

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 45: shadows between brother

The night air was crisp, cool against the heat of the lanterns that lined the Imperial Walkway.

Zhao Rui left the Lantern Hall with the faint taste of wine still on his tongue and Lady Chen's perfume trailing behind him.

He loosened the gold clasp at his throat, exhaling softly. The evening had been pleasant enough—her laughter familiar, her touch light—but the talk of loyalty and promises had weighed on him more than the food itself.

The court was restless. The border remained tense.

Peace, even within these marble walls, was a luxury he could not afford.

As he turned the corner toward his study, a shadow detached from the far corridor.

"Elder Brother."

The voice was smooth, low, polite.

Prince Liang approached with a faint smile, his silver robe glinting beneath the torchlight.

Zhao Rui slowed, inclining his head slightly. "Liang. Out so late?"

The prince bowed, his smile never faltering. "I heard you'd returned from council earlier than usual. I thought perhaps we might speak of the border reports."

The Emperor gestured toward the open colonnade. "Walk with me."

They moved side by side down the moonlit path, footsteps echoing softly.

Beyond the walls, the cicadas hummed; within, silence pressed close.

"The Duke left at dawn," Zhao Rui said. "He carries orders to investigate the northern supply routes personally. Too many ledgers show missing grain and falsified numbers."

Prince Liang nodded. "I read the reports. It's likely corruption from the lower officers. The border generals have grown complacent."

"Or ambitious," Zhao Rui murmured.

Liang glanced at him, tone measured. "Ambition is not always treason, Your Majesty."

The Emperor's mouth curved faintly. "No. But it's the seed from which treason grows."

Liang's smile tightened. "Then you would pull it before it sprouts?"

"If I must."

The words were quiet, but the weight behind them was unmistakable.

They paused near the lotus pond where lanterns floated gently across the surface.

For a moment, their reflections shimmered side by side—two faces alike in form, divided by the space of a crown.

Liang looked away first. "You never rest, Brother. Even at the table, even in laughter—you're always thinking of war."

"Someone must," Zhao Rui replied simply.

"Someone?" Liang's voice softened, though bitterness crept beneath it. "Or only you?"

The Emperor turned to him fully then, eyes calm but sharp. "Is there something you wish to say?"

Liang's expression smoothed again, his mask slipping easily into place. "Only that the Empire thrives when its rulers share burdens, not hoard them."

Zhao Rui studied him a moment longer, then said, "You speak like a man who feels untrusted."

Liang laughed softly, the sound polite but cold. "And you speak like one who trusts no one."

Neither denied the truth in the other's words.

Zhao Rui resumed walking, his tone lighter. "I heard Princess Zhi's health improves. That pleases me."

A flicker of something crossed Liang's face—pride mixed with calculation. "She's strong. The child will be strong too."

"Good." The Emperor's gaze lingered on him. "Pray Heaven blesses you with a son."

"I do," Liang said smoothly. "A son who might one day serve his uncle loyally."

The words sounded courteous, yet the undertone was unmistakable.

Zhao Rui's eyes narrowed slightly, though his smile remained faint. "Loyalty is a rare gift these days. I'd welcome it—if it were true."

Liang bowed, his face unreadable. "You wound me, Brother."

"I hope not," Zhao Rui replied softly. "The last thing I need is another enemy who calls me family."

They reached the junction where the corridor split—one way leading toward the Emperor's study, the other toward the Prince's residence.

Liang paused, clasping his hands. "Then I'll leave you to your thoughts, Your Majesty. May your night be peaceful."

The Emperor inclined his head. "Peace is earned, not given. Sleep well, Liang."

The prince turned, the faint smile returning to his lips only after he was sure Zhao Rui could no longer see it.

In the Emperor's Study

Back inside, Zhao Rui poured himself a cup of untouched wine, his mind replaying every word, every glance.

His brother's politeness had always been perfect—too perfect.

He looked down at the faint ripples in his cup and murmured,

"Even within my own blood, the current shifts..."

Outside, the torches flickered. Somewhere in the distance, a lone owl called—soft, low, and foreboding.