

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 44: promise over wine

The Lantern Hall shimmered with soft gold light.

Silken curtains swayed gently as palace maids poured warmed wine into carved jade cups.

The scent of jasmine rice and roasted duck filled the air, mingling with the faint crackle of the brazier.

Lady Chen sat opposite the Emperor, her posture elegant, her smile perfectly measured — the kind that could melt hearts and conceal daggers all at once.

It had been weeks since they'd last dined together alone.

Tonight, she intended to remind him what they once were.

She lifted her cup, voice low and smooth. "It's been long since we ate together, Your Majesty. I almost forgot how you like your tea."

Zhao Rui gave a faint smile. "Still without sugar."

Her eyes warmed. "Just as I remembered."

She poured the tea herself, her fingers brushing his wrist deliberately as she set the cup before him.

For a while, they spoke softly — of the old palace gardens they used to sneak into as children, of stolen mooncakes and childish laughter.

Then, Lady Chen's tone shifted slightly. "Do you remember, Your Majesty," she said gently, "what you once promised me?"

He looked up, surprised. "Which promise?"

Her smile was sweet but tinged with sadness. "That when you took the throne, I would never be alone again. That you would give me a child soon — a child who would carry both our names."

The words hung in the air like perfume — sweet, lingering, heavy.

Zhao Rui's gaze softened with memory, then dimmed with fatigue.

He set his cup down, rubbing his temples lightly. "I remember."

Her eyes brightened. "Then why..."

She hesitated, her voice trembling just enough to sound vulnerable. "Why do you never come to me anymore?"

He sighed, his hand reaching across the table to clasp hers. His touch was warm, his expression sincere.

"Chen'er," he said softly, "you've always been with me. Since before the crown, before the wars, before all this."

He smiled faintly. "There's no one in this palace I trust more than you."

Her heart fluttered — but something in his tone felt... distant.

He continued, his voice quieter now, thoughtful. "But right now, the court is divided. Spies and greedy ministers are everywhere. Even the palace walls have ears. This is not the time to bring a child into danger."

She looked down, hiding the flicker of disappointment behind her lashes. "You think it's unsafe?"

He nodded. "Yes. Until the court is purged of traitors and the border is secure, no woman in this palace — even you — should risk carrying an heir."

Lady Chen's grip tightened slightly around his hand. "Then I'll wait. For as long as it takes. You know my family's loyalty will always be yours."

His lips curved faintly. "I know."

The Emperor leaned back, his eyes distant again — the shadow of politics never leaving his thoughts.

"Many in court bow with smiles but plot behind my back. Even within the palace, tongues wag too freely. Before peace, we must have silence."

Lady Chen lowered her gaze demurely. "Then let me help you silence them, Your Majesty. My family can move where the crown cannot."

He looked at her for a moment, studying her expression. "You've already done much, Chen'er. I'll not risk your name any further."

But even as he said it, Lady Chen's heart raced with a quiet thrill. He still trusts me. He still believes I'm his ally.

If she could just keep that trust — keep him from drifting toward her, the so-called Empress — everything would return to the way it was.

The servants refilled their cups and quietly withdrew.

The flicker of candlelight caught the reflection of their hands still resting together — his steady, hers trembling ever so slightly.

Zhao Rui smiled gently. "You've been patient, Chen'er. When all this chaos ends, I'll make good on my promise."

Her heart skipped. "You mean..."

He nodded slowly. "A child. Our child — when the time is right."

Lady Chen forced her smile to remain graceful, but her mind was already racing. When the time is right? How long will that take? Until she wins his heart?

She reached across and gently adjusted his collar, her voice honeyed. "Then promise me you'll come to me when this storm ends."

He looked into her eyes. "I promise."

She smiled — and though her lips curved softly, her eyes gleamed with a resolve that burned quietly beneath the surface.

> If peace won't come soon, she thought, then I'll make it come — even if it means removing the cause of his distraction myself.