

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 32: the emperor arrived

The faint clatter of porcelain echoed softly as Ananya set down her empty teacup.

The first rays of light were breaking over the courtyard, painting her chamber in pale gold.

She had just begun to untie her cloak when the door burst open — no sound of footsteps, no shadow crossing the threshold — only a sudden rush of cold air and three familiar voices overlapping in panic.

"Ananya!"

Fen Yu appeared first, her translucent form nearly flickering from agitation. "He's here—he's here!"

Wei Rong followed, face pale but fierce. "The Emperor—his carriage—already past the second gate! We saw him ourselves!"

Li Shen was last, calmer but grim. "He rode without escort. Only two attendants and his banner hidden. This isn't a formal visit."

Ananya's hand stilled halfway through removing her hairpin. "The Emperor?"

Wei Rong nodded rapidly. "Yes! At this hour! And the guards at the outer courtyard are practically bowing through the dirt. He's heading this way!"

For a heartbeat, she simply stood there — motionless. Then her stomach dropped.

The Emperor... here?

She'd only returned moments ago. Her cloak still smelled faintly of firewood and spice.

Fen Yu hovered near her shoulder, wringing her hands. "What if he knows? What if someone told him you weren't in the Duke's palace last night? Or—worse—about the shop!"

Wei Rong growled, pacing in a ghostly circle. "If he does, we'll know soon enough. But you can't hide from him now. He's already crossed the main courtyard."

Ananya's mind spun.

Had someone followed her?

Did the Dowager find out?

Or had the Emperor, with that sharp, cold mind of his, simply noticed what others hadn't — that she was no longer the timid woman he remembered?

"No," she murmured softly, half to herself. "He's just returned from the morning council... perhaps here for Duke Lian. It's too soon for suspicion."

Li Shen's calm voice broke the silence. "You can't assume that, Ananya. When rulers move quietly, it's not for ceremony. It's for certainty."

She drew a slow, steady breath. "Certainty of what?"

Li Shen's faint smile didn't reach his eyes. "Of truth."

Ananya's Resolve

Ananya pressed a hand to her chest, feeling her heartbeat thrum like a drum beneath her palm.

For a moment, she wanted to curse her ghosts for scaring her—but their fear wasn't baseless.

If Zhao Rui was here, something had shifted.

But panic would only feed suspicion.

"Enough," she said at last, straightening her posture. "If he's here, then we meet him with grace, not guilt. If I tremble, he wins. If I'm calm, he questions himself."

Fen Yu blinked. "You're not scared?"

"Oh, I'm terrified," Ananya admitted, a faint, dry laugh escaping her. "But I've learned—fear wastes time. Composure earns seconds. Seconds win survival."

She moved to the dressing mirror, pulling off her night robe. "Fen Yu, help with the hair. Li Shen—check if any of the servants are awake near the hall. Wei Rong, stay by the courtyard gate. If the Emperor reaches the Duke first, I want to know."

The ghosts scattered instantly, disappearing like gusts of wind.

Alone again, Ananya looked at her reflection.

Her hands were steady now.

She pinned her hair up quickly, smoothed her pale-blue robe, and dusted the faintest trace of powder across her neck.

The woman staring back at her in the mirror didn't look like the frightened girl who once wept for affection.

She looked like someone used to walking the line between life and death — calm, beautiful, and dangerous.

A small smile curved her lips.

"So, Your Majesty," she murmured under her breath, "what brings you here before dawn? Curiosity... or suspicion?"

Outside, faintly through the morning air, came the sound of hooves and the heavy thud of carriage wheels halting at the gate.

Wei Rong's voice echoed through the walls, breathless:

"He's here."

Ananya drew herself up, the last of her fear burning away.

"Then let's find out," she said softly.