

## Ghost in the palace

### *Chapter 42: the smile that's cut*

The corridors of the East Pavilion were silent when Princess Zhi returned.

The soft glow of dusk had settled, lanterns flickering to life one by one, their orange light stretching long shadows across the marble floor.

The palace maid supported her as they entered her chambers. Zhi moved carefully, both hands protectively over her stomach.

Her mind was still lingering on the Empress's calm voice, the warmth of that sweet tonic.

For the first time in months, her stomach didn't twist with nausea.

Her heart, too, felt lighter—until she saw the figure waiting inside.

Prince Liang was seated on the lacquered chair near the window, a cup of tea resting untouched beside him.

His expression, at first glance, was gentle—his smile light, his tone even.

"Zhi'er," he said, rising slowly. "You're late returning. Were you walking again?"

His voice carried concern, but there was a thin thread of steel beneath it.

Zhi lowered her eyes, bowing slightly. "I only walked by the lotus pond, Your Highness. The air was pleasant today."

He approached her, gaze sweeping over her face and the curve of her stomach. His hand brushed her cheek in a gesture meant to look affectionate.

But Zhi stiffened. The warmth in his touch felt hollow—like silk over a blade.

"You must take care," he murmured. "We cannot risk... accidents. Our son must be born healthy."

He emphasized son with quiet insistence.

Zhi forced a smile. "You speak as if you already know the child's gender."

Liang's eyes glinted with something sharp. "I do. Heaven wouldn't deny me that. My son will bring new balance to this court."

He turned away, pacing slowly, the silk of his robe whispering against the floor.

"You see how my brother sits upon the throne," he continued softly, almost to himself. "Bathed in praise, adored by ministers. Everything he touches becomes law, while the rest of us live in his shadow."

Zhi looked down, voice quiet. "He is the Emperor."

Liang's smile curved, brittle and cold. "For now."

Her heart gave a faint tremor.

He caught her reaction, then chuckled softly, masking the venom in his words. "Don't look so frightened, my dear. I only mean—if our son is born strong, perhaps Heaven will see fit to bless this family again. The bloodline must remain powerful."

Zhi clasped her hands, lowering her gaze. "Yes, Your Highness."

Inside, her thoughts swirled. He speaks of power, not of life. He sees our child as a step toward the throne.

Liang moved closer again, crouching slightly so his gaze met hers.

His smile softened, his tone warm—but his eyes, those calculating eyes, did not match.

"Zhi'er," he said, voice almost affectionate. "You must stay away from certain people."

Her breath caught. "Certain... people?"

He brushed a loose strand of hair from her cheek. "You've always been gentle, too easily swayed by kind words. But kindness can be poison in this palace. I heard whispers—you crossed paths with my brother's Empress today."

Zhi froze.

His thumb lingered near her jaw. "She's... complicated. Misfortune follows her. I don't want you involved. Do you understand?"

Zhi swallowed, her mind flashing to Ananya's calm gaze, the warmth of that simple bowl of soup, the kindness that had felt more genuine than anything she'd known in years.

But she only bowed her head. "I understand, Your Highness."

"Good." He smiled again—beautiful and empty. "I'm only protecting you. You and the boy."

He turned away, waving his hand dismissively. "Rest now. I have matters to attend to."

When the door closed behind him, Zhi finally let her breath out.

Her hands shook faintly as she pressed them against her belly.

He doesn't love me, she thought, her eyes stinging. He loves what I carry.

She glanced toward the low table, where the empty porcelain bowl still sat — the one that had once held Ananya's tonic.

The faint honey scent lingered, soft and comforting amid the coldness of her chamber.

Her eyes softened as she whispered to herself,

"She's the only one in this palace who looked at me... as a person, not a vessel."

Outside, the wind brushed the windows, carrying the distant sound of palace bells.

And deep within the East Pavilion, the prince's smile faded completely, replaced by the dark gleam of envy that had long been festering in his heart.