

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 25: the small beginning

The sun had already slipped behind the rooftops when Ananya returned to The Whispering Bowl.

The little shop was quiet, painted gold by the dying light. The smell of new wood lingered in the air, mingling with faint traces of rice and dust.

Yao Qing had gone to rest, leaving the room silent except for the faint crackle of the lamp flame.

Ananya unwrapped the day's purchases — spices, beans, herbs — and stacked them neatly on the counter. Her fingers brushed the clay stove, cool and unused.

She paused, remembering the children from the bridge — their hollow eyes, their silence.

Without hesitation, she pulled out a pot and began to cook.

She filled the small pot with rice and water, adding sliced ginger and a few beans for flavor. The fire caught slowly, flickering like a heartbeat in the dim room.

She stirred quietly, her movements unhurried but deliberate. The smell of boiling rice filled the kitchen, warm and comforting — the scent of something simple, human, alive.

When the porridge thickened, she ladled it into two bowls, wrapped them carefully in a clean cloth, and tucked them into a small woven basket.

Her eyes softened. "You shouldn't have to starve," she murmured, as if speaking to the night itself.

Then she lifted her cloak, slipped the basket under her arm, and stepped out into the cooling dusk.

The marketplace had nearly emptied, its noise replaced by the hum of crickets and the faint rush of the river.

Lanterns glowed along the bridge, their reflections trembling on the water's surface like tiny moons.

The children were still there — huddled together, too still, their heads bowed.

The boy stirred at the sound of footsteps, his small body tensing.

Ananya slowed, keeping her voice soft. "You're still awake."

He straightened immediately, eyes sharp with caution. "We weren't doing anything wrong."

"I know," she said gently, setting the basket down before them. "You haven't eaten since morning, have you?"

The boy hesitated, his lips pressed into a thin line. "We don't take from strangers."

"Then don't think of it as taking," she replied. "Think of it as sharing."

She opened the basket, letting the warm scent of rice and ginger drift into the cool air. The girl lifted her head, her eyes wide with disbelief.

Ananya smiled softly. "Eat while it's still hot."

The twins exchanged a quick glance before the boy finally reached forward, lifting a bowl and handing it carefully to his sister.

They ate quietly, both polite even in their hunger — chewing slowly, as if afraid the food might vanish if they were too greedy.

When the bowls were nearly empty, Ananya asked, "What are your names?"

"I'm Lian," the boy said softly. "And she's Lin."

"How old are you?"

"Twelve," he replied. "We're twins."

"Where are your parents?"

Lin's voice trembled. "They... they died at the border."

Lian lowered his gaze, fingers tightening around the clay bowl. "Our father worked at the granary in the north. When fighting started, everything burned. He went to help people escape. He didn't come back."

Ananya felt her heart twist. "And you walked here?"

He nodded. "There was nowhere else to go."

For a long moment, silence settled between them. The night breeze brushed through their hair, carrying the faint scent of river reeds.

Ananya finally spoke, her voice soft but steady. "You shouldn't stay here. It's dangerous at night. Come with me."

Lin blinked. "With you?"

"Yes. I have a small place — warm, safe. You can sleep there tonight."

Lian shook his head quickly. "We can't. We'll be trouble for you."

Ananya's smile was gentle. "Then let me decide what's trouble and what's not."

The twins hesitated only a moment longer before they stood. Lian picked up the empty bowls, unsure what to do with them, and Ananya took them back with a quiet thank-you.

They followed her across the bridge in silence, their steps cautious but growing steadier with each one.

The city had grown darker, the last of the vendors gone, and only the lantern light guided them along the narrow alleys.

When they reached The Whispering Bowl, Ananya pushed open the wooden door and gestured them inside.

The warmth from the lingering fire wrapped around them like a soft blanket.

"You can sleep in that corner tonight," she said, pointing toward a small space near the stove. "There's an old blanket in the chest."

Lin stared at her, her voice small. "You're really letting us stay?"

"Only for tonight," Ananya said lightly, though her tone carried quiet affection. "We'll talk about tomorrow when morning comes."

The twins exchanged a glance — disbelief mixed with fragile relief — before settling quietly in the corner.

Ananya placed the empty bowls by the sink, then sat down at the table, watching them drift into exhausted sleep.

The lamp flame flickered gently, throwing shadows across the new wooden walls.

A tired smile touched her lips. "Maybe this place will finally feel alive," she whispered to herself.

Outside, the night wind passed softly over the shop sign, rustling the carved letters of The Whispering Bowl,

as if whispering back — It already does.