

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 30: before the dawn

The roosters had not yet cried, and the lanterns outside The Whispering Bowl still flickered faintly against the sleepy mist.

Inside, a single light burned steady in the kitchen.

Ananya sat at the wooden counter, sleeves rolled up, ink brush in hand.

The paper spread before her was covered in her delicate handwriting — neat columns of ingredients, small notes beside each:

"Chop onions thin — not crushed."

"Steam buns no longer than four breaths after vapor rises."

"If flavor dulls, add a drop of ginger oil before salt."

She paused, added one last line in smaller letters —

"Cook with patience; flavor listens to kindness."

When she set the brush down, she smiled faintly.

From the doorway came a quiet voice, still thick with sleep. "You're awake again before dawn, aren't you?"

Yao Qing entered, hair loose, rubbing her eyes. "You haven't slept a wink since yesterday."

Ananya shook her head gently. "There's work that cannot wait."

She gathered the sheets together carefully, tying them with a red ribbon before handing them to Yao Qing.

"These are the dishes for the kitchen to serve," she said softly. "Simple, easy to prepare, but precise in flavor. Each note lists time, temperature, even the order of chopping."

Yao Qing blinked. "You even wrote about chopping?"

Ananya smiled, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "If you crush the herbs, they lose their scent. Precision matters."

Yao Qing laughed under her breath. "You sound like an army officer."

"Food," Ananya replied calmly, "is no less serious than war."

Her tone was gentle, but there was truth in her eyes — the kind that came from experience far older than her years.

She then drew a small purse from her sleeve and placed it on the counter. The coins jingled softly.

"Fifty silver," she said. "Use them to buy clothes for the children. They need shoes and thicker blankets. The rest — daily necessities for the kitchen and a small emergency fund."

Yao Qing's eyes widened. "This is too much!"

"It isn't enough if you're unprepared," Ananya said simply. "And you're running a shop. Problems come before you can count the coins."

The older woman's lips quirked. "Since when did you become the cautious one between us?"

"Since I had people relying on me," Ananya replied with a quiet smile.

From the corner, the faint sound of small feet padded in.

The twins, Lian and Lin, rubbed their eyes, blinking up at her.

"Are you leaving again, Miss ?" Lin asked sleepily.

Ananya crouched down, smoothing the girl's messy hair. "Just for a short while. The palace needs me back."

Yao Qing frowned softly. "How long this time?"

"Two weeks, maybe less," Ananya said. "If things go well."

She took Yao Qing's hand and pressed a folded piece of paper into her palm. "If you need to send word to me, give this to my sister. She can deliver it through the servant corridor — no one will question it."

Yao Qing nodded, understanding the risk hidden beneath that calm instruction. "And if there's trouble?"

"Then wait until the second bell after dusk," Ananya said. "Light the lantern outside the door. The twins know which one. My friends will see it."

Her voice held a quiet certainty that made Yao Qing shiver — she never questioned who those "friends" might be anymore.

By the time the first light began to touch the street outside, steam was already rising from the kitchen pots.

Ananya checked each carefully, tasting a spoon of broth, adjusting the salt with precise ease.

The smell of ginger, garlic, and fresh rice filled the room.

She turned to Yao Qing. "Remember — if the broth thickens, add half a cup of boiled water first, not cold. Cold kills flavor."

"Yes, yes, Captain of Cooking," Yao Qing teased softly. "I'll follow your battle orders."

Ananya laughed quietly, a rare sound, warm and fleeting. "Good. Then victory will be easy."

The twins came running, holding a small packet wrapped in cloth.

Lin smiled shyly. "We made these buns for you. So you don't forget us."

Ananya's heart softened. She took the packet gently and said, "How could I? You're my lucky charms."

She brushed her fingers across their hair, then stood, straightening her robe.

"Keep the fire warm, Yao Qing," she said. "I'll return soon."

Outside, the mist was thinning, the streets still quiet.

Ananya walked to the gate and looked back once more.

Through the kitchen window, she could see Yao Qing bustling about, the twins carrying small bowls of flour — laughter beginning to fill the shop again.

A faint glow shimmered beside her — a whisper of her ghostly companions drifting near.

Fen Yu's voice was soft. "Leaving again?"

Ananya nodded. "Yes. But this time, I left the hearth in good hands."

Li Shen's calm tone followed. "The Emperor's shadow grows restless. Be careful when you return."

Ananya smiled faintly. "Let him be restless. It keeps him from sleeping too comfortably."

As the first ray of dawn broke over the rooftops, she lifted her veil and started walking toward the palace — the quiet weight of both worlds on her shoulders.