

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 47: bread of hunger

The next morning broke beneath a gray sky, the sun veiled in a haze of dust and smoke.

The northern plains smelled faintly of ash and hunger.

Duke Lian rode through the lower camp with General Rong at his side.

Everywhere they passed, the same scene unfolded — hollow faces, tattered uniforms, soldiers sitting by cold fires gnawing at dried roots.

Some had bandages so old they'd begun to fray.

Others sat too still, eyes glassy with exhaustion.

The Duke's chest tightened. This isn't an army, he thought grimly. It's desperation in armor.

They stopped near the supply tent. A soldier, little more than skin and bone, struggled to lift a half-empty sack of rice.

The Duke dismounted immediately.

"How many days' ration is left?" he asked.

The soldier hesitated, glancing at ROUNG before answering. "Two days, my lord. Maybe three if we stretch the soup."

"And the civilians?"

"Worse," ROUNG said grimly. "The villages near the southern ridge haven't had grain for weeks. They're trading livestock for stale flour."

The Duke's hands curled into fists. "This is not negligence. This is cruelty."

He turned sharply to his aide. "Send word to the nearest merchants' guild. I want every grain dealer within fifty li summoned. I'll buy their stock — all of it."

ROUNG blinked. "At your own expense?"

The Duke met his gaze evenly. "Would you rather my men starve while we wait for the palace to debate morality?"

Roung hesitated, then bowed his head. "Then I'll ride with you."

By afternoon, the Duke's party reached the nearby trading outpost — a dusty cluster of storehouses and wagons huddled along the road.

A handful of merchants waited nervously in the main hall, murmuring among themselves.

When the Duke entered, their whispers died instantly.

"Gentlemen," he said, his voice calm but commanding. "The border soldiers are starving. I will pay double market price for your grain stocks. Delivery begins today."

A few nodded eagerly — but one man at the end of the line hesitated.

He was older, with thin gray hair and cautious eyes.

"My lord," the man said softly, bowing low. "I wish I could help... but my stores were seized last week by a royal order."

The Duke frowned. "Royal order? From whom?"

"An official seal from Chen Valley," the merchant replied. "Signed by Supervisor Chen Wei. He claimed the grain was for the Emperor's army, but..."

He trailed off, lowering his gaze. "None of it ever reached here."

Roung stepped forward sharply. "You're sure of that?"

The merchant nodded. "A convoy of wagons took the grain westward — toward the border villages controlled by General Feng's men."

The Duke's pulse quickened. General Feng was a minor commander loyal to the Chen family.

"Did you see any markings on the wagons?" the Duke pressed.

"Yes, my lord. They bore the imperial crest... but the color of the ink was darker. Like it was painted over an older seal."

The Duke exchanged a look with Roung. "Painted over? They forged the royal seal."

The merchant hesitated, then leaned closer, lowering his voice. "My lord, forgive my boldness—but you should be careful. Those who question Chen Valley's shipments don't live long. A scribe in the next town found irregularities in their ledgers. Two days later, he was found dead—poisoned."

The tent went quiet.

The Duke's jaw tightened, but his tone remained steady. "Thank you for your honesty. You've done the Empire a service. My men will protect you and your family until this is resolved."

The merchant fell to his knees. "You're a just man, my lord. Heaven bless you."

By evening, wagons from the other merchants began to roll into the camp — sacks of millet, barley, and rice piled high.

The soldiers' eyes widened as the scent of fresh grain filled the air.

"Feed them first," the Duke ordered. "And the villages too."

General Rong gave a low whistle. "You just spent half your fortune in one afternoon."

The Duke smiled faintly. "Money is paper. Lives are not."

He watched as the first soldiers received bowls of hot porridge, their trembling hands lifting spoons with disbelief.

A few even wept as they ate.

Roung folded his arms. "If Heaven has eyes, it favors men like you."

The Duke's gaze hardened. "Heaven will favor justice — when I drag those rats out of their hiding holes."

As night fell, the Duke sat by his tent, writing a sealed report to the Emperor.

Before he could sign it, a messenger arrived breathless from the southern ridge.

"My lord," he gasped. "We found one of the painted wagons. It was burned near the river — but there's a sigil on the wood... the Chen family's crest."

The Duke's eyes darkened.

He took the brush and wrote one final line at the bottom of his report:

> "The traitor hides beneath a name of loyalty."

Then he pressed his seal into the wax.