

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 48: midnight order

The palace had fallen into silence.

Only the steady crackle of lamps and the whisper of the night wind through the open lattice filled the Emperor's study.

Zhao Rui sat at his desk, robe loose around his shoulders, hair unbound. The hour was late, yet sleep refused him.

Reports lay scattered across the table — lists of missing grain, falsified ledgers, and patrol routes marked in red ink.

Then came a soft knock.

"Your Majesty," a eunuch whispered from beyond the doors. "A courier from the northern camp. Urgent."

Zhao Rui's gaze sharpened. "Send him in."

The courier entered, kneeling as he presented the sealed scroll.

The Emperor broke the wax — Duke Lian's insignia gleamed faintly beneath the lamplight.

He read in silence.

Each line carried weight:

"The border is starving. The soldiers are weak, the villages dying. I've found proof of stolen grain bearing false imperial seals. The trail leads to Chen Valley."

Further down, the tone shifted — colder, desperate.

"I request healers and fresh men. Send aid quietly, or we risk the enemy learning our weakness. I'll hold the line as long as I can."

By the time Zhao Rui reached the end, his hands had tightened around the parchment.

He could almost hear the Duke's steady voice behind the words — disciplined but weary, pushed to the edge of endurance.

He leaned back, exhaling slowly. "You brave fool... even your reports sound like a soldier's oath."

He rose, walking toward the open window.

Beyond the distant palace walls, the night stretched endless and black. The wind carried faint traces of rain.

The Emperor's jaw set. "If the border falls, so does our peace."

He turned sharply. "Summon Han Yi."

Within minutes, a tall man entered — broad-shouldered, sharp-eyed, his movements quiet as a panther. He bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty."

Zhao Rui smiled faintly. "You still don't sleep when I don't, do you?"

Han Yi grinned. "You gave up rest when you wore that crown. I'm merely keeping company with insomnia."

The Emperor chuckled softly before his tone hardened. "I received a letter from Duke Lian. He's uncovered corruption at the border — Chen Valley's name appears in every ledger."

Han Yi's humor faded instantly. "That valley belongs to Lady Chen's kin."

"I know," Zhao Rui said coldly. "Which is why this matter stays between us. No council, no ministers. I want no tongues wagging before I see the truth."

He returned to his desk, taking a blank scroll.

His brush moved quickly, precise strokes forming a sealed command.

"Take fifty of our best riders — men who answer only to me. You'll ride before dawn with carts of grain, coin, and medical supplies. Bring three healers from the temple and five surgeons from the capital. Say nothing to the treasury. If anyone asks, the shipment is bound for the southern mines."

Han Yi accepted the order, eyes gleaming with understanding. "Understood."

Zhao Rui looked up at him. "If this corruption runs as deep as it seems, someone in the palace is feeding on the Empire's lifeblood. You'll protect the Duke — and bring back names. Every last one."

Han Yi bowed deeply. "I'll bring you truth, even if I must carve it from their throats."

After Han Yi left, the Emperor stood alone in the lamplight.

He poured himself a cup of tea that had long gone cold, watching the surface ripple.

Duke Lian had always been steady — loyal to the Empire, loyal to him.

And his daughter, the Empress...

He hesitated, her image flickering across his mind — the stubborn tilt of her chin, the way her brows knit when she argued, how she never bowed even when others did.

He shook his head, half a smile crossing his lips. "Like father, like daughter."

Setting the cup aside, he murmured to himself,

"Hold the border a little longer, old friend. Reinforcements ride with the dawn."

Outside, the bells tolled once — the hour of the ox.

And beyond the palace walls, Han Yi and his riders prepared in silence, their torches snuffed out against the night.

The Empire slept.

Its saviors rode unseen.