

Ghost in the palace

#Chapter 21: the dawn escape - Read Ghost in the palace Chapter 21: the dawn escape

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The first bell of dawn had barely rung when pale sunlight began to creep through the silken curtains.

A faint chill lingered in the air, carrying the scent of dew and sandalwood from the garden outside.

Ananya sat by the mirror, dressed in a plain robe of dull brown — the kind a servant might wear. Her long hair was braided simply, tucked beneath a faded scarf. Her reflection hardly looked royal; it looked... invisible.

Behind her stood Meilin, the young servant who had followed her since childhood, now clutching one of Ananya's embroidered gowns with trembling fingers.

"My lady," Meilin whispered, her voice shaking, "if they find out—"

"They won't," Ananya said firmly. "You'll wear my robe, lie in my bed, and tell anyone who enters that I've taken a fever from last night's chill."

Meilin's eyes widened. "A fever?"

"Make it convincing," Ananya said, handing her a damp towel. "Sweat a little if you must."

Fen Yu appeared near the bedpost, floating upside down. "Oh, I can make her look feverish! I'll rattle the windows so the maids think a ghost's angry!"

Wei Rong grumbled. "Please don't. We're trying to avoid attention."

Li Shen, ever calm, turned his fan once. "Better yet, scatter the herbs near the brazier. It'll smell like medicine. No one questions medicine."

Ananya smiled faintly at their chatter. "You see? Even my afterlife advisors agree."

Meilin blinked at the empty air, clearly unable to see the ghosts but sensing the strange chill around her mistress. "You... really plan to leave the estate like this?"

"I must," Ananya said, tying the scarf tightly under her chin. "There's someone waiting for me in the market — and if I don't go, she'll be lost forever."

"But the Duke—"

"My father will forgive me," Ananya interrupted softly. "The palace won't. But some debts must be paid in person."

The Plan in Motion

She turned to her small chest, opened it, and drew out a modest pouch of silver coins and a simple hairpin carved with peach blossoms. She pressed the hairpin into Meilin's hand.

"Keep this near you. If anyone doubts you're me, show them this. And remember: cough occasionally. Convince them I'm too weak to receive visitors."

Meilin swallowed hard. "I'll do it, my lady."

Ananya gave her a small smile. "You always do."

Fen Yu whispered dramatically, "It's like a play! She's the decoy princess!"

Wei Rong smirked. "More like the terrified heroine."

Li Shen's lips curved faintly. "And our queen plays both parts well."

Ananya glanced at the window where pale dawn light shimmered through the lattice. "We have little time. The outer servants will rise soon."

She crossed to the hidden panel behind the screen — a small servant's passage used by gardeners and delivery boys. It smelled faintly of dust and oil.

Fen Yu drifted ahead, peering down the corridor. "All clear! Except a sleepy cat and one snoring guard!"

Wei Rong cracked his knuckles. "I can handle the guard."

Ananya frowned. "No haunting."

Wei Rong sighed. "Just... gentle intimidation?"

"None," she said firmly, suppressing a smile.

The Disguise

Before stepping into the passage, she pulled her scarf higher, covering half her face. The plain robe hung loosely around her shoulders, hiding the fine silk beneath.

For a brief second, she paused, looking back at the room — at the bed where Meilin now lay, feigning illness under a thin blanket, her face pale under a sheen of water.

"Thank you," Ananya whispered.

Meilin bowed her head, voice trembling. "Come back safe, my lady."

Ananya hesitated just long enough to let the words sink in — then slipped into the passage, closing the panel behind her with a soft click.

Through the Servant Halls

The narrow hallway smelled of damp wood and tea leaves.

Morning light filtered through cracks in the shutters, drawing thin golden lines across the floor.

Ananya moved quickly but quietly, her steps practiced and measured. Every corner felt like a heartbeat too loud, every sound a threat.

Fen Yu floated ahead, darting from shadow to shadow like a mischievous lantern. "The coast is clear! Oh wait—no—two maids coming with buckets!"

Ananya ducked behind a stack of rice sacks, holding her breath. The maids passed, yawning and gossiping.

"...the Queen Consort hasn't come down yet. They say she caught a chill last night."

"Again? Poor thing. She's so fragile."

The maids laughed softly and vanished down the hall.

Ananya let out the breath she'd been holding. "Looks like Meilin's doing her part."

Li Shen's tone carried quiet admiration. "Efficient. You trained your people well."

Wei Rong snorted. "They think she's fragile. If only they knew."

The Escape

They reached the back garden gate — a small wooden door hidden behind rows of jasmine vines.

A single sleepy guard leaned on his spear, fighting to keep his eyes open.

Fen Yu peeked around the corner. "He's half-asleep. One push and he'll nap standing up."

Ananya smiled faintly. "No violence. Just distraction."

She picked up a pebble and tossed it gently toward the opposite wall. It clinked softly, echoing down the corridor.

The guard straightened. "What was that?"

Fen Yu darted ahead, swirling the vines with ghostly wind. The jasmine flowers rustled.

The guard blinked, rubbed his eyes, and stumbled off toward the noise.

"Good work," Ananya whispered.

Fen Yu puffed out her chest proudly. "Team effort!"

She slipped through the gate, the cool air outside brushing against her face.

For the first time in months, she stood beneath open sky — no palace walls, no painted ceilings, only the endless blue-grey dawn stretching before her.

Wei Rong's voice softened unexpectedly. "You're free. For now."

Ananya pulled her scarf tighter, stepping onto the narrow path that wound down toward the market road. "Not free," she murmured. "Just unseen."

A New Morning

As she walked, the sun finally broke over the horizon.

Golden light spilled across the roofs of the sleeping city. Merchants were just beginning to open their stalls, the sound of wooden shutters creaking like yawns.

Li Shen's tone held quiet amusement. "You realize the Emperor would burn the heavens if he saw you walking like this."

Ananya smiled faintly beneath her scarf. "Then it's good he can't see everything."

Fen Yu twirled beside her, giddy with the morning breeze. "We're really going to buy a shop! You'll be a secret businesswoman, Ananya!"

"Not me," she said. "Her. Yao Qing. I'll just... guide her from the shadows."

Wei Rong chuckled low. "You sound like a ghost yourself."

Ananya looked toward the city gates, where the scent of fresh bread drifted faintly in the air. "Then perhaps that's the safest way to live."

Chapter 22: buns and new path

Morning light spilled over the rooftops, chasing away the mist that lingered between the narrow streets of the capital.

Vendors were already shouting prices for steamed buns and sweet tea, their voices rising above the clatter of carts.

The smell of breakfast filled the air — warm, familiar, tempting.

Too tempting for three hungry ghosts.

The Ghosts and the Buns

Fen Yu hovered above a bamboo basket overflowing with steaming buns.

Her eyes gleamed. "They smell divine... just one bite!"

Wei Rong folded his arms. "You don't even have a stomach."

"Then I'll eat with my soul!" she declared and snatched one.

Within seconds, half a dozen buns floated mysteriously through the air. The vendor's mouth fell open.

"By the heavens! My buns are flying!"

Panic rippled through the crowd. People gasped, dropped their coins, and began praying loudly.

Down the lane, Ananya froze.

Six buns hovered toward her like obedient messengers from chaos itself.

"Oh no..." she muttered, catching them before anyone noticed.

Fen Yu appeared beside her, proud. "I brought breakfast!"

Ananya pressed a palm to her forehead. "You nearly caused a riot for breakfast."

Wei Rong's deep laugh rumbled. "Worth it."

Li Shen sighed softly. "Perhaps next time we steal something less dramatic — like rice."

Ananya lowered her scarf and whispered sharply, "No more stealing. If anyone sees food floating again, I'll trap you all in temple bells."

Fen Yu gasped. "Cruel!"

"Deserved," Ananya said, hiding the buns in her satchel as the vendor bowed toward the sky, muttering blessings for the 'benevolent spirits.'

At the corner of the spice lane, Yao Qing waited, cloaked in dull green and looking around anxiously.

Her face lit up the moment she saw Ananya.

"You came," she breathed, relief softening her eyes.

"I said I would." Ananya smiled behind her scarf and handed her one of the buns. "Don't ask where it came from."

Yao Qing blinked, then laughed quietly. "You still bring food no matter where life throws you."

"It's my curse," Ananya replied with mock seriousness, then glanced at her surroundings. "You found something?"

Yao Qing nodded. "A place near the bridge — old, but the broker said it might suit what we need. There's a hall where people used to eat, a kitchen, two rooms, even a small bath at the back."

Ananya's gaze brightened. "Then that's where we're going."

Fen Yu floated between them eagerly. "A new kitchen! I call the biggest pot!"

Wei Rong snorted. "You'd haunt it."

Li Shen's voice was calm but amused. "Let her. A kitchen blessed by mischief stays alive."

Ananya shook her head, smiling despite herself. "Let's go before she steals something else."

The streets grew quieter as they left the crowded market.

The smell of spices faded, replaced by the clean scent of river air.

The bridge came into view — its old stone arches glinting faintly under the sun.

On the far end, tucked between a candle-maker's shop and an abandoned tea stall, stood a small building half-hidden by ivy.

The wooden signboard was blank from age; the door leaned slightly on its hinges. But sunlight spilled from the cracks, and faint traces of sesame and broth still clung to the walls — ghosts of meals once served.

Ananya stopped before it, heart beating softly. "This is it."

Yao Qing hesitated. "It looks forgotten."

Ananya stepped forward, pushing the creaking door open. "Forgotten things just wait for new hands."

The air smelled of old wood and pepper. Dust swirled through a beam of golden light from the latticed window.

The hall stretched long and narrow — space enough for four tables, maybe six if they squeezed.

A small kitchen opened through an arch on the left, with a clay stove, a cracked counter, and shelves begging for new jars.

Down a short corridor, two rooms waited — one still holding a small bedframe, the other empty except for a stool.

Behind them, a tiny bath area with a copper basin caught the sun like firelight.

Yao Qing's voice softened. "It's small... but it feels peaceful."

Ananya touched the edge of the stove, smiling faintly. "Peaceful is enough."

Fen Yu twirled happily above the counter. "We could hang lanterns here! And flowers!"

Wei Rong smirked. "Or traps for anyone who dares overcook rice."

Li Shen's tone was calm. "For the first time in weeks, you're all smiling. That's worth something."

Ananya looked around one more time, eyes glimmering in the golden dust.

Her voice came soft, almost to herself. "Maybe this is where we begin again."

The light from the window stretched across the floor like a promise.

Outside, the river murmured, carrying the sound of life past the forgotten bridge.

And inside, for the first time since her rebirth, Ananya felt the world breathe quietly beside her — full of laughter, ghosts, and hope.

Chapter 23: purchase

The air in the small shop still smelled faintly of sesame, dust, and old dreams.

Golden sunlight streamed through the cracks in the latticed window, spilling warmth across the worn counter where Ananya rested her palm.

She exhaled slowly, gazing at the walls, the uneven floorboards, the way the light hit the far corner near the stove.

"This could be home," she murmured.

Yao Qing smiled faintly, brushing dust off a broken chair. "It already feels like one."

Fen Yu twirled gleefully in the sunlight. "Our very own shop! I can haunt the kitchen!"

Wei Rong rolled his eyes. "And I'll haunt the customers if they don't pay."

Li Shen's calm voice carried quiet amusement. "Let's buy it before you start scaring off future profits."

As if on cue, footsteps echoed outside.

A round, sweating man stepped through the doorway, his robe dusted with flour from the market streets. "Ah! So you found it! Yes, yes, this is the property I mentioned. Still solid, no termites, honest walls."

Ananya turned, composed and polite. "You're the broker?"

He bowed quickly. "Master Jin, at your service. Fine spaces for fine customers. The previous owner retired to the south. Left everything to his cousin, who needs silver quickly. Lucky timing, eh?"

Wei Rong muttered. "He says that to everyone."

Fen Yu whispered, "He looks like he eats half the deals he makes."

Ananya kept her voice level. "You said it's for sale, not rent."

"Yes, yes." Jin rubbed his palms together. "The cousin's asking fifty taels. Price for a lifetime. You own it outright, no rent, no interference. A bargain if you ask me."

"Fifty taels for cracked beams and a leaking roof?" Ananya replied, her tone smooth as silk. "I've seen palaces with fewer holes."

He blinked. "Palaces don't come with river views."

Ananya stepped toward the window, glancing out at the slow water glinting beneath the bridge. "Forty."

Jin shook his head. "Forty? Lady, that barely covers the land paper."

"Forty," she repeated. "Paid in full, today. No debts, no questions, no gossip."

The broker hesitated, eyes flicking between the women. There was something in Ananya's gaze — calm, unwavering, commanding.

Finally, greed overpowered pride. "Forty-five. Final offer."

Ananya met Yao Qing's eyes, and the younger woman nodded once.

"Done," Ananya said.

Jin nearly tripped over his robe rushing to draw up the contract. He produced the property papers — aged parchment with faded seals — and spread them across the counter.

"Sign here," he said, pointing. "And here. Full ownership, no rent, taxes already cleared for the year. When you sign, this shop is yours."

Ananya turned to Yao Qing. "Your name goes on the document."

Yao Qing blinked. "Mine?"

"Yes," Ananya said softly. "If my name appears, someone in the palace might notice the trail. This way, you stay free, and so do I."

Her voice gentled. "This will be your protection — your new life."

Yao Qing hesitated, eyes bright with emotion. "You're giving me everything. I don't know how to thank you."

Ananya smiled. "Live honestly. Work hard. That's thanks enough."

Yao Qing took the brush with trembling hands and signed her name carefully, the strokes of ink trembling slightly but sure.

Jin pressed the red wax seal onto the parchment, folded it neatly, and handed her the deed with a wide grin. "Congratulations, Madam Yao. You are now the proud owner of this fine establishment."

He placed a small brass key on the counter. It gleamed faintly in the sun. "And that, my ladies, is your door to fortune."

When Jin left, the door creaked shut, leaving only the soft sound of the river outside.

Dust floated lazily through the sunlight. The air felt different now — lighter, yet heavier with meaning.

Yao Qing stared down at the key in her palm. "I can't believe it. It's really ours."

Ananya nodded, her voice calm but full of quiet pride. "Not borrowed. Not gifted. Earned."

Fen Yu drifted closer, eyes shining. "You really bought it? We're landowners!"

Wei Rong grinned. "Better than the Emperor's palace — he can't even leave his own walls."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Freedom smells like old wood and sunlight."

Ananya took the key from Yao Qing's hand and turned it slowly, watching the light catch on its surface.

"This key," she said softly, "isn't just for a door. It's for everything we've lost — and what we'll build again."

She looked around the small, dusty hall: the narrow tables waiting to be set, the old stove waiting for fire, the quiet corners waiting for laughter.

"It will be called The Whispering Bowl," she said. "A place where no one asks, only listens."

Yao Qing smiled through her tears. "Then let's open it soon."

Ananya nodded. "Tomorrow we start cleaning. Today... let's just breathe."

Sunlight stretched across the floor, warm and golden.

The ghosts hovered quietly, for once without mischief, watching the two women who had turned dust into hope.

Fen Yu whispered softly, almost reverently. "You did it."

Ananya smiled faintly. "No," she said, "we did."

And as the river murmured outside, the sound of possibility filled the tiny shop.

Chapter 24: purchasing

By the time Ananya and Yao Qing left the shop, the sun hung high in the sky, beating down on the bustling capital streets.

Vendors shouted prices, rickshaw wheels rattled over cobblestones, and the air was heavy with the scent of sesame oil, sugar syrup, and fresh-cut bamboo.

Ananya adjusted her scarf, squinting at the rows of shops. "We'll need almost everything—tables, chairs, a stove, spices, and some seeds for the garden behind the shop."

Fen Yu clapped her translucent hands. "A garden! I'll grow flowers!"

Wei Rong snorted. "You'll scare them into blooming early."

Li Shen's voice came softly, "Let her dream. Gardens remember kindness."

Ananya hid a small smile. "Then let's start before the market closes."

They reached a stretch lined with carpenters, the rhythmic clatter of chisels filling the air.

Planks of polished wood gleamed in the sunlight; sawdust floated like fine mist.

The master carpenter looked up from his bench. "Looking for furniture, ladies?"

Ananya nodded. "Four tables, eight chairs. Strong, not fancy. And a long bench for the kitchen."

The man rubbed his chin. "Maple wood, sturdy, lasts through storms. Forty coins for the lot."

"Thirty-five," Ananya replied calmly. "And you'll deliver it by evening."

The carpenter chuckled. "You bargain like my mother. Fine, thirty-five. But you owe me tea when your shop opens."

"Done."

Fen Yu spun in delight. "We're going to have real tables! No more floating plates!"

Wei Rong rolled his eyes. "You can't even sit."

"I can hover politely," she huffed.

Their next stop was the blacksmith's lane, where smoke coiled from forges and the clang of iron rang out like music.

Ananya inspected the stoves — large, round, with adjustable vents for heat.

"This one," she said, touching the smooth edge of a clay-and-iron hybrid. "Compact, perfect for our kitchen."

The smith grinned. "You've got a sharp eye, miss. It's a good make — three taels."

"Two and a half," she countered without missing a beat.

He laughed. "You'd rob a saint. Two and eight."

Ananya smiled slightly. "Done."

Wei Rong murmured, "I like this side of her."

Li Shen's calm voice followed, "This side was always there. The palace just never looked for it."

They loaded the stove onto a small handcart along with copper pots, a large ladle, and an iron wok polished smooth as glass.

The smell of pepper, cumin, and dried orange peel filled the air.

Ananya lifted a handful of star anise and inhaled deeply — sweet, sharp, comforting.

"These," she said, nodding to the merchant. "And a little turmeric, dried chili, and sesame."

Yao Qing held up a pouch. "Do we need more salt?"

"We'll take coarse salt," Ananya said. "Cheaper, and better for storage."

Fen Yu sniffed theatrically. "All this talk of food and no one feeds me."

Wei Rong teased, "You'd season yourself if you could."

Li Shen added mildly, "You already have too much spice."

Ananya shook her head, amused. "If you three came back to life, you'd argue over breakfast."

Their last stop was a small stall on the quieter end of the street, where an old woman sold vegetable seeds.

Bundles of herbs and garlic hung from the roof, and jars of tiny seeds gleamed like pearls under the light.

Ananya crouched beside the baskets. "How much for these mint seeds?"

The old woman smiled, her eyes kind. "For you, child, take them with coriander and radish — good for spring planting."

Ananya hesitated. "No, I'll pay."

"Then pay me with a smile," the woman said, tying the small pouch of seeds. "May they grow strong."

Ananya bowed her head slightly, her voice soft. "Thank you."

As they walked away, Yao Qing glanced over. "You're really going to plant them?"

"In the backyard," Ananya said. "Fresh herbs make simple meals feel rich. And tending them... might make me feel human again."

Fen Yu hovered low, humming. "I'll water them! With ghost rain!"

Wei Rong muttered, "That's called dew, idiot."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "Let her think she's helping."

By the time the sun tilted westward, their handcart was overflowing — new tables, chairs, a stove, pots, sacks of flour, and a small pouch of seeds resting on top like treasure.

Yao Qing wiped sweat from her forehead. "If we keep going like this, the shop will be ready in two days."

Ananya smiled lightly. "If the ghosts don't break everything first."

Fen Yu gasped. "We'd never! Well... not on purpose."

Wei Rong snorted. "Yet."

The city glowed gold in the afternoon haze as they crossed the old stone bridge. The water below rippled, reflecting light like glass.

Then Ananya slowed.

Near the end of the bridge, by a shuttered food stall, two children sat — a thin boy and girl, clothes torn, knees drawn up to their chests.

Their faces were pale, eyes dull with hunger, but they watched every passerby with silent hope.

Ananya paused, her expression unreadable beneath her scarf.

Even Fen Yu went still, her glow dimming slightly.

For a heartbeat, no one spoke. The noise of the city faded behind them, replaced by the soft whisper of the wind over the bridge.

Ananya's gaze lingered on the children for a moment longer — then she turned back toward The Whispering Bowl, her steps slower, more thoughtful than before.