

## Ghost in the palace

### *Chapter 43: a silly afternoon*

The noon sun shimmered over the imperial garden, warm enough to turn the pond's surface to liquid gold.

Ananya sat under a magnolia tree, surrounded by threads, half-tangled yarn, and a scowling expression that could scare even brave generals.

Her hands were clumsy, fingers wrapped around a crochet hook that refused to cooperate.

"Why won't this stupid thing work?" she muttered, tugging at a loop that promptly unraveled the entire pattern.

Fen Yu floated beside her, upside down, giggling uncontrollably. "Maybe because you're making a bird's nest, not a scarf!"

Wei Rong snorted, arms crossed. "Even the palace cats wouldn't play with that thing."

Li Shen, ever calm, tilted his head. "Crochet is a craft of patience, not war. Perhaps try again with less... violence."

Ananya glared at all three of them. "Easy for you! You don't even have hands!"

Fen Yu burst into laughter so loud Ananya threw the crochet hook at her. It went right through, of course, hitting the nearby bush.

"Ha! Missed again!" Fen Yu teased.

Ananya picked up a ball of yarn and tossed it next. "You're worse than toddlers!"

"And you're worse than an old grandma!" Wei Rong shot back, ducking midair.

Ananya huffed, cheeks puffed. "Thank Heaven no one's around, or they'd think I've gone completely mad—talking to air and losing an argument!"

The ghosts laughed so hard they phased halfway through the garden bench.

At that exact moment, a pair of figures strolled into the garden from the far side of the path — the Emperor, Zhao Rui, and Lady Chen.

They walked close, their conversation gentle, almost nostalgic.

Lady Chen's laughter was soft and sweet as she said, "Do you remember, Your Majesty, how you used to sneak pastries from the kitchen when we were children? You always blamed me when the Dowager found out."

Zhao Rui smiled faintly, eyes half distant. "I remember. You cried so hard, I had to give you my jade bead to stop your tears."

Her hand brushed his sleeve lightly. "You still remember that?"

He nodded. "I remember everything."

Her heart fluttered. For a moment, it felt like old times again — warm, safe, hers.

Until he stopped walking.

His gaze had drifted toward the magnolia grove.

There, a ridiculous sight unfolded: the Queen Consort herself, kneeling on the grass, tangled in yarn, muttering angrily at invisible companions as she waved a crochet hook like a sword.

Zhao Rui blinked, then the corner of his mouth lifted.

Ananya, unaware of her audience, was scolding thin air. "You three are hopeless! If I ever finish this scarf, I'll wrap it around your heads till you stop laughing!"

Lady Chen noticed his sudden stillness. "Your Majesty?"

But Zhao Rui's gaze lingered on the scene — her puffed cheeks, the fierce way she bit her lip in frustration, the wild curls escaping her braid.

It was absurd... and oddly endearing.

He felt something tighten in his chest — amusement, maybe. Or something else.

Lady Chen followed his gaze and froze.

Her smile faltered when she saw who sat beneath the magnolia tree.

The sight of Ananya — radiant even in her clumsiness — sent a surge of hot anger through her veins.

Her jaw clenched. She remembered when Zhao Rui's eyes only ever turned soft for her.

But now, even when standing beside her, he looked somewhere else.

At her.

Lady Chen forced a laugh, but it cracked slightly. "Your Majesty, you seem... distracted."

Zhao Rui blinked, looking back at her. "Hm?"

She tilted her head, her tone light but sharp underneath. "You were smiling at something. Or someone."

He glanced back toward the magnolia grove — just in time to see Ananya toss a tangled bundle of yarn into the air and sigh dramatically.

He coughed, trying to hide his amusement. "Nothing. I was thinking about... the absurdities of palace life."

Lady Chen's fingers curled tightly around her fan. "Ah, yes," she said sweetly. "Some people make even absurdity look graceful, don't they?"

He gave no reply.

"Shall we go, Your Majesty?" she pressed.

Zhao Rui nodded, still faintly smiling. "Let's go I'm hungry."

He didn't see the glint of anger that flashed in her eyes as she turned.

But Lady Chen saw everything — his brief glance, his softened expression, his small laugh.

And in that moment, her heart filled with one clear thought:

> Since she entered this palace, nothing has been the same.

And soon... it will be her last day smiling beneath that magnolia tree.