

## Ghost in the palace

### *Chapter 33: fire beneath politeness*

The Duke's courtyard was still silvered in dawn when Emperor Zhao Rui's carriage rolled to a stop.

No trumpets, no guards—just the quiet crunch of gravel beneath wheels and the distant flutter of banners in the cold breeze.

Servants scrambled, half-dressed, bowing so low their foreheads brushed the ground.

Zhao Rui stepped down without a word, his boots echoing sharply against stone.

He didn't wait for announcement. He never did.

Inside, Duke Lian was still dressing when the news reached him.

By the time he emerged, the Emperor was already standing beneath the plum tree, hands clasped behind his back, eyes fixed on the fading moonlight.

Ananya approached slowly, her blue robe flowing like mist across the courtyard.

Her hair was pinned simply, her face calm but unreadable.

She bowed gracefully. "Your Majesty."

Zhao Rui turned, his gaze sweeping over her face, lingering a second too long before he spoke.

"I came to speak with your father. Is he awake?"

"He will be soon," Ananya replied evenly. "But you came before dawn, Your Majesty. That's unlike you."

He arched a brow. "You keep track of my habits now?"

She met his eyes directly. "You're the sun of the empire, are you not? Even the clouds notice when you rise too early."

His lips curved faintly — not quite a smile. "Still the same sharp tongue."

"Sharper now," she said quietly, "because words are safer than truth."

Something flickered in his expression — irritation mixed with reluctant intrigue.

Zhao Rui took a step closer. "I hear you've been recovering well."

"I have," she said, tone polite but cool. "Though recovery in this palace depends on which kind of sickness you speak of — the body's, or the court's."

He studied her face, the faint edge of defiance beneath her composure. "You speak like a minister, not a wife."

"Then perhaps you married the wrong kind of woman, Your Majesty."

The words landed between them like quiet thunder.

For a moment, even the wind stilled.

Then Ananya tilted her head slightly, voice still soft, but her eyes sharp enough to cut through silk.

"Tell me, Your Majesty," she said, "did your mistress give you permission to come here? Or are you planning to kill me yourself?"

Zhao Rui froze. The air itself seemed to tighten around them.

Her tone was not mocking — it was too calm for mockery — but there was no fear, only quiet challenge.

His jaw clenched. "You speak carelessly."

"I speak plainly," she replied. "Men like you prefer honeyed lies. I lost the taste for them."

He stepped closer still, his shadow falling across hers. "You forget who you're speaking to."

She didn't move. "Do I? You came to my father's house before dawn without a word of warning. It doesn't take a scholar to see that something weighs heavy on you."

He stared at her for a long time — long enough to notice how the morning light caught in her eyes, how her calm only seemed to provoke him further.

The woman before him was not the fragile girl who once wept for affection.

This one stood like a blade in silk — quiet, sharp, unyielding.

He should have been angry. He was angry. But beneath that anger lay something far more dangerous — confusion.

When he came to the Duke's estate, he had felt... warmth.

The Duke greeted him without flattery, speaking plainly, offering tea with the same respect he would give a guest — not an Emperor.

The Duchess bowed deeply but smiled sincerely, not trembling like courtiers often did.

They treated him like a man — not a god.

And now, their daughter — the same woman he'd once thought weak — stood before him, unafraid to meet his eyes, unafraid to speak truth.

Something twisted in his chest, a quiet ache he refused to name.

At last, he broke the silence. "Your tongue grows bolder by the day."

Ananya's lips curved faintly. "Boldness is a habit, Your Majesty. Once learned, it doesn't fade."

His gaze flicked over her face once more, then he turned abruptly. "Tell your father I'll await him in the study."

"As you wish," she said softly, bowing.

When he walked past her, the faint scent of sandalwood and smoke brushed the air — the same scent that clung to her cloak from The Whispering Bowl.

He noticed.

But said nothing.

And when he left, Ananya's ghosts materialized around her again, whispering nervously.

Wei Rong muttered, "He looked ready to strangle or kiss you — hard to tell which."

Ananya let out a slow breath, her hands finally unclenching.

"Neither," she said quietly. "He came here to confirm something... and he just did."

Li Shen tilted his head. "And what did he confirm?"

Ananya smiled faintly. "That I'm no longer his obedient shadow."