

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 41: helping princess

The morning air in the Phoenix Garden was light and scented with magnolia.

After leaving the Dowager's pavilion, Ananya walked along the shaded path toward her own quarters.

For once, her heart was steady. The Dowager had not dismissed her harshly — she had even finished the tonic. That small victory lingered like warmth in her chest.

A gentle wind brushed her sleeves. She slowed, eyes half-lidded in quiet thought, when a faint sound broke through the still air—

A stifled gasp, followed by a soft cry.

Ananya turned sharply toward the willow grove beside the lotus pond.

There, near the curved stone railing, stood a young woman dressed in pale lilac silk — the wife of the Emperor's younger brother, seven months pregnant.

Her round belly strained against her sash as she gripped the railing, panting, color drained from her face.

"Princess Zhi!" Ananya called softly, hurrying over. "Why are you walking here alone? You should be resting."

The younger woman's head snapped up.

Her eyes widened — not in recognition, but in alarm.

For a moment, she looked as if she might flee.

Her lips parted, as though she wanted to speak — but no words came.

She merely shook her head weakly, taking a step back.

Ananya slowed her pace, keeping her tone calm. "You're pale. Sit down before you fall."

The princess hesitated. Her throat bobbed.

Her husband's warning echoed in her mind:

Do not speak to the Queen Consort. She brings ruin to all who show her favor.

But her body was trembling, her stomach heavy, and her knees weak.

She sank onto the bench with a small, breathless sound.

"Good," Ananya said softly. "Stay still."

She turned to her maid. "Go to my quarters. Bring the tonic I made for the Dowager and some cool water. Quickly."

The maid hesitated. "Your Majesty... it may not be appropriate—"

"Go," Ananya interrupted, her voice gentle but firm.

The maid bowed and ran.

Ananya knelt beside the princess, supporting her back. "You should have called for help. Walking alone in this condition is dangerous."

The princess averted her gaze, her lashes trembling. "I didn't want to trouble anyone."

Her tone was formal, almost rehearsed. She didn't meet Ananya's eyes — afraid, perhaps, of the rumors that clung to her like a shadow.

Ananya didn't press her. She simply said, "If you fall, the entire palace will be troubled. So you might as well trouble someone kind."

The younger woman blinked, caught between surprise and guilt.

When the maid returned, Ananya carefully poured a small bowl of the warm lotus tonic.

The fragrant steam curled upward, soft and sweet, carrying the faint scent of ginseng and honey.

"Drink this," she said. "Slowly."

The princess hesitated, staring at the bowl.

Her appetite had been gone for weeks — every meal had ended in nausea.

Even the smell of food had made her ill.

But the scent that rose from this bowl was different — soothing instead of sharp.

She took a small sip.

Warmth spread down her throat, settling gently in her stomach.

Her hands trembled slightly as she took another.

And another.

For the first time in months, the food did not rise back up.

Ananya smiled faintly, watching her expression change. "Better?"

The princess blinked back sudden tears. "It's... the first thing I've kept down in weeks."

"Then have a little more," Ananya said, refilling her cup.

The princess obeyed without protest this time, her face softening with relief.

When the bowl was empty, she sat quietly, staring at her hands.

A thousand thoughts tangled in her chest — fear of her husband's anger, confusion at Ananya's kindness, shame for believing the palace whispers.

Ananya stood, smoothing her sleeves. "You'll feel tired now. That means it's working. Go back to your quarters and rest."

The princess looked up at her, still speechless.

Ananya smiled gently. "You don't owe me thanks. But take care of yourself. The child listens to its mother's heart — not her fear."

With that, she turned and walked away, her robe sweeping softly across the stone path.

Behind her, the young princess pressed a trembling hand to her stomach, tears filling her eyes as she whispered under her breath,

"She's nothing like they said she was..."

And for the first time in many months, she felt peace settle like a quiet heartbeat beneath her hand.