

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 27: ghostly chaos

By midmorning, The Whispering Bowl was a storm of activity.

Sunlight poured through the open shutters, dust sparkled in the beams, and laughter echoed between the newly polished walls.

Buckets of paint lined the floor, brushes stuck out from bowls, and Yao Qing stood with her sleeves rolled up to her elbows, holding a cloth like a weapon.

"We'll start with the walls," she declared. "Then the tables, then the sign outside. And no one leaves until this place looks like a real shop."

Lian saluted awkwardly. "Yes, Sister Qing!"

Lin giggled, her small hands already clutching a brush almost as tall as she was.

Ananya stood in the middle of it all, watching with quiet amusement. She'd tied her hair with a ribbon, her pale robe tucked neatly at her waist, sleeves rolled up just enough to show she meant business.

"All right," she said calmly. "Let's see if we can survive this without turning each other into paintbrushes."

It started simply — sweeping dust, wiping counters, washing windows.

Then the ghosts arrived.

Fen Yu floated in first, wide-eyed. "It's so bright! Did you open Heaven's door?"

Wei Rong appeared next, smirking. "So this is what you've been doing while we were gone — nesting."

Li Shen followed quietly, his translucent form shimmering faintly. "It's cleaner than the palace kitchens. I'm impressed."

Ananya didn't even look up from her sweeping. "If you're impressed, grab a broom."

Wei Rong blinked. "You'd make a fearsome general."

"Only when my soldiers float instead of work."

Fen Yu giggled and picked up a wet cloth — which immediately slipped through her ghostly fingers and splattered paint across the floor.

Yao Qing gasped. "Who did that?!"

Lian froze mid-brush. "Not me!"

Ananya pressed her lips together to hide a smile. "Just the wind," she said quickly.

Lin squinted at the moving cloth. "That's... some strong wind, miss."

By midday, they'd managed to wash half the floor and paint one wall — mostly without disaster.

Then Wei Rong decided the shop looked "too quiet."

He blew gently across a bowl of paint, sending a spray of white droplets across the newly cleaned table.

Yao Qing shrieked. "Who—who did this?!"

Ananya sighed softly, her brush pausing mid-stroke. "The wind again."

"The wind," Yao Qing muttered, glaring at the perfectly round splashes on her skirt, "has terrible aim."

Fen Yu tried to help by picking up a wet rag — and accidentally swung it straight through Lin's hair.

The little girl squealed, jumping three steps back. "Something cold touched me!"

Lian dropped his brush, brandishing the broom like a sword. "Who's there?!"

Ananya quickly stepped forward, hiding her laugh behind her sleeve. "Calm down. Just the draft. These old buildings are full of them."

From the corner, Wei Rong whispered to Fen Yu, "She's covering for us again."

Fen Yu beamed. "She must love us."

"Or she's too tired to yell," Li Shen murmured.

Despite the chaos, the shop began to change.

The dull walls turned warm cream; the wooden tables gleamed under a new coat of polish.

Lin hummed softly as she worked, leaving streaks of paint across her cheeks, while Lian stood on a stool to hang a small lantern by the window.

Ananya mixed herbs into a bowl of water, the faint scent of mint and clove filling the air.

When Yao Qing sniffed curiously, Ananya said, "It'll keep insects away. My grandmother used to do it."

Yao Qing smiled. "You're full of old tricks."

Ananya's eyes softened. "They're the kind that keep places like this alive."

Fen Yu floated quietly above them, watching the scene unfold. "It feels like a home," she whispered.

Wei Rong rolled his eyes but didn't disagree.

Li Shen folded his hands behind his back, his voice faint. "She's building more than a shop."

By sunset, everyone was exhausted. The twins collapsed against the wall, covered in paint and laughter. Yao Qing leaned on a chair, fanning herself dramatically.

Ananya stood by the doorway, gazing out at the lanterns flickering to life along the street.

A faint smile touched her lips — soft, satisfied, the kind that comes only after honest work.

The ghosts hovered quietly behind her.

Fen Yu sighed dreamily. "I like it here."

Wei Rong stretched. "Don't get too sentimental."

Li Shen said nothing, only watching as Ananya brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear, her expression peaceful for the first time in weeks.

From the corner, Lin yawned. "Miss Ananya?"

"Yes?"

"Can we call this home now?"

Ananya turned to her, her smile gentle but sure. "Yes," she said softly. "You can."