

Ghost 60

Chapter 60: chains and supplies

Dawn in the imperial city arrived with the pale clarity of ice. Bells from the morning watch had barely faded when the Emperor stood at the study window, robe half-fastened, a scroll still in his hand. The candle beside him burned low, the wax forming strange ridges like small white mountains. He had not slept.

Across the desk lay open ledgers—lists of men, wagons, coin, and grain—each marked by his brush in swift, decisive strokes. The border, that constant bleeding wound of the empire, finally pulsed with order again, but order built on exhaustion needed tending.

He turned the last page and reread the report that had arrived before sunrise.

> To His Majesty,

From Han Yi, Commander at the Eastern Front,

By your order, we have retrieved the stolen goods from the merchants' stores. The ringleaders—six men under false banners—were seized in the outer village. They confessed under seal that they sold army grain for coin. They now wear iron and are marched to the capital for judgment.

The Duke has recovered well. His wounds heal. The soldiers cheer his name and say the court remembers them. Morale rises. With your latest dispatch of silver, we rebuilt two storehouses and repaired one bridge swept by flood. Yet winter presses early; we require more salted meat, wool, and tools to mend homes. If granted, the men can rebuild before the snow binds the road.

Your servant, Han Yi.

The Emperor read the last line twice, the brushwork steady and loyal.

Han Yi had always written like that—no flourish, only truth.

He exhaled and set the scroll aside.

"Good," he murmured, the single word a weight lifted.

The rustle of silk broke the quiet; his chief eunuch, Lin Su, approached with a cautious bow. "Your Majesty, shall I summon the ministers to discuss the winter provision list?"

"No," the Emperor said, straightening. "If I wait for their debates, the border will freeze before the wagons roll. Prepare an edict. The treasury will release fifty thousand taels. Ten thousand will go for the rebuilding of villages, twenty for grain and salt, ten for medicines and winter clothing, the rest for repairs of houses and armory. Send word to the western warehouses—no delay."

Lin Su's brows flickered in surprise. "At once, Your Majesty."

"And one more thing," the Emperor added, pacing to the map pinned on the far wall. Dots of red ink marked forts and supply lines; thin strings traced routes like veins through paper skin. His finger rested on a small circle near the mountains. "Here—the Duke's command post. Order the artisans in the capital to prepare timber frames and bricks for new housing. The last storm tore roofs from half the camp. Tell Han Yi he has my full permission to recruit local hands for labor and to purchase grain directly from the southern granaries if need arises."

Lin Su bowed again. "Yes, Majesty."

The Emperor's eyes softened briefly. "And send a personal letter. Tell the Duke... I expect him to recover quickly. The court still needs his blunt honesty."

When Lin Su withdrew, the Emperor remained by the window, gaze on the pale horizon. Beyond those mountains, men marched through frost for a country that had long forgotten their names. He would not forget. Not this time.

A Kingdom in Motion

By mid-morning the palace was alive with noise. Messengers thundered through the courtyards; clerks from the Ministry of Finance arrived red-faced and clutching abacuses like shields. Carts rattled out of the city gates loaded with bolts of wool, sacks of millet, and jars sealed in wax.

The city whispered of imperial generosity. Street hawkers shouted, "His Majesty saves the border!" Soldiers in taverns raised cups in gratitude, half-disbelieving. In the marketplace, mothers pointed toward the palace roofs glittering in the sunlight and told their children, the Emperor remembers his people.

Inside the study, the Emperor reviewed another parchment—Han Yi's follow-up report carried by swift riders.

> Your Majesty,

The arrests are complete. The stolen goods have been restored to the main depots—three hundred sacks of grain, fifty crates of weapons, and three wagons of medical herbs. The men who aided the theft are in chains; they will arrive in the capital within ten days. Discipline returns to the camps. We rebuild daily, but the cold gnaws early. The people of the nearby villages work beside us willingly. With more supplies for winter and timber for shelter, we can restore all within a fortnight.

Your servant, Han Yi.

The Emperor's mouth curved faintly. Han Yi, ever precise.

He signed a new decree in his sharp, uncompromising hand:

> Deliver additional food, coin, and medicinal wine to the Eastern Front. All corrupt officers to be dismissed and replaced with loyal men recommended by Duke Lian and Commander Han Yi. Winter aid to extend to villagers within ten li of the camps.

When the brush left the paper, the order of an empire changed.

A Quiet Thought

By afternoon the Emperor allowed himself a moment's pause. He moved from his desk to the balcony where the chrysanthemums swayed, their yellow heads nodding in the wind. He thought of the Duke—wounded yet unyielding; of Han Yi, precise as an arrow; of the Empress, strange and stubborn, whose words still echoed from the last time they met.

She had accused him of coldness.

Yet here he stood, ensuring her father lived, her homeland fed.

A wry smile ghosted across his lips. "You bite like a dog," he murmured, recalling her furious shout in the carriage. "And yet... you make me remember what loyalty looks like."

Below, servants rushed with documents, unaware that their Emperor's expression had softened from steel to something almost human.

Evening at the Duke's Estate

The news of Han Yi's success reached the Lian estate by sunset. Lanterns were lit in celebration; the Duke, still weak but smiling, called for sweet rice wine. The Duchess wept openly with relief, muttering thanks to every known deity between Heaven and Earth.

Lian An stood near the doorway, arms folded, a smile playing at her lips as she listened to her mother speak.

"Our Emperor truly has the heart of a saint," the Duchess declared. "Even with a thousand duties, he sends healers, herbs, and coin. See? He may be busy, but he thinks of us."

The Duke chuckled, patting her hand. "He is a good ruler, my dear. A man of reason. Perhaps my son-in-law after all."

Lian An looked down quickly to hide the twitch of her mouth. If only they knew how that 'reason' growls when he's annoyed, she thought.

Her sister, bright-eyed and mischievous, leaned close. "Elder Sister, you should thank His Majesty properly when you return to the palace. Father says gratitude strengthens affection."

Lian An arched a brow. "Gratitude? He once accused me of treason for making him tea too strong."

Her sister giggled. "Because you put salt instead of sugar!"

The family laughed until the Duke's cough interrupted them; even that sounded easier now, lighter.

Lian An helped him recline. "Father, you must rest. You've done enough heroics for ten lifetimes."

He squeezed her hand. "I have done my duty, child. Now it is your turn. Be good to him. He may not show it, but the man shoulders the empire alone. One gentle word from you can ease more burden than a thousand ministers."

She wanted to protest, to remind him of how that man's "gentle words" often came sharpened like arrows. But her father's eyes were too soft, too proud. She swallowed her retort and nodded.

"Yes, Father," she said quietly. "I will try."

Night Whispers

That night, as moonlight spilled over the tiled roofs, the estate settled into rest. The ghosts, delighted by the good news, decided a celebration was in order. Fen Yu strung floating lanterns in the air, each glowing faintly blue; Wei Rong drummed invisible rhythms on the tables; Li Shen composed a verse that began solemnly and ended with a rhyme so terrible that Fen Yu threw a cushion at him.

Lian An watched them with a grin. For all their nonsense, they were hers—her secret chaos amid the rigid world.

She lifted her cup of warm wine toward them. "To the border," she said. "To victory, to healing... and to idiots who still know how to laugh."

The ghosts cheered, their voices echoing faintly like wind through glass. Somewhere in the distance, fireworks from the city markets bloomed—gold and red sparks painting the sky.

But beyond those lights, far on the frontier, soldiers huddled by new-built fires, wrapping their cloaks tighter against the cold, whispering thanks for wagons that had come just in time.

And in the Emperor's study, under the weight of stars, a single candle burned beside a map covered with new ink. He traced the eastern border with his finger, then the capital, then the name Lian.

His lips moved silently. "This time," he murmured, "no one starves."