

## Ghost in the palace

*Chapter 46: smoke on the border*

The wind of the northern plains was sharp enough to cut through armor.

Dust rose like ghosts across the dry land, carrying the faint smell of steel, sweat, and old blood.

Duke Lian reined his horse at the ridge overlooking the camp, his cloak whipping in the bitter wind.

Rows of tents stretched across the horizon, their banners frayed, their fires dull. Soldiers moved like shadows—disciplined but tired.

The Duke's jaw tightened.

So this is the state of the frontier they claimed was "under control."

A horn sounded from below.

The main tent stirred, and a tall man stepped out—a soldier with broad shoulders, bronze skin tanned from years beneath the sun. His armor bore the scars of many battles, but his eyes were bright and unyielding.

"General Rong," the Duke greeted, dismounting.

"Duke Lian." The general bowed stiffly, his voice respectful but cautious. "His Majesty sent word you'd come. I wasn't sure whether to expect a politician or a warrior."

The Duke smiled thinly. "Whichever you prefer depends on how much trouble you're in."

Inside the command tent, maps covered the long wooden table, ink stains marking the shifting lines of defense.

General Rong gestured toward them. "The supply wagons from the capital stopped two weeks ago. Half the rations we received were molded or missing entirely. My men are surviving on scraps."

The Duke's gaze swept the room. "Missing wagons? From which route?"

"The southern pass through Chen Valley."

The Duke's brows furrowed. "Chen Valley?"

That name pricked sharply in his memory.

The Chen family managed the southern trade lines—the same family as Lady Chen.

He kept his expression composed. "And what of your officers?"

Roung's tone hardened. "Two of my captains were caught hoarding provisions and trading with smugglers. I executed them three days ago."

The Duke nodded slowly. "Then the rot runs deeper than hunger."

Roung pushed a ledger across the table. "Here are the manifests from the last three deliveries. Your men can check them if you doubt me."

The Duke flipped through the pages, his eyes narrowing as he studied the marks.

Each shipment bore the same imperial seal—but in slightly different ink shades.

Some entries were written in a smoother hand, others rushed.

And at the bottom of one, a name stood out in small, precise strokes: Supervisor Chen Wei.

The Duke looked up. "This name. He oversees the routes?"

Roung nodded. "He was the one who certified the last deliveries. But he's vanished. Left camp two nights ago with a small escort. Never returned."

"Dead or hiding," the Duke muttered. "Either way, he's guilty."

He closed the ledger, eyes sharp as the wind outside.

"This corruption isn't the work of a few hungry soldiers. It's organized. Planned. Someone powerful is bleeding the border dry."

Roung leaned forward. "You've come from the palace. Tell me, Duke—does His Majesty truly care what happens out here? Or are we just pawns to keep his court quiet?"

The Duke's jaw set. "His Majesty sent me because he does care. But caring isn't enough. He needs proof before heads roll in the capital."

Roung studied him, measuring his words. Then he nodded once, slow and deliberate.

"You're not like the other nobles," he said. "They talk of honor but travel with silk blankets. You came with dust on your boots."

"Then trust me long enough to end this," the Duke said. "Give me three days. I'll find who's behind your missing grain."

Roung smirked faintly. "If you can do that, Duke, I'll drink to your name until I die."

That night, the camp burned quiet.

The wind howled across the plains, carrying the hum of men whispering by dying fires.

Inside his tent, Duke Lian sat alone, poring over ledgers by lamplight. Each number, each seal, each route told a story of theft masked as duty.

He dipped his brush into ink and circled one line in crimson—Chen Valley.

As he leaned back, the tent flap shifted slightly. A messenger appeared, bowing deeply.

"My lord," he said softly. "One of the scouts found something by the southern ravine. Empty barrels... stamped with the royal crest."

The Duke's hand stilled.

"Empty?"

"Yes, my lord. But filled before—with grain or powder. And..." the messenger hesitated, lowering his voice, "there were tracks. Leading west. Not toward the capital... but the enemy's border."

Duke Lian's blood ran cold.

"So the Empire's grain feeds the enemy," he said quietly. "And the thieves wear our own crest."

Outside, thunder rumbled in the far distance.

War was no longer a rumor—it was coming.