

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 28: the ledger

The moon hung low over the city, half-veiled by drifting clouds.

The palace slept, but The Whispering Bowl glowed faintly in the darkness — its single lamp still burning.

Ananya sat by the window, her hair undone, a quiet resolve hardening behind her calm eyes.

She'd been listening all evening — to rumors carried by Yao Qing, whispers from merchants, and small slips of information the twins had overheard at the market.

Each thread pointed in the same direction — the border was starving.

And worse, someone was making sure it stayed that way.

Her fingers tightened around the edge of her robe. "My father can't fight what he can't see," she murmured.

Across the room, the air rippled faintly — three figures materialized, pale in the lamplight.

Li Shen's calm eyes met hers first. Wei Rong leaned lazily against the wall, and Fen Yu hovered just above the table, her glow flickering with curiosity.

Wei Rong grinned. "You've been thinking too long, Ananya. Who are we haunting tonight?"

She looked up at them. "Not haunting. Helping."

Fen Yu tilted her head. "Helping who?"

"My father," Ananya said softly. "He's still in the Duke's residence. He'll be the first to believe the truth if he sees it himself."

Li Shen's expression sharpened. "You want us to retrieve something."

"Yes," she said. "The proof of what's happening at the border — ledgers, letters, anything that shows who's stealing from the army. I want it on my father's desk before dawn."

Wei Rong crossed his arms, intrigued. "That means entering the Palace Bureau of Trade. Guarded night and day."

Fen Yu's glow brightened. "But ghosts don't need doors."

Ananya smiled faintly. "Exactly. You can go where others can't."

She stood, walking closer, her tone soft but firm. "You've saved me before. Now I'm asking you to save more than just me."

For a heartbeat, the three spirits said nothing. Then Li Shen bowed slightly. "It shall be done."

Midnight draped the capital in silver shadows as the three ghosts glided through the air, silent as mist.

The palace gates stood locked, guarded by soldiers who shivered though the air was still.

Fen Yu's laughter danced like wind in the reeds as they passed through the gates without sound or shape.

Inside, the Bureau of Trade was quiet — only the faint scratching of a scribe's brush could be heard.

The ghosts slipped through the wall and into the archive hall, where stacks of ledgers lined the shelves in endless rows.

Li Shen's sharp gaze scanned the marks. "Here — the border shipments."

Wei Rong passed through the shelves, his hand brushing faintly against a roll of parchment. "Someone's hiding something. This section feels cold."

Fen Yu drifted down, pressing her translucent hand to the ledger's cover. A faint shimmer pulsed beneath her fingers — a hidden seal.

With a whisper, the lock cracked open. The smell of old ink and sandalwood spilled into the air.

They turned the pages. Inside were the records — shipments rerouted, signatures forged, and at the corner, a small red phoenix sigil.

Li Shen's eyes darkened. "The Chen family."

Wei Rong's smirk vanished. "The Emperor's mistress's kin. No wonder the soldiers starve."

Fen Yu looked stricken. "If we show this to the wrong person, they'll burn it."

Li Shen closed the ledger carefully. "That's why she told us who should see it."

They carried the ledger out under the pale moonlight, their forms flickering faintly in the wind.

Past the palace gates, past the quiet streets — until they reached the Duke's residence.

The guards at the gate felt only a chill and drew their cloaks tighter.

Inside the Duke's study, the lamp burned low, the man himself bent over maps, frustration deepening in his eyes.

The ledger drifted silently from Fen Yu's hands onto his desk, landing with a soft thud.

Ink shimmered faintly where ghostly fingers had touched it.

The Duke looked up sharply. "What—?"

No answer. The window rattled once in the wind.

He frowned, standing slowly, his eyes narrowing at the unfamiliar book.

He hadn't heard the door, nor the footsteps. But curiosity won over fear.

When he opened the cover, the breath caught in his throat.

"This... these are military records. And this seal—" His fingers brushed the phoenix mark. "The Chen family?"

He flipped through page after page, every line unraveling a web of deception — forged tallies, stolen grain, bribes masked as donations.

His voice trembled with controlled fury. "They're feeding the border with lies."

For a moment, he hesitated.

Who had brought him this?

Why now?

But when he looked around, the room was silent again.

The only movement came from the flame of the candle — which flared once, bright as lightning, before returning to normal.

The Duke tightened his grip on the ledger. "Whoever you are... I owe you truth."

Back in The Whispering Bowl, Ananya stood by the open window, waiting.

The air stirred softly, and the faint shimmer of light told her enough.

"They delivered it?" she asked.

Li Shen bowed. "He's reading it now."

Wei Rong stretched. "Almost scared the old man out of his skin."

Fen Yu smiled softly. "He looked... proud, though. When he saw it."

Ananya's lips curved faintly, her eyes soft. "He'll take it to the Emperor by morning."

Li Shen's gaze lingered on her. "You understand this might bring danger — to him, to you."

"I know," she said quietly. "But truth always does."

The moonlight spilled over her face as she looked out toward the sleeping palace.

"Let the court play their games," she whispered. "I'll play mine — with the living and the dead."

And outside, the wind carried her words away — toward the palace gates, where destiny was already stirring.