

## Ghost in the palace

### *Chapter 35: shadow and silk*

After breakfast, the hall slowly emptied, leaving only the clink of teacups and the lingering warmth of laughter.

Zhao Rui sat beside Duke Lian near the study's window, the faint light from the garden reflecting in his eyes.

The ledger lay open on the table once again — the same document that had drawn him here before dawn.

But his thoughts kept slipping from ink and parchment to the soft echo of laughter that had filled the hall moments ago.

Duke Lian spoke in a low, measured voice. "Your Majesty, the border reports have grown worse. Supplies vanish before reaching the northern forts. The ledger confirms corruption, but not who commands it."

Zhao Rui's expression hardened. "Then we'll find out who does. Tonight, I'll issue orders for the wagons to be inspected before departure. I'll ride with you as far as the outer fort."

The Duke blinked. "You, Your Majesty?"

"I won't rule from behind a wall," Zhao Rui said simply. "If men starve in my name, I'll see their faces myself."

Duke Lian bowed, deeply moved. "Then Heaven stands with us."

Zhao Rui's eyes darkened slightly. "Heaven has been silent for too long. Perhaps it's time it listened to us instead."

As they stepped out into the open air, the morning had turned warm.

Servants rushed about preparing the Emperor's carriage, guards aligning in quiet precision.

Ananya stood a short distance away with her mother and sister, her composure flawless as always — back straight, chin lifted slightly, hands folded neatly in front of her.

Zhao Rui's gaze lingered on her again, unbidden.

The faint jealousy that had flashed across her face during breakfast was gone now — replaced by cool politeness, the same mask she wore at court.

But he had seen through it.

The quick blink when he complimented her sister.

The way her chopsticks had stilled when he placed food in her mother's bowl instead of hers.

He'd noticed everything.

The Duke and Duchess bowed deeply. "Your Majesty, may your journey be safe."

Zhao Rui returned a small nod. "I will see you again soon, once this matter is settled."

He turned then — eyes falling on Ananya.

Her mother nudged her gently. "Child, go. Escort His Majesty to the carriage."

For a heartbeat, their gazes locked — silent challenge and unspoken memory between them.

She inclined her head, stepping forward. "Your Majesty."

He extended his hand to her — a simple gesture, half tradition, half habit.  
"Allow me."

But Ananya's lips curved slightly, polite yet distant. She stepped past his hand without touching it, lifted her robe herself, and climbed into the carriage.

Then, without a word, she reached out and shut the door behind her — softly, but firmly.

The guards froze, stunned.

Even Duke Lian looked ready to faint.

Zhao Rui, however, did something none of them expected.

He laughed.

A quiet, genuine laugh that startled even himself.

As he climbed into the carriage opposite her, his amusement still lingered.

Her eyes flicked toward him briefly, unimpressed.

"You find something amusing, Your Majesty?"

"Only you," he said, still smiling. "No one in this empire has ever dared to ignore my hand before."

She crossed her arms lightly. "Perhaps they should have. You might've learned humility sooner."

He raised a brow. "You speak boldly for someone in my carriage."

"I speak truth," she replied. "You said yourself, truth should serve the throne. Consider it a gift."

Zhao Rui chuckled again, leaning back. "If this is a gift, it cuts sharper than any sword."

"Then handle it carefully," she said.

Their eyes met again — tension, laughter, and something dangerous flickering beneath the quiet.

Outside, Duke Lian and his family bowed as the carriage rolled forward.

The horses began to move, the road ahead leading toward the open plains and the shadowed border beyond.

Inside, silence settled — the kind that hummed with too many thoughts.

Zhao Rui glanced once more at the woman across from him — poised, calm, untouchable.

And for the first time in years, he felt more alive than he had on any battlefield.