

Ghost 55

Chapter 55: the emperor decree

The hall smelled of incense and iron. Dawn did not yet prick the sky, but torches had been set, and the courtiers' faces were pale in the thin light.

Zhao Rui's robe hung impeccably about him; the dragon on his breast gleamed like a promise. He had not spoken all night. The ledger from Duke Lian lay open on a side table, its pages heavy with truth.

When the emperor finally rose, his voice carried like a sword through the chamber. "The crime is clear. Treason disguised as trade. Men who use the Emperor's seal to feed enemies and starve their own people have answered the worst question a man can ask: would he betray his country for coin?"

Chen Tai and other Chen relatives scrambled, lips moving in protest. Lady Chen's face was a ruin of fury and fear — she sat like a figure whose strings had been cut, fingers white on the edge of her silk.

Zhao Rui's eyes did not waver. "By imperial law and by the blood under our standards, the sentence is death. At dawn tomorrow, Chen Wei—Lord Chen's uncle—will be executed. His property is confiscated. His house is sealed."

Murmurs rose. Someone dared to call out that the Chen family's loyalty had been true. Zhao Rui lifted a hand and the hall fell. "Loyalty that hides poison is not loyalty," he said coldly. "I will not spare a name because it is gilded."

He turned, and the order widened like a fall of snow. "As for his immediate household: his wife and children are to be bound to the northern posts as servants to the border garrisons — to labor where their hands will feed those whom their masters starved. Let none among the Chen kin think themselves above the cost of their family's crimes."

The words landed like thunder. Faces went still; Lady Chen's lips formed a sound that might have been a prayer or a curse.

Zhao Rui's voice hardened further. "Let this be the lesson: anyone who plays with the empire's lifeblood will face the same fate. No rank, no favor, no childhood pledge shields treachery. The penalty for betraying the crown will be executed without mercy."

He paused, then softened — not with mercy, but with calculation. "To those who served faithfully and suffered for the sake of the people, we will restore what was taken. Duke Lian has risked life and limb and brought the truth to light."

There was a ripple of surprise as the emperor moved from retribution to reward. "For his service, Duke Lian is hereby granted fifty thousand gold coins in imperial credit. Ten acres of land will be given to him adjacent to his estate to feed the families of the garrison. Two sea-rubies — the finest from the royal stores — shall be delivered to him as a symbol that the crown honors courage."

A low cheer rose from Duke Lian's supporters; Chen family retainers bowed their heads in stunned silence. Lady Chen's face crumpled inward, an expression of contained rage and loss.

Zhao Rui, ever the ruler who balanced iron with calculation, made the final commands with the same steady hand. "Send healers and tonic at once to the Duke's residence. The imperial physician will ride with the convoy. Han Yi, General Rong — you will see this convoy personally reaches the Duke unharmed."

Han Yi bowed. "It will be done, Your Majesty."

"And one more thing," the emperor added, softer than before but with absolute authority. "Empress Lian An will be permitted to remain at the Duke's house for one week. She may attend to his recovery and the household; she shall have the imperial escort and supplies needed. No rumor or edict will prevent her. Let the House of Lian know the crown stands with them."

There was a hush. Lian An had already arrived at her father's estate the night before; the emperor's formal permission would ensure she could stay openly, with imperial protection and provisions. For a moment the thought of the Empress under her roof eased the lines drawn by fear.

An eunuch moved swiftly to carry the emperor's will. "Prepare the sealed messages," Zhao Rui ordered. "One to Duke Lian — send coin, tonic, physicians, and the rubies as a mark of imperial favor. One to the generals and provincial commanders — enforce the seizure of the Chen estates. One to the capital courts — ready the trial at dawn."

The eunuch took the seals and the orders, bowing until his brow touched the marble floor. "It will be executed, Your Majesty."

Outside the Hall, the city shivered under the weight of the dawn orders. Messengers rode like storms to the north; the imperial physician's litter was readied; Han Yi's men arranged carts of tonic, herbs, and coin.

In the Chen quarters, the family's servants wept quietly as guards set seals on chests. Lady Chen stood very still, a mask of cold that did not hide the plotting underneath. She touched the tender place on her cheek where Ananya's palm had struck, and a tiny, terrible smile formed at one corner of her mouth. If the law had taken her uncle, she would answer with schemes no sword could cut at once.

At Duke Lian's house, the courier arrived before the first roll of drums. Mei, the maid, opened the message with trembling hands and read aloud: provisions were coming; reinforcements were on the way; the Emperor himself had ordered coin and rubies; the Empress had the crown's leave to stay. A sob of relief passed through the courtyard.

Lian An closed her eyes for the first time in days and let herself breathe. The weight eased not because the danger had passed — danger still circled like crows — but because the crown had spoken clearly. For now, there was help.