

Ghost 51

Chapter 51: slap

The palace felt wrong that dawn, as if the lacquered corridors themselves had been carved by some jagged surprise. Lantern light trembled in the colonnade like nervous hearts.

Ananya's hands shook when the messenger bowed before her; the seal on the paper was smeared with travel dust and blood.

Her eyes skimmed the lines, each phrase a cold iron into her chest: an ambush on the road... Duke Lian wounded... delivered to his house... urgent aid required. The rest of the room blurred.

She had thought herself steady. She had thought the world could take heat and return to temper. The words in that letter made her feel as if she might splinter.

She could hear the household calling for a physician, servants whispering, but everything narrowed to a single thought: Father.

Far away, in another wing, Lady Chen did not receive a letter that would ease a heart. She received one that lit a fuse. Her father's courier arrived just before dawn with news—news that made her porcelain face crack.

Paper fluttered from her hand and scattered like autumn leaves across the silk floor. She cursed aloud, a single ugly sound that startled the maids. "Duke Lian's on the road? That old fool—he dares to interfere with what is ours?"

Rage—hot, territorial—tore through her. For a long while she paced, palms clenched. Then she pressed her face to the cool silk curtain and let herself be wrung dry by panic she hadn't expected: her uncle's arrest, the palace's attention turned to him, the Emperor's secret commands—everything threatened the careful web her family had built.

She could not stand it. She would not.

She smoothed her robe with hands that trembled and set her jaw. If the court thought the Chen line was cracked, she would prove it unbreakable. She would find the Emperor and kneel and sob and promise whatever bargains were asked. She would throw herself at his mercy and bind him to her with gratitude. She would do anything.

So she went to the Emperor's chamber, every step practiced into a soft petition. When she arrived, she let a perfect, fragile sob escape — precisely measured; a plea to an old memory of shared childhood and an assumed loyalty.

Ananya had intended to go home — to sit at her father's bedside, to feel the pulse and the heat and count the breaths. Guards barred the way. "Her Majesty must not travel now," a captain said, voice clipped and formal. "Orders of the court."

Of course they stop me, she thought, fury rising that the palace would lock doors against a daughter, but fling them open for a favored niece. She shoved past the guard as if she could shove past the lattice of politics. The guard caught her sleeve, then let it go—the sight of her eyes was enough to loosen disciplined hands.

She found the inner corridor crowded with a hush that telegraphed a meeting. Voices behind the carved door were soft—urgent. When the door opened, she saw them at once.

Lady Chen knelt at the Emperor's side, face wet with an acted sorrow that should have been beautiful and empty, and Zhao Rui stood like a stone pillar, watching her with tired, watchful eyes.

Something cold and animal rose behind Ananya's ribs. She had come to the court as a stranger, to sew meals and listen to the shadows. She had come to this place and found teeth and venom and warmth thrifted for gain. Now here they were—her father's fate hanging between them—and the sight of the woman who had smiled at her like a welcome, now bowing to the Emperor, was a shape of fresh salt.

She did not think. She moved. It was a motion that came from a place older than words—an old daughter's fear and a new woman's fury braided into one.

Ananya should have announced herself, made the small ritual bows that kept the palace from combusting. She did none of that.

She pushed the Emperor aside — not cruelly but with the force of someone who had nothing to lose. He staggered, startled, hand slicing the air as Ananya stepped between him and the kneeling figure of Lady Chen. A hush cracked like thin ice.

"Why?" Ananya's voice broke on the single word, sharp as glass. The servants in the corridor clutched each other, breath held.

Lady Chen looked up, the act falling off her face like a mask. There was a blink of real confusion, then outrage that had been practiced and perfected. "You—" she began.

"You and your family," Ananya said, every syllable clean and bright with accusation, "have made my father a target. You have fed lies, sold our grain, let people starve and then turned the hungry against him. If anything happens to him—" She could not go on. The rest of the sentence was molten. She pressed her palm to Lady Chen's cheek and struck—hard.

The slap rang through the chamber, sudden and awful in the marble silence. Lady Chen reeled, fingers flying to her face, more shocked by the loss of the safe script she had always been able to perform than by the pain.

Zhao Rui's face was a mask of astonishment that folded immediately into a ruler's control. Hands moved without order—guards rushed in, ministerial eyes flashed, a hush of low panic swelled. Someone began to babble of decorum, of breach of etiquette, of scandal. The palace thrummed like an insect in amber.

Ananya's heart hammered. She had nowhere right then to curl around the dignity of the court. She had a father who needed hands and heat and a houseful of weeping faces waiting for news. The sight of Lady Chen kneeling as if to beg soothed none of the rage. The sight of the Emperor's stillness—of his not having stopped her before she struck—was salt.

"Don't touch me," Ananya said to Zhao Rui, low but bright with the edges of an order. The guards who had moved toward her paused, uncertain. She reached for the carriage keys that a steward had left unattended near the door—anachronistic, but there.

"You want to leave?" the Emperor asked—his voice finally steady, the weight between politeness and command. He did not move to stop her. Perhaps he did not want to be the one to restrain a woman driven on by love and fury.

She huffed a laugh that had no mirth. "Yes." She turned and strode through the small throng of startled faces, heading for the waiting carriage. The guards moved reflexively to stop her, to question her right to go, to prevent scandal—but the carriage driver had already mounted. The horses pawed, angry and impatient.

From the doorway, Lady Chen hissed, "You will regret this! You will bring ruin to your house—" but her voice cracked. She had expected shrieks of obedience, not a daughter's slap and a woman's freedom.

From the corridor, people shouted for order. The carriage doors slammed. The carriage lurched forward, the wheels grinding on the stones, and Ananya felt, strangely, the first small lift of air that the world sometimes gives when someone chooses to run.

She rode away with the palace behind her, with the statue of power shrinking into distance and with the echo of the slap unfolding behind her like a bell.

In the hushed rooms, the Emperor watched the carriage disappear, his jaw tight with something he could not name. Lady Chen's hands flew to her cheek as she tore at her hair, formerly cool composure fracturing into real fear. Guards seized Ananya's steward and the keys, ministers whispered of treason and of inevitable retribution.

And somewhere along the road, the horses' hooves raised dust that smelled, faintly, of burning grain.

Inside that dust rode a woman who had pushed a king aside and struck a highborn niece and who would not, for the moment, be stopped from reaching a father's bedside.