

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 26: a place to stay

Morning light crept gently across the shutters of The Whispering Bowl, turning the wooden walls golden.

Birds chattered somewhere near the riverbank, and the scent of damp earth and boiled rice hung faintly in the air.

Inside the shop, everything was still — except for two small figures huddled in a blanket by the stove.

The twins, Lian and Lin, slept so quietly that for a moment it was hard to believe they were even breathing.

The door to the back room slid open. Yao Qing stepped out, tying her hair, still half-asleep.

She froze when she saw them. "What in Heaven's name...?"

Before she could call out, Ananya appeared from the small kitchen corner, holding a pot of steaming tea.

Her calm eyes met Yao Qing's startled ones. "Don't be alarmed. They're with me."

"With you?" Yao Qing whispered, looking between the children and her. "An'an, where did they come from?"

Ananya set the pot down, her voice quiet but steady. "From the bridge. I saw them yesterday — hungry, alone. Their parents died near the border."

Yao Qing's expression softened instantly. "The border?"

Ananya nodded. "Their father worked at the granary before it burned. They walked here when the fighting reached their town."

For a long moment, Yao Qing said nothing. Then she sighed. "The world grows crueler every season."

Ananya poured her a cup of tea, her hands graceful and steady. "They'll stay here. We can give them work — cleaning, errands, helping in the kitchen. Nothing heavy."

Yao Qing looked up sharply. "Work? You mean to keep them?"

Ananya's smile was faint but firm. "Yes. This shop needs more than tables and chairs to come alive. It needs people who understand hunger."

Yao Qing's eyes softened. "You always take in strays, don't you?"

"Maybe I just remember what it felt like to be one," Ananya replied quietly.

A faint rustle came from the corner. Lin stirred first, blinking against the light.

She sat up slowly, clutching the blanket around her small shoulders. Beside her, Lian woke with a start, immediately alert, eyes scanning the unfamiliar room.

Ananya walked over, her steps light. "You're awake," she said with a smile.

Lian got to his feet quickly. "We're sorry! We didn't mean to fall asleep here!"

"You were supposed to," Ananya said gently. "And you can stay as long as you need."

The boy froze, staring at her in confusion. "Stay?"

"Yes." She crouched so they were eye-level. "But not for free."

Lin blinked, nervous. "What do you mean?"

Ananya smiled softly. "You'll work here. Help with cleaning, errands, whatever needs doing. And you'll eat three meals a day, no skipping. Agreed?"

Lian stared at her as if she'd spoken in another language. "We can work?"

"Of course." She glanced at Yao Qing, who was watching with quiet amusement. "This is my friend. You'll listen to her when I'm not around."

Yao Qing knelt beside them, her voice gentle. "We'll need help cleaning the tables and running to the market. Think you can manage that?"

Lin nodded so hard her braid bounced. "Yes, madam!"

"Don't call me madam," Yao Qing laughed. "Call me Sister Qing."

When Yao Qing went to open the front shutters, Ananya led the twins toward the small rooms at the back.

One was empty except for a folded mat and a chest.

"This will be yours," she said. "It's small, but it's safe."

Lin ran her hand along the wooden wall, eyes wide. "Our own room?"

Ananya nodded. "You'll share until we can make space for another."

Lian looked at her, still hesitant. "Why are you doing this for us?"

Ananya's gaze softened. "Because once, someone did it for me."

For a long moment, the boy just stood there, staring at her as if memorizing her face.

Then he bowed deeply, his voice low. "We'll work hard, miss. I promise."

"I know you will," she said, resting a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Now go wash up. Breakfast will be ready soon."