

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 31: return before dawn

The courtyard was still wrapped in mist when Ananya slipped quietly through the side passage of the Duke's mansion.

Dew glittered on the stone path, the world half-asleep, with not even the faintest whisper of morning wind.

She moved fast, her steps soundless. Every second before sunrise mattered.

If anyone saw her outside her quarters now, all her careful planning would collapse.

The faint glow of a candle leaked from under her chamber door.

Good — just as she'd told Mei.

When Ananya entered, she saw her maid sitting rigidly on the bed, wrapped in one of the Empress's pale silk robes.

The blanket pulled to her chin, her face half-hidden in the shadow of the bed-curtain.

At the sound of the door, Mei jumped.

"Y-Your Majesty!" she gasped, relief flooding her voice. "You're back! Heaven be praised— I thought you might have been caught!"

Ananya closed the door behind her and let out a slow breath. "You did well, Mei."

The girl pressed her shaking hands to her chest. "I-I followed everything you said. I pretended to be asleep all night. If anyone passed the door, they would think you were resting. But—" her voice cracked a little, "I nearly fainted every time I heard footsteps."

Ananya smiled faintly, tired but calm. "You were braver than you think."

Mei bit her lip. "Did anyone see you leave? Did the guards—?"

"No," Ananya said simply. "I left before they changed shifts, and came back before the rooster crowed. The gates are still closed. No one will notice."

The girl exhaled shakily, finally letting go of the blanket she'd been clutching. "If anyone had found out you were gone, both our heads would've rolled," she whispered. "Even the Duke wouldn't have been able to save us."

"I know." Ananya's tone softened. "That's why I trusted only you."

For a moment, Mei blinked in stunned silence. Then she lowered her head quickly. "It was my duty, Your Majesty."

Ananya moved to the table, where the teapot sat untouched. The liquid inside was cold now, but she poured a cup anyway, her hands steady despite the long night.

"Did anyone ask about me?" she asked.

"No," Mei said quickly. "Everyone believes you're resting after the Purity Rite. The steward even told the kitchen to send light porridge later, nothing heavy."

"Good," Ananya murmured. "Then nothing's out of place."

She turned back to her maid, who was still pale but standing straight now.

"Get some rest," Ananya said gently. "You've done enough for one night."

"But what about you, Your Majesty?" Mei asked softly. "You haven't slept at all."

Ananya's lips curved in a faint, weary smile. "Sleep is a luxury I can borrow later. For now, I need to look like I never left."

As Mei went to change out of the borrowed robes, the faint light of dawn began to push through the window lattice.

The household would soon stir — servants waking, fires lit, whispers of morning chores starting across the courtyard.

Ananya stood by the window for a moment, watching the horizon turn pale gold.

The plan had worked. The shop was running, the children were safe, and no one in the palace suspected a thing.

Still, something tugged faintly at her senses — a feeling like distant thunder behind the calm.

It wasn't her own.

It was the Emperor's.

Her fingers brushed the sill, eyes narrowing slightly. "So... you're moving too."

The morning bell rang once.

Ananya exhaled, smoothing her sleeves.

"Let's see," she whispered, "who reaches the truth first."