

Ghost in the palace

#Chapter 49: fire in the grain yard - Read Ghost in the palace Chapter 49: fire in the grain yard

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The wind carried smoke and shouting long before the horns sounded.

The northern camp, once calm, now seethed like a boiling pot.

From the ridge above, Duke Lian could see torches moving — hundreds of them — bobbing in the darkness like angry fireflies.

"Your Grace!" a soldier stumbled up the hill, breathless. "The villagers— they've gathered at the supply yard! They say the Duke hides food meant for them!"

The Duke's eyes narrowed. "That's absurd. We distributed grain this morning."

General Rong strode forward, his face grim. "Rumors spread faster than fire, my lord. Someone's feeding them lies."

Below, the shouts grew louder. "Traitors! Thieves! Give us our food!"

The Duke felt his stomach twist. After all we did... someone still twists their hunger into hatred.

By the time they reached the yard, the scene had already spiraled out of control.

Dozens of starving villagers, men and women both, surrounded the wagons filled with grain sacks.

A few soldiers tried to hold the line, shields raised, voices pleading for calm.

A rock flew through the air, striking a guard across the face.

Another hit one of the horses, sending it rearing wildly.

"Stop this madness!" Duke Lian shouted, stepping forward. His deep voice carried across the yard, but desperation drowned it.

"They're stealing our food!" a man screamed from the crowd. "He's feeding the nobles while our children starve!"

"That's a lie!" Rong bellowed, moving to stand beside the Duke. "Every family received rations—"

But his words ended in a grunt as a stone slammed into his shoulder.

He stumbled back, teeth gritted, blood staining his armor.

"General Rong!" the Duke caught his arm, eyes flashing. "Fall back! I'll handle this!"

Rong shook his head. "No, my lord. You step into that crowd, and they'll trample you."

The soldiers tightened formation, but the mob kept surging.

Someone in the back shouted, "Burn the wagons! If we can't eat, no one will!"

Torches were raised.

Flames licked the dry air, the smell of smoke sharp and terrifying.

The Duke drew his sword — not to strike, but to be heard.

"Enough!" he roared, his voice cutting through the chaos like thunder. "Every grain here was bought with my gold! You eat because I paid for it! You burn it, and you burn your own lives!"

The words struck some like cold water — but the fire had already caught.

A torch flew, hitting one of the grain carts. Flames erupted.

The Duke lunged forward, shouting for water, for order — when a sharp whizz of an arrow sliced past his ear.

It buried itself in the wooden post behind him.

Rong tackled him aside, grunting as another arrow struck his leg. "Sniper—on the ridge!"

The Duke's heart pounded. "Archers! Find them!"

But before his men could react, another horn blared in the distance — deeper, stronger.

From the dark horizon, torches appeared — moving fast, steady, disciplined.

The banner of the imperial phoenix shimmered in the light of the burning wagons.

General Han Yi rode at the front, his armor dusted with ash, eyes sharp and furious.

"Put down your weapons!" he roared, voice echoing across the chaos. "By order of His Majesty!"

The imperial riders surged forward, forming a wall between the Duke's men and the villagers.

Han Yi dismounted without hesitation, moving straight toward Duke Lian. "You're bleeding, my lord!"

"It's Rong," the Duke said quickly. "Arrow wound. Get him a healer."

Han Yi turned, gesturing sharply. "You heard him! Healers, now!"

As soldiers dragged water barrels and doused the flames, Han Yi's gaze swept the yard. "Who started this?"

The Duke gestured to the villagers, some already kneeling in fear now that imperial soldiers had arrived. "Someone incited them. They think we're hoarding food."

Han Yi's jaw tightened. "Then we find their voice."

Moments later, one of Han Yi's men dragged forward a young man in torn clothes.

He struggled violently, shouting, "I didn't mean to! They told me to say it!"

Han Yi's eyes narrowed. "Told you? Who?"

The man dropped to his knees, trembling. "I—I work at the granary in the next town. A merchant came—rich clothes, said he was from Chen Valley. Gave us coins. Told us to spread the word that the Duke kept grain for the army... and to make the people rise. He said—he said the Duke's death would make the Emperor see the truth!"

Silence fell like a blade.

Duke Lian's face turned to stone. "And you believed him?"

Tears streaked the man's dirt-covered face. "My children were starving. I thought—if I shouted once, they'd eat."

Han Yi's expression darkened. "And because of that, men bled tonight."

The Duke raised a hand. "He's a pawn. The real traitors sit behind silk walls."

He turned to Han Yi, voice low but steady. "You came in time. If not for you, we'd be ash by morning."

Han Yi bowed slightly. "His Majesty sent me with supplies — food, healers, and soldiers. He suspected this would happen."

The Duke nodded once, eyes hard. "Then we hunt the hand behind this. If Chen Valley started this chaos... I'll end it."

As dawn crept over the burning plains, soldiers carried food to the weeping villagers.

The air smelled of smoke and regret.

General ROUNG, pale but alive, sat by the fire, his leg bandaged tightly.

Duke Lian stood beside Han Yi, watching the sunrise.

"He always knows," the Duke murmured. "Even without being told."

Han Yi smiled faintly. "That's why he's Emperor."

The Duke's gaze hardened toward the horizon. "Then tell him this: I'll find the one who turned hunger into rebellion. And when I do... their head will be my offering to the throne."

Chapter 50: price of loyalty

The camp slept under a bruised red sky.

Ash from the burned grain wagons still hung faintly in the air, but inside Duke Lian's tent, the light of a single lamp burned steady.

Stacks of sealed scrolls lay before him — ledgers, signatures, coded letters — proof of everything.

The name Chen Wei appeared again and again, stamped beside forged seals and false deliveries.

Each mark was a nail in the coffin of Lady Chen's uncle, the man whose greed had bled the Empire's borders dry.

General Han Yi stood beside the table, silent but watchful.

"You have enough evidence to bury a dynasty," he said finally.

Duke Lian tied the scrolls together with red silk. "Then let us bury one snake first."

He handed a smaller bundle to his most trusted guard, a scarred man named Shen.

"You will ride ahead," the Duke said. "Deliver this to His Majesty's hands only. No ministers, no guards, no one in between. You ride through the night. Do not stop until dawn."

Shen saluted, eyes fierce. "I swear on my life, my lord."

The Duke nodded. "Good. The Emperor must have truth before the court hears lies."

Han Yi frowned. "You should go with the escort. These men will kill again if they know you carry the originals."

The Duke smiled faintly. "And if I hide, what lesson does that teach my soldiers? That justice fears its own shadow?"

Han Yi's jaw tightened. "You're too brave for your own good."

The Duke laughed softly. "No, General. I'm too old to be afraid."

He strapped his sword to his side and stepped into the night.

They left before dawn — ten riders moving swiftly across the narrow road that wound through the rocky northern hills.

The wind bit cold against their cloaks, the air heavy with silence.

By midday, the sun broke through the clouds.

The Duke raised a hand, signaling the group to rest near the pass.

"Once we cross this ridge, the capital road lies ahead," he said. "We'll reach home by tomorrow."

But as he turned his horse, the silence cracked.

A twang cut through the wind.

The first arrow struck one of the men in the throat.

Before the others could react, a rain of shafts descended from both sides of the pass.

"Ambush!"

The Duke drew his sword, deflecting one arrow mid-flight, shouting orders. "Form the line! Protect the scrolls!"

Chaos exploded. Horses screamed. Steel met steel as masked men emerged from the rocks, blades flashing.

Han Yi's warning echoed in his mind — They will kill again if they know.

Another arrow hissed through the air.

The Duke turned just in time for it to pierce his shoulder, driving him back in the saddle.

Pain exploded down his arm.

"Ride!" he roared to his men. "Get through!"

Blood soaked through his sleeve.

He gritted his teeth, swinging his sword as another attacker lunged. With one strike, the Duke cut the man down.

But there were too many.

Shen grabbed the Duke's reins, shouting, "My lord, fall back! We have to move!"

"Go!" the Duke barked. "Deliver the letter—!"

Another arrow slammed into his side, stealing his breath. His sword clattered against the rocks.

The last thing he saw before darkness claimed him was his men breaking through the trees, the scrolls tied to a rider's saddle, vanishing toward the capital.

Hours later, near dusk, a group of battered soldiers arrived at Duke Lian's estate — their armor bloodied, their faces streaked with dust and grief.

Two of them carried their master between them, unconscious, his robes dark with blood.

The gates burst open as Lady Xiu and their daughters ran forward.

"Father!" "My lord!"

Lady Xiu fell to her knees beside him, her hands trembling as she touched his face.

"He's burning up," she whispered. "Bring the physician! Hurry!"

The servants scattered, weeping, carrying the Duke into the inner hall.

Ananya's younger sister clung to her mother's sleeve, crying. "He promised he would come back safe!"

Lady Xiu pressed her hand against his chest, feeling the faint heartbeat. "He kept his promise... he came back."

Meanwhile, far away in the capital, the Emperor sat alone again in his study.

The courier from the border knelt before him, presenting the sealed bundle.

Zhao Rui broke the wax and scanned the documents quickly — each line confirming what he had feared.

Chen Valley's name.

Lady Chen's uncle.

Forged orders bearing the imperial seal.

By the time he reached the last page, his expression had turned to ice.

"Summon the guards," he said quietly. "At once."

The eunuch bowed deeply. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Moments later, the Emperor's voice rang cold as steel through the hall.

"Cuff Lord Chen before dawn. Seal his estate. No one enters, no one leaves."

The eunuch hesitated. "Your Majesty... the Lord is uncle to—"

"Silence." The Emperor's gaze cut through him. "Tomorrow, I'll hold court. By sunrise, I'll decide his fate before the Empire."

He looked down once more at the blood-stained edge of the Duke's letter and whispered, almost to himself,

"You've done enough, old friend. Now it's my turn."