooked. Just a little."

The girl's eyes rounded in wonder. "The Queen Consort cooking? If the palace knew—"

"Let them not know," Duke Lian cut in, his tone firm. But he lifted his chopsticks and tasted the broth. For a long moment, silence reigned.

Then, quietly, he said, "This flavor... your mother used to make it. When winters were cruel, and my duties kept me late, she always warmed the house with this soup."

The words pierced through her like an arrow.

In her mind, she saw her other parents in their little restaurant—her mother with rolled-up sleeves ladling soup, her father chuckling as he chopped scallions, steam fogging the windows, warmth banishing the chill outside.

Her eyes stung. She lowered her gaze quickly, taking a sip to mask the tremor in her lips. Two families. Two worlds. But the love feels the same.

Fen Yu drifted close, whispering with shining eyes, "Ananya, this... this is home, isn't it?"

Wei Rong's deep voice rumbled softly, "A hearth, warm and steady. Guard it well, girl."

Li Shen inclined his head. "Even if the thread between lives has twisted, its knot remains. Hold on."

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Lian Hua took a bite of pancake and squealed. "Delicious! Sister, it's better than the palace kitchens. You must cook for me every visit!"

Ananya chuckled softly. "Still greedy."

The girl's cheeks flushed, but she laughed, leaning closer. "If it means eating your food, I'll be greedy forever."

Duke Lian set his bowl down slowly, his gaze resting on her. "You've changed. You've grown stronger. I see it in your eyes."

Her heart squeezed, but her voice was steady. "The palace forces one to grow quickly. But... I will endure."

His large, calloused hand reached across the table, covering hers with gentle weight. "Then remember this. Whatever storms rise here, you still have a home outside these walls. You are not alone."

Her lashes lowered. The tears burned hot, but she did not let them fall. "Yes, Father."

Lian Hua tugged her sleeve. "And you have me! Always. I'll... I'll fight anyone who dares hurt you."

"Fight?" Duke Lian raised a brow.

Lian Hua puffed her cheeks. "Well, maybe not fight. But I'll cry until you fight for me!"

For the first time in weeks, Lian An's laugh rang clear and warm.

Fen Yu dabbed at her eyes dramatically. "Even ghosts envy this kind of love."

Wei Rong looked away, gruff. "Don't make me soft, girl."

Li Shen's faint smile deepened. "She is no longer just enduring. She is living."

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The meal wound down with gentle laughter—Lian Hua sneaking an extra pancake onto her sister's plate, Duke Lian scolding but not hiding the pride in his eyes.

When at last the dishes were cleared, Duke Lian cleared his throat. "There is another purpose to our visit."

Lian An straightened.

"In three nights, our household will host a banquet. We wish to invite you, daughter, and His Majesty, to dine at the Duke's manor. It has been too long since our family gathered. It would honor us to welcome the Emperor—and to welcome you home."

Lian Hua clasped her hands together, eyes shining. "Yes, Sister! Come. I'll hang lanterns and save the best seat by me."

Her chest tightened. Home. They called it home. Even if the soul who belonged to them is gone, they still open their arms to me.

Her voice was soft but resolute. "I will speak to His Majesty. If he agrees, I will come. It would be my joy."

Duke Lian gave a rare, approving nod. "Then it is settled. We shall prepare a feast worthy of our Emperor—and our daughter."

As they rose to leave, his hand pressed firmly to her shoulder. "Endure. And remember—you are never without us."

Her voice wavered, but she held her chin high. "I will remember, Father."

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When their footsteps faded, silence settled in Phoenix Hall.

Ananya pressed her palm to her chest, her heart aching and warm all at once. They are not mine. But today, I decide—I will be theirs. Completely.

Fen Yu twirled, beaming. "Two families in one lifetime. Twice the love. That's a blessing."

Wei Rong smirked faintly. "Better than any crown."

Li Shen's voice was calm, steady. "Then hold to it, Ananya. Because storms are coming."

She nodded, her gaze lifting to the latticed window where the winter light streamed in. Let them come. I will not let this love slip away again.

#### *Chapter 6: Confiscated*

The warmth of her father's visit had barely faded when the air in Phoenix Hall shifted.

Lian An sat in silence, her fingers resting on the table where the bowls of soup had been. The laughter of her sister still echoed faintly in her ears. But the quiet pressed too heavily.

Fen Yu hovered nearby, her eyes solemn. "You can't keep pretending. We know, Ananya."

Lian An looked up sharply. "Know what?"

Li Shen's calm voice cut in, steady and soft. "That you are not the same soul as the one who once lived here. When you opened your eyes, we felt it. Different breath. Different heart."

Her throat tightened. She lowered her gaze. "Then... what should I do?"

Fen Yu leaned closer, her whisper gentle. "Live. This is your life now. Accept it. Be happy."

Wei Rong smirked, though his voice carried weight. "Or leave. Divorce the Emperor, take your dowry, open a restaurant. You cook well enough to survive."

Lian An laughed bitterly. "The palace would never allow it."

Before Li Shen could reply, the doors slammed open.

"By decree of the Empress Dowager!" the eunuch's sharp voice rang. "General Wei has come!"

Boots struck stone as General Wei strode in, flanked by guards. His armor gleamed, his face stern.

"The Queen Consort is ordered to submit to the Purity Rite," he announced. "All personal silver, trinkets, and records are to be confiscated until the rite is complete. By command of the Empress Dowager."

Gasps broke among the maids. Su Mei fell to her knees, pale as paper.

Lian An rose slowly, her sleeves rustling like banners in wind. Her eyes met the general's, sharp and unyielding.

"Confiscated?" she repeated. "For what crime?"

"The harem whispers," General Wei said coldly. "That you carry corruption. That your body may not be clean. The rite will prove truth. Until then, no wealth or freedom will remain in your hands."

Her pulse thundered, but her voice was steady. "So because of rumors, I must kneel before braziers and mirrors like a criminal? Because tongues wag, I must be stripped of dignity?"

Wei Rong growled, invisible at her side. "Strike him down, Ananya! He insults you!"

Fen Yu clung to her sleeve. "Don't—don't anger him too much!"

Li Shen's voice was calm but edged with steel. "Careful. Words can wound as much as swords, but they can also protect."

Lian An stepped forward, her voice carrying through the hall.

"If the Queen Consort of this empire can be dragged through the mud by whispers, then none of us are safe. If lies can chain me, tomorrow they will chain the Empress Dowager herself."

The guards shifted uneasily, but General Wei's face did not flinch. "This is not for you to decide. You will attend the rite. Resist, and you defy Heaven's order."

For a heartbeat, silence rang heavy.

Her fists clenched in her sleeves. "Then let Heaven judge me. But I will not kneel as though already guilty."

The general's eyes flickered—just slightly—at her defiance. Then he turned sharply. "Prepare her. Tomorrow, she faces the Purity Rite."

The soldiers swept forward, seizing the small chest of silver from the corner. The maids wept quietly, bowing low.

When the hall was empty again, Lian An stood in the silence, her chest heaving.

Fen Yu's eyes filled with tears. "Why do they hate you so?"

Wei Rong snarled. "Because they fear what they cannot control."

Li Shen's voice was steady, grave. "Then we must prepare. Tomorrow will decide whether you are chained forever—or rise untouchable."

Lian An drew a long, steady breath. Her voice was quiet, but resolute.

"Then let them see. I will not break."

#### *Chapter 7: Plan*

The echo of General Wei's boots still rang in Phoenix Hall long after he was gone. The chest of silver had been carried away, and the maids still crouched on the floor, too frightened to breathe loudly.

Ananya remained standing in the middle of the hall, her heart pounding in her ears. She forced her voice steady. "They strip me like a criminal, and for what? They don't even tell me the reason."

Fen Yu darted in front of her, fists balled, her round eyes blazing. "It's unfair! It's cruel! They just want to see you fall!"

Wei Rong's jaw clenched, his eyes smoldering. "This is no accident. Someone planted it. Rumors don't grow this fast without poison."

Li Shen's voice, calm as still water, carried the edge of a blade. "And if poison spreads, we must find the hand that poured it."

Ananya turned to them sharply. "But how? I can't even leave this hall now."

Fen Yu floated closer, lowering her voice as though afraid the walls had ears. "You don't have to. We will."

Ananya blinked, startled. "You mean—"

Wei Rong smirked darkly. "Investigate. Slip into corners no one dares. No eyes can catch us. We'll see where the whispers started."

Li Shen gave a single grave nod. "We divide. Soldiers, scribes, maids. Each leaves a trail. By dawn, we'll know who holds the knife."

Ananya's throat tightened. "And if you find something? What then? What proof can ghosts bring me?"

Fen Yu reached out, her hands brushing the air near Ananya's cheek. "Then at least you'll know the truth. You won't fight shadows blind."

Wei Rong barked a laugh. "Don't worry, girl. We'll bite harder than they expect."

For the first time since General Wei's arrival, a faint smile touched her lips. She lowered her eyes, whispering, "Go, then. But return to me."

The three ghosts shared a look, and without another word, they melted into the dark corners of the hall, vanishing like smoke.

Ananya sank onto her seat beside the cold lamp. She lifted her embroidery, but her hands shook too much to guide the needle.

She stared at the cloth in silence. They won't tell me why. They think fear will break me. But I will not bow. Not now.

The hall was still, but in its silence, unseen allies moved through the night.

### *Chapter 8: Whisper in dark*

The palace at night was a restless beast, sighing with the wind through corridors and whispering with the voices of servants who never truly slept.

Li Shen, Wei Rong, and Fen Yu slipped into its veins unseen.

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Li Shen glided into the clerks' wing, where eunuchs bent over scrolls, voices lowered to keep from echoing in the quiet. He listened, his form hovering like smoke above their heads.

"...came from a maid at the Duke's manor."

"She swore she saw the Queen Consort speaking with a merchant in the garden."

"And the proof?"

"A handkerchief. She said it was embroidered with Consort Lian's initials. Handed to him as a token."

The eunuchs muttered nervously, their brushes scratching harder against paper as though the ink itself could carry scandal.

Li Shen's brows furrowed. A handkerchief. A trinket twisted into a blade. He vanished.

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Wei Rong prowled the barracks. Soldiers lounged on mats, laughing, cups of rice wine clinking.

"Did you hear? Consort Lian's finished."

"Gave a merchant a handkerchief, bold as anything. Even stitched her own name on it!"

"The rite will expose her for sure. Serves her right, trying to play noble."

Wei Rong's jaw tightened. He swept his hand across their dice. The pieces scattered, startling the men. They cursed, thinking the wind had cheated them, while Wei Rong melted back into shadow, his fury smoldering.

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Fen Yu slipped between the curtains of the maids' wing. Two girls huddled close, whispering fast.

"...they said Sister Min was the one. She served Consort Lian at the Duke's house."

"But she wouldn't lie, would she?"

"She swore she saw it. A handkerchief, initials and all. That's what she told the palace steward."

"Then it must be true."

Fen Yu's stomach twisted. She fled, wings of her robe flickering in and out like candlelight.

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The three ghosts gathered in a quiet corner of the palace grounds.

Wei Rong spat first. "So that's it. They're hanging her on a scrap of cloth."

Fen Yu's voice trembled. "But why? She never— She doesn't even know what they're saying about her."

Li Shen's gaze was steady. "That is the cruelest part. They don't need her guilt. They only need a story that sounds real."

Wei Rong's hands balled into fists. "We should tell her. Let her know what they're planning."

But Li Shen shook his head. "No. Not yet. Fear will weaken her. Let her walk into the rite with pride, not panic. We will watch. If they present this 'handkerchief,' then we act."

Fen Yu bit her lip, torn, but finally nodded. "Then we protect her. Whatever it takes."

Together they turned back toward Phoenix Hall, their faces grim.

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Inside, Ananya sat alone, her embroidery fallen into her lap. The needle glinted in the lamplight, untouched.

She whispered to herself, "They don't even tell me what I'm accused of. How am I to fight shadows?"

From the darkness, three unseen allies watched her with heavy hearts, carrying a truth too dangerous to lay before her just yet.

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### *Chapter 9: Night before the fire*

The night was heavy with silence. No music from the outer courts, no soft laughter of concubines drifting on the wind — only the rustle of the winter breeze scraping along the shutters of Phoenix Hall.

Ananya sat on the edge of the couch, her back straight though her body begged for rest. The lamplight flickered faintly, casting her reflection into sharp shadows. She had not closed her eyes once since General Wei's boots had shaken the floor.

A shimmer in the air signaled the return of her three unseen companions. Wei Rong materialized first, arms crossed, his expression a storm. Fen Yu trailed after, her glow dim, lips pursed as though holding back tears. Li Shen stood behind them, calm but grave, his form as steady as if carved from the night itself.

Ananya raised her eyes to them. Her voice was soft, but there was no hesitation. "Tell me what you found."

The three exchanged glances.

Wei Rong was the one to break first, his voice low with restrained anger. "They claim you met a merchant in the Duke's manor gardens. That you lingered with him."

Ananya's brows knit, but her voice remained level. "And?"

Li Shen's eyes narrowed slightly, his tone precise. "They say you gave him a token. A handkerchief. Stitched with your initials. Proof, they call it."

The words struck the chamber like a blow. The flame of the lamp shuddered, and even the air seemed to hold its breath.

Ananya stared ahead at her reflection in the bronze mirror. Her lips parted faintly. "A handkerchief..."

Fen Yu burst out, unable to hold back. "It's a lie! They built it so carefully. It sounds believable — something so small, so ordinary. And they'll hold it up and point and say, 'See? Proof!'"

Wei Rong slammed his fist against the wall, the motion rippling through wood that didn't move. "They want you cornered like a fox. A token of affection? They couldn't have picked a sharper knife."

Li Shen's calm voice cut through their fury. "It is dangerous because it is simple. Not outrageous, not wild. A story so plain, people will believe it."

Ananya closed her eyes. For a moment, silence weighed heavy. Then, slowly, memories stirred — not her own, but the body's. The fragments that had flooded her when she first awoke in this world.

She saw a younger girl, adorned in pale silks, walking through her natal courtyard. Everywhere she went, eyes followed. Scholars composed poems for her. Young lords carved trinkets to win her smile. Handkerchiefs, jewelry, fans, even locks of hair — all offered as tokens of devotion. She had accepted none.

Suitors whispered she was like the moon: admired, worshipped, never touched. Her parents had smiled, proud of her unyielding grace.

Ananya's heart squeezed, her breath caught as the memories settled.

Then her own past rose beside them — nights in her family's restaurant, laughter of friends, glances from strangers who lingered too long. She had been admired too, asked to dates, courted with flowers and chocolates. She had smiled politely, and refused all. Her dignity was her shield. Her life had been full, but her heart had never bent.

The lamp flame steadied as she opened her eyes. Her reflection stared back at her, stronger, firmer than before.

"This body and I," she whispered, "we share the same path. Admired, but never swayed. Desired, but never touched. Neither of us gave ourselves away. No lies can rewrite that."

Fen Yu sniffled, tears dripping down her cheeks though they left no marks on the ground. "I knew you were strong, but hearing it from your own lips—it makes me braver."

Wei Rong's mouth curved into a dangerous grin. "Let them wave that cursed handkerchief tomorrow. I'll knock it into the fire before they can finish their words."

Li Shen's eyes softened, his calm voice carrying rare warmth. "Then you are ready. Walk into the hall with pride. If Heaven truly watches, it will not be blind."

Ananya exhaled slowly, letting the weight on her chest transform into steel.

"I am ready," she said simply. "Tomorrow, let them strip me of silver, let them accuse me before the court, let them whisper behind their fans. I will not bend. I will not burn."

The lamp flickered low, shadows bowing across the chamber.

Three ghosts, bound no longer by grief but by loyalty, stood silently around her like unseen sentinels.

And Ananya, once an ordinary girl, now a Queen Consort, sat tall in her white robes — ready to face judgment, not as prey, but as the truth itself.

#### *Chapter 10: the rite of smoke and water*

The first light of dawn spread like a blade across the tiled roofs, gilding the frost with pale silver. The entire Inner Court seemed to hold its breath. Servants whispered in corridors, eunuchs scurried with hurried steps, and the air was heavy with the weight of a trial that had not yet begun.

Inside Phoenix Hall, the atmosphere was no less tense. The maids were silent as they carried in the ceremonial garments.

Su Mei knelt, her hands trembling as she held up the plain robe of white silk. "Your Highness... it is time."

Ananya rose slowly, her expression composed. She stepped into the robe, letting the soft fabric fall against her skin. The maids smoothed the folds with shaking fingers, then gathered her long black hair, binding it high with a single jade pin.

When they stepped back, even they gasped.

"She looks... like snow," one whispered.

"Snow doesn't stain," another replied, her eyes wide.

Ananya said nothing. She looked at her reflection in the bronze mirror — pale, calm, unbowed. "Bring me to the Hall of Clear Sound."

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The courtyard stretched wide before her. Guards stood in rigid lines on either side, spears gleaming under the morning sun. Servants, concubines, and lesser officials had gathered to watch.

As she stepped forward, their whispers fluttered like crows' wings.

"Look how calm she walks."

"Calm? Or resigned?"

"They say she gave a merchant a handkerchief."

"With her initials? Shameless."

"Perhaps she trusts Heaven. We shall see."

The words slid around her like blades, but her stride did not falter.

Unseen by all, three shadows floated close. Wei Rong scowled at the gawkers. "Look at them, all hungry for her fall. Dogs, the lot of them."

Fen Yu wrung her hands, her voice quivering. "I hate this... they look at her like wolves ready to bite."

Li Shen's gaze never left Ananya's back, calm and unwavering. "Let them look. They will see more than they expect."

Ananya almost smiled at the faint whisper of their voices in her ear.

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The Hall of Clear Sound loomed ahead, its great doors carved with phoenixes soaring through clouds. When the guards pulled them open, the weight of solemn silence spilled out.

Inside, the court was assembled in full.

Ministers stood in ordered rows, robes of black and blue rustling like waves. Concubines sat glittering in jewels, their painted eyes sharp with curiosity or malice. At the highest seat, the Empress Dowager rested her hands on the arm of her throne, her face carved in ice.

Beside her sat the Emperor, robes dark as storm clouds, expression unreadable. His gaze swept the hall once, then fixed on nothing, a mask even his closest ministers could not pierce.

As Ananya entered, the murmur of voices died instantly. She walked to the center, the hem of her white robe whispering across the stone, and bowed low.

"Your Majesty. Mother of the Empire."

Her voice was steady, neither defiant nor meek.

Grand Eunuch Gao stepped forward, his staff striking the floor with a sharp crack. "The Queen Consort Lian stands accused of impropriety. Today she will undergo the Purity Rite. Heaven's judgment will reveal truth from lies."

Four great braziers burned at the corners of the altar, incense smoke twisting into the air in strange, curling patterns. Behind them, the purity mirror gleamed, polished so bright it seemed like a pool of still water, waiting to reflect sin or purity.

Ananya stepped into the circle of smoke, every eye upon her.

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A minister stepped forward, his voice ringing through the chamber. "A maid of the Duke's household has testified. She claims that while at her father's manor, the Queen Consort met secretly with a merchant in the garden. That she passed him a handkerchief, embroidered with her own initials. Such a token is the act of lovers, a betrayal of both throne and family."

A ripple of shock ran through the hall. Fans snapped shut. Concubines covered their mouths, whispering.

The Dowager's gaze was cold as steel. "If this is true, then she not only disgraces herself, but she drags shame upon the throne."

Fen Yu's voice trembled in Ananya's ear. "It's so unfair. They speak as though it's already proven."

Wei Rong snarled. "One word more and I'll scatter their scrolls into fire."

Li Shen's voice cut steady and calm. "Patience. Let her speak."

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Ananya lifted her head. Her eyes swept the court, unflinching.

"I have nothing to fear from Heaven's light. If they believe my honor can be broken by scraps of silk and whispers, then let Heaven itself judge me."

Her voice rang clear in the silent hall.

"Begin the rite."

The braziers flared higher, the smoke twisting like serpents. Ministers leaned forward. Concubines held their breath. The Emperor's eyes, for the first time, shifted toward her — dark, searching, unreadable.

And the Purity Rite began.