

Ghost in the palace

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Chapter 36: tooth

They had been riding for hours, the road thinning into a ribbon of packed earth, the fields at the sides low and colorless under a dull sky. The carriage rolled steady, springs creaking, the Emperor's face a carved mask of attention and restraint. Ananya sat opposite him, hands folded in her lap, expression as still as if carved from jade. Outside, the retinue had fallen into a purposeful hush; even the horses seemed to move with caution.

Zhao Rui did not trust the silence.

It was the way the light lay, the small gaps between trees that felt too neat, that made him shift forward on his seat. He reached out as the carriage turned through a narrow copse — not in gallantry, but to steady her as the wagon lurched. His fingers closed on her wrist.

She flinched. In the cramped space his hand was more possession than protection. Instinct rose in her like heat. Before thought could temper reaction, Ananya's teeth snapped down on the soft inside of his forearm — a sharp, animal bite, sudden and fierce.

He made a small, strange sound — not a cry, not a laugh — a surprised, dangerous exhale. He jerked his hand back, more from reflex than pain. The skin flared hot where her teeth had met it; a crescent of red there told him she had meant it.

"Are you dog" he started, voice low, incredulous.

She spat the words, breath ragged, eyes wild and furious. "Why did you pull me?"

Their moment of human heat broke like glass.

At that instant the first arrow screamed out of the trees like a black stanza. It struck the carriage side with a splintering crack and then, impossibly, another hammered into wood near the wheel. The carriage lurched, then stuck — one wheel wedged into a rutted dip, splintered planks biting soil. Dust rose in angry plumes. The world outside turned into chaos: shouts, the thud of hooves, the clatter of metal.

Zhao Rui's expression hardened the way iron hardens in the forge. He looked at her once, a flash of something raw and quick in his face — worry, annoyance, a thing that

was neither apology nor anger, but a hard, brittle care. "Do you see now?" he snapped, words compacted and sharp, "We're ambushed. Sit. Sit and do not move."

She did not sit easily. Her jaw worked, the trace of his bite a burning proof along his arm. She pressed her hand to her mouth as if to staunch a counter-urge to answer back further, to say something that might be fatal. Instead she stood up, the carriage small around them, and leaned forward so close their breath tangled.

"Do you think I don't know an ambush when I see one?" she hissed. Her voice was low but fierce enough to be heard through the roar. "If you pull me like some possession, you put us both at risk."

One of the coachmen outside screamed. Men were down — a jolt of motion — and from the trees a scatter of arrows began to pepper the ground. One grazed the Emperor's cloak and another sank into the leather roof with a sick thunk. The guards had leapt out, swords bright, shouting as they returned fire and tried to secure the route. The air smelled of pine sap and hot iron.

Zhao Rui shoved as much of his composure into his next words as he could. "Sit," he said again, softer but iron-hard. "I will go watch. I will find the flank. You stay."

She read the command the way she had learned to read commands on the battlefield in dreams she'd never lived — for what it was: a demand to be safe, or a demand made in fear. Her hands curled into fists. For the space of a breath she looked like she might leap through the splintered window, into the mud and the metal and the shouting.

Then she did something that took him off-guard: she laughed, small and rough. It was not a yielding laugh. It was a sound packed with contempt and affection both. "Fine," she said, as if bartering on dangerous terms. "Go. Find what you can, Emperor. If you die prancing about like some hero, I'll bite the next man who comes to claim your crown."

He toppled into a rare, startled smile — a human gesture in a place of sharpened steel. "If you bite the wrong man," he returned, "I will personally be very offended."

The guard leader's return was a clattering of boots and a bowed, strained voice. "Your Majesty! The road is cut. They used light javelins and a sap trap — one wheel is stuck. Men are ready, but we were not the first to see them."

Zhao Rui's gaze flicked to the wheel wedged deep in the mire; its axle had taken a blunt strike. "Then move fast. Clear a line toward the trees. Do not let them circle." He slid from his seat with the practised economy of a ruler who could move like a soldier when he must.

Ananya rose as well. At the doorway she hesitated, then reached up and briefly — as the coachman turned — brushed the sleeve where he had bitten before. There was no

forgiveness in the motion and no apology; it was an acknowledgement they both understood: they were not safe, and words were luxuries they could not afford.

The carriage door slammed open. The Emperor vaulted from the carriage, cloak flaring, and the world reduced to motion: men shouting, arrows skittering past, a cacophony of urgent things. He did not go alone; guards were at his shoulder. He did not look back often, but when he did his eyes caught hers — a flash of steel softened by something else. For a heartbeat the battle around them stilled in both their minds.

Fen Yu's tiny voice grazed the corner of Ananya's ear, barely audible even over the chaos. "We should help."

Wei Rong's tone was a rasp of eager menace. "Let them taste arrow and regret."

Li Shen's voice, always the quietest, threaded into the rawness: "Be careful. Move not only for him — move for truth."

Ananya drew a breath and stepped out onto the chopped grass. Her foot sank into mud. The sky above knit with smoke and the scent of disturbed earth. She glanced at Zhao Rui, then at the broken wheel, then at the ring of trees that had ceased being pastoral scenery and had become a line of mouths waiting to swallow men.

"Watch your flank," she told the nearest captain, her voice now the incomparably calm blade it had been in the palace. "If they try to pin us here, we burn the road."

He blinked, taken by the smoothness of her command, then followed it: orders flowed, men moved. Somewhere in the woods a shout answered, and the ambushers moved, realizing their quarry would not be the easy feast they'd hoped for.

Ananya's mouth tightened. The bite on the Emperor's arm had been real; the mark would be there later — a small, fierce red to remind them both that tonight everything could be ordinary and yet everything could be war.

She glanced at him once, short and sharp. "You test me enough and you'll find there are teeth you do not like."

He bore the look, unflinching. "Test me more," he said, and for once his tone was not a command but a dare. Then, without more words, he vanished into the ring of men and motion, and the night sang with steel.

Chapter 37: ghost in the picture

The forest rang with shouts and the hiss of arrows.

The ambush that was meant to kill had turned into a circus of chaos.

The Emperor's guards braced around the half-stuck carriage, blades flashing in the morning haze. The Duke's men fought like a wall — trained, strong, but outnumbered.

Then... the air shifted.

A cold gust swept through the branches, though no wind stirred the leaves.

Something unseen slithered between trunks, laughter hidden in the rustle of pine needles.

Wei Rong was the first to appear — if "appear" could describe the blur of translucent flame that slipped through a bandit's shoulder.

He grinned, invisible to mortal eyes, voice a growl only Ananya could hear.

"They want a fight? Let's give them a memory instead."

Before anyone could blink, the nearest attacker swung his sword—only to have his own wrist seized midair.

His arm jerked back violently.

"Who—who touched me!?" he shouted, spinning around.

Fen Yu giggled, her bell-like laugh floating on the wind.

She swooped low, snatched the man's cap, and placed it backward on his head. Then she pulled his hair hard enough to make him yelp.

"Who's there?! Show yourself!"

"Ghosts!" another screamed, eyes rolling. "It's ghosts!"

Li Shen hovered above them, calm and faintly glowing. His long scholar's robe moved like water, sleeves trailing mist.

He extended one elegant hand and whispered a short verse under his breath — the old language of balance.

Branches cracked. A fallen log rolled, tripping three men as though the forest itself had come alive.

Ananya leaned out of the carriage window, her face half-lit by sunlight filtering through the trees.

Her lips curved in satisfaction. "Serves them right," she murmured.

Yao Qing gasped as one of the men tripped over a root, only to find himself pushed headfirst into a mud puddle. His companion tried to help — and promptly got his ear flicked by invisible fingers.

Wei Rong roared with laughter. "Pathetic mortals! You thought you'd ambush an Empress?"

He grabbed a man's collar and swung him into a tree trunk with a loud thud.

Fen Yu danced above him, gleeful. "You're too rough, Wei Rong! Let me try!"

She floated toward another bandit — a burly brute pulling back his bowstring — and, with a wicked grin, she tugged the back of his trousers.

He squealed, the arrow flying into the sky.

Even the guards blinked in disbelief. The Emperor, watching from his horse nearby, frowned deeply — because his enemies were... running? From nothing?

As if to prove her point, Fen Yu twirled upside down in the air, sticking her tongue out at a fleeing bandit.

The man shrieked and dropped his sword.

Li Shen sighed, ever the calm teacher among fools. "You two have no discipline. Next time, aim for efficiency."

Wei Rong snorted. "Discipline doesn't make men scream."

Fen Yu giggled so hard she nearly fell through a tree trunk. "Did you see his face when I pulled his hair?"

Ananya chuckled quietly, resting her chin on her hand. "I did. Remind me to reward you later."

Yao Qing stared at her, half in awe, half in disbelief. "You're actually... enjoying this?"

Ananya smiled, a rare sparkle lighting her eyes. "For once, I don't have to pretend to be scared."

Outside, chaos had reached its peak.

Men fled, tripping over each other, their cries echoing through the forest.

"Ghosts! The forest is cursed!"

"My sword—my sword is gone!"

"Something just slapped me—someone help!"

Fen Yu had grabbed one man's hand and used it to slap another, cackling uncontrollably.

Wei Rong, not to be outdone, shoved a third bandit so hard that he flew into a patch of nettles.

Li Shen glided calmly between them, his voice cutting through their laughter.

"Enough. Leave a few alive to tell the tale. Fear spreads faster than corpses."

The others slowed, panting though they needed no breath.

Fen Yu floated back toward the carriage, her hair rippling like pale smoke.

She waved cheerfully. "All clear, my lady!"

The woods fell quiet again, save for the panting of horses and the creak of bowstrings being lowered.

Zhao Rui's men stood in stunned silence, blades still drawn, eyes darting between the trees.

One of them whispered, "Did... anyone else see that?"

Another crossed himself. "Heaven protect us... the forest fought for Her Majesty."

Ananya finally stepped out of the carriage, skirts brushing the dirt, her expression composed — though a faint smile tugged at her lips.

She looked around the clearing at the scattered, moaning bandits, the guards too awed to speak, and the Emperor standing rigid on his horse.

"Is the danger over?" she asked, voice smooth as silk.

Zhao Rui met her gaze, still processing what he'd witnessed. "It seems... someone else decided to fight on your side."

She smiled faintly, brushing dust from her sleeve.

"Then it's about time I had some loyal allies."

Wei Rong's laugh echoed softly through the trees. "You already do, my lady. You just keep us well-fed on fun."

Fen Yu twirled above Ananya's shoulder, invisible to all but her. "We should do this again!"

Ananya's grin was small but genuine. "Next time, maybe in the palace gardens."

Chapter 38: arrows

The road beyond the forest was eerily calm, as if the trees themselves were holding their breath after the storm.

The air smelled of sap and ash. The wheel had been fixed, the wounded tended, the dead wrapped for the journey home.

Only the Emperor remained motionless on horseback, gaze fixed on the arrow still lodged deep in the carriage frame.

The shaft trembled in the faint breeze — black fletching, heavy iron tip.

A perfect soldier's arrow.

But its angle was wrong.

Zhao Rui dismounted, boots crunching softly against the gravel.

He traced the path of the arrow with his eyes, following it to the seat where the Empress had been sitting.

Three arrows had struck — all within the same mark.

Not one toward his side.

The Pattern

"Strange," he murmured.

The captain beside him stiffened. "Your Majesty?"

Zhao Rui's tone was calm, too calm. "You see the pattern, don't you? The shots came from the left ridge. All aimed here..."

He touched the spot beside the embroidered cushion. "Not one toward me."

The men exchanged uneasy glances.

Ananya stood a short distance away, speaking softly with Yao Qing and checking the wounded. She hadn't noticed the Emperor's quiet scrutiny — or the hardening of his jaw as he continued to study the arrows.

"They knew where we'd stop," he said finally. "Where the carriage would be trapped. They knew who sat where."

His hand clenched around the shaft and snapped it in half. The wood cracked like a neck breaking.

The guards flinched.

That knowledge wasn't public.

Even Duke Lian's most loyal soldiers hadn't known the exact route.

He had changed it at the last moment — only a few had been told.

Which meant one thing:

There was a leak inside the palace.

Zhao Rui's eyes darkened. "Find who prepared the travel list," he ordered. "And question the messenger who rode last night. Quietly."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

When the guard departed, Zhao Rui turned slightly, gaze flicking toward the Empress. She was laughing softly with her sister's maid, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, unaware of the invisible noose tightening around her life.

He frowned.

This ambush wasn't for him.

Someone wanted her dead.

And worse — they wanted it to happen on his watch.

Later that evening, camped near a stream, Zhao Rui sat alone beside the embers of a dying fire.

The forest whispered around him, and his reflection in the water looked back like a stranger.

His thoughts spiraled inward.

Who would dare strike her now — after the Purity Rite, after Heaven itself had cleared her name?

Lady Chen's face flickered briefly across his mind, serene and poisonous.

Her uncle commanded a portion of the border's supply lines — the same border that had begun to starve.

Coincidence? He didn't believe in them anymore.

He remembered the ledger Duke Lian had shown him — half the missing provisions had vanished along routes Chen's kin supervised.

And now... an ambush, aimed not at him but at the woman Lady Chen despised most.

He exhaled slowly, the smoke of the fire curling up like a serpent. "Too convenient," he whispered.

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Chapter 39: back to the palace

The gates of the imperial palace loomed like a shadow against the afternoon sun.

The moment the carriage rolled across the marble bridge, the guards straightened, trumpets blew once, and the bronze doors swung open — swallowing the convoy whole.

Servants lined the courtyard, heads bowed as the Emperor's party returned.

The air smelled faintly of sandalwood and steel, as if the very stones remembered discipline.

When the carriage stopped, Ananya waited for him to move first.

But Zhao Rui was already gone.

He'd stepped out the instant the wheels halted — no glance back, no word spoken, just a curt nod to the captain before striding toward the main hall.

His black robes swept behind him like a tide, sharp and fast.

Ananya blinked, momentarily stunned. "That's it?" she muttered under her breath. "Not even a 'You're alive, good work?'"

Yao Qing peeked out of the carriage with her, whispering, "Maybe he's shy?"

Ananya shot her a look. "He's a grown man, not a maiden waiting for a confession."

Still, her voice was softer than her words. She had seen him fight, seen the calm steel in his eyes, and—though she'd never admit it—she'd felt safer for it.

Now, watching his retreating figure disappear beneath the golden eaves, she frowned, irritation tugging at her chest.

"So rude," she muttered again, stepping down.

No sooner had her feet touched the ground than the air around her shimmered.

Wei Rong appeared first, hovering upside down with an enormous grin. "Did you see his face when the bandits ran? Priceless!"

Fen Yu twirled beside him, laughing so hard she nearly dropped through the floor. "That man who tried to slap you—I pulled his hair three times! Three!"

Li Shen adjusted his ghostly sleeves, voice calm but proud. "It was effective. Fright spreads faster than death. You chose your allies well, my lady."

Ananya sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Allies, yes. But next time, maybe pull less hair and throw fewer men into trees."

Wei Rong crossed his arms, pretending offense. "You're no fun. We saved your royal hide!"

Fen Yu giggled. "And we had fun doing it!"

Ananya rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress a smile. "You three are impossible."

By the time she reached her chambers, the exhaustion she'd been ignoring crashed over her like a wave.

Her shoulders ached; her temples throbbed from holding composure for hours.

The maids rushed forward, fussing over her — removing her dusty robes, fetching warm towels, lighting fresh incense.

Ananya waved them away gently. "Enough, I just want to sleep."

The room filled with quiet — faint lantern light, a soft rustle of curtains, and the distant hum of cicadas.

Fen Yu floated near the ceiling, whispering dreamily. "You were amazing today, my lady."

Wei Rong yawned, stretching mid-air. "We should do that again. Bandits make good sport."

Li Shen gave them both a pointed look. "Let her rest. She'll need her wits when dawn comes."

Ananya was already lying down, her hair loose against the pillow, eyes half-closed.

She murmured drowsily, "If dawn brings more trouble, at least I have you three idiots to make it worse."

Fen Yu giggled. "That's the spirit."

Wei Rong saluted dramatically. "Sleep well, Commander of Ghosts."

Li Shen gave the faintest smile. "Sweet dreams, Empress who bites emperors."

Ananya's lips curved faintly in her sleep. "I didn't bite him that hard..."

The ghosts shared a quiet laugh as her breathing softened, the room wrapped in peace — fleeting but real.

Outside, the moon climbed high above the palace walls, casting silver light over the roofs where plots and whispers waited for the next dawn.

Chapter 40: a bowl

Morning sunlight spilled through the lattice windows, painting faint gold patterns across the polished floor.

The palace had awakened with its usual rhythm—maids whispering in corridors, the distant sound of bells marking the hour, the faint scent of sandalwood from the temple courtyard.

Ananya sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes. The echoes of last night's chaos had finally faded, replaced by a rare calm.

Her body still ached, but her mind was sharp.

The Emperor hadn't spoken to her since their return.

Fine. She didn't need his words.

Today, she had another task in mind.

"The Dowager must know I've returned," she murmured, tying her hair into a neat knot. "But she's not the kind to send for me first."

Fen Yu floated beside her, twirling a strand of her own ghostly hair. "You're going to her again? She doesn't like anyone."

"Then I'll give her a reason to," Ananya replied.

She walked toward the small side kitchen attached to her quarters—one few nobles ever entered, but one she loved.

Inside, the air was still and faintly dusty from disuse.

Ananya rolled up her sleeves, lighting the small brazier herself.

"We'll make something easy," she said softly. "Simple, warm, healing."

The ingredients were humble: lotus seeds, longan fruit, a few slices of ginseng, and honey from the palace apiary.

She washed and simmered them slowly, the faint sweet scent curling through the air.

Fen Yu leaned over the pot, eyes shining. "It smells heavenly!"

Wei Rong sniffed exaggeratedly. "If the old bat doesn't like it, I'll drink it myself."

Li Shen gave them both a disapproving glance. "Behave. This is diplomacy, not dessert."

Ananya smiled faintly. "You three can haunt a battlefield, but not a kitchen."

She stirred the tonic, watching the liquid turn a soft amber hue. "The Dowager once had lung ailments—this will soothe her breath and heart. Food can do what words cannot."

By midmorning, she carried the porcelain tray herself, refusing servants' help.

The bowl of tonic steamed gently, the honeyed aroma soft yet clean.

The Phoenix Pavilion stood as grand and cold as ever, sunlight glinting off its golden tiles.

Ananya entered, bowing deeply when she reached the inner chamber.

"Your daughter-in-law greets the Mother of the Empire."

The Dowager Empress sat on a raised couch, robed in pale crimson silk. Her expression was unreadable as she looked down.

"You returned yesterday. I heard there was... trouble on the road."

Ananya bowed again. "It was resolved, thanks to Heaven's grace."

The Dowager's tone was cool. "And yet you still find time to play the kitchen maid?"

Ananya didn't flinch. "Yes, Your Majesty. Some lessons are worth learning twice."

She placed the tray on a low table, pushing it forward. "This is lotus and ginseng tonic. It helps the lungs and clears fatigue. I wished to greet you properly for allowing me to return."

The Dowager eyed the bowl without reaching for it. "You think sweet broth will change what I think of you?"

"No," Ananya said simply. "But maybe it'll remind you I mean no harm."

For a long moment, silence stretched. The only sound was the slow bubbling of the tonic as it cooled.

Then, with a faint sigh, the Dowager lifted the spoon.

She sipped once.

Her brows relaxed, almost imperceptibly.

"This tastes..." The Dowager paused, searching for words she wasn't used to saying.

"...like home."

Ananya's lips curved in quiet amusement. "Then it succeeded."

The old woman gave her a sharp look, but there was less frost in her eyes now. "You were braver than expected during the Purity Rite. And now you cook. Tell me, what is it you want from me?"

Ananya bowed her head. "Nothing, Mother of the Empire. Only that the palace breathes easier when there's less bitterness."

The Dowager huffed softly, but her gaze softened for just a heartbeat before she turned away.

"Leave the tray," she said. "And don't think I'll compliment you again."

Ananya smiled. "One was enough."

Outside the pavilion, Fen Yu twirled excitedly. "She liked it!"

Wei Rong grinned. "If she doesn't admit it, her empty bowl will."

Li Shen's voice was calm, approving. "A battle won without blood."

Ananya walked slowly down the marble steps, sunlight warming her face.

She had expected scolding, perhaps cold words, but she had not expected the faint tremor in the Dowager's voice—like home.

It wasn't victory.

But it was a beginning.
