

Ghost 271

Chapter 271: The Court of Power and the News of Death

Morning in the imperial capital carried a different weight.

The sky was clear—

But the air felt heavy.

As if something unseen pressed down on the city.

—

Inside the Imperial Court—

Officials had already gathered.

Rows of ministers stood in their designated places.

Silk robes in shades of red, blue, and gold filled the grand hall.

—

Whispers moved quietly among them.

—

"Why was court summoned early today?"

"Something important..."

"I heard the Duke family has entered the capital..."

"No, no... it's about the recent strange incidents..."

—

At the front—

The Cheng family stood together.

Composed.

But alert.

—

Beside them—

The Chaeng family.

Proud.

Confident.

—

Further to the side—

The Shin family, watching quietly.

—

And among them—

Ministers.

Scholars.

Officials.

—

Everyone waited.

—

Then—

The announcement echoed.

"His Majesty has arrived!"

—

Silence.

—

Every official straightened.

—

The Emperor entered.

—

His presence filled the hall instantly.

Cold.

Authoritative.

Unquestionable.

—

All bowed.

"Greetings, Your Majesty!"

—

"Rise."

—

They stood.

—

The Emperor walked to his throne.

Sat.

Looked across the court.

—

His gaze sharp.

Measuring.

—

Then—

He spoke.

—

"There is an announcement."

—

The court stilled completely.

—

"The daughter of the Chaeng family..."

"...will be married into the Cheng family."

—

A ripple passed through the hall.

—

Eyes shifted.

Expressions changed.

—

The Emperor continued,

"...to Cheng Meli."

—

Now—

The reaction was clearer.

—

The Cheng family looked stunned.

Then—

Delighted.

—

The Chaeng family maintained composure.

But their satisfaction was visible.

—

The Emperor raised his hand slightly.

"And as reward—"

—

"...the Cheng family will be granted additional land."

—

Gasps.

—

"And..."

"...Cheng Meli will be elevated to a Second-Level Scholar."

—

Now—

The court could not remain silent.

—

Whispers spread rapidly.

—

"Second level?!"

"He struggled for years!"

"This is sudden..."

"This marriage—"

—

At the center—

Cheng Meli stood frozen.

—

His mind raced.

—

Years.

He had tried for years.

Failed.

Again and again.

—

And now—

One marriage.

—

Everything changed.

—

His fists tightened slightly.

—

"...Grandmother was right..."

—

He stepped forward.

Kneeling.

—

"This humble subject thanks Your Majesty!"

—

The Cheng family followed.

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

—

The Chaeng family bowed as well.

—

The Emperor watched them.

Expression unreadable.

—

"...Serve well."

—

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

—

The moment settled.

—

Then—

The Emperor's gaze shifted.

Colder now.

—

"...Next matter."

—

The court grew silent again.

—

"Recently—"

"...there have been rumors."

—

He paused.

—

"Of the dead returning."

—

A chill passed through the hall.

—

Some ministers lowered their heads.

Others exchanged glances.

—

The Emperor continued,

"...and strange incidents."

—

"...Disappearance."

"...Reappearance."

"...Unexplained behavior."

—

His voice deepened slightly.

—

"I have investigated."

—

Silence.

—

"From the information gathered—"

—

"...I do not believe the merchant was dead."

—

Shock.

—

Murmurs broke out again.

—

"Not dead?!"

"Then what about the burial?!"

"Impossible!"

—

The Emperor's voice cut through.

—

"He deceived the people."

—

The court stilled instantly.

—

"There is no confirmed evidence of death."

—

A minister stepped forward cautiously.

"Your Majesty... then the rumors—"

—

"Rumors," the Emperor said coldly.

"...can be created."

—

The hall quieted again.

—

The tension eased slightly.

—

Some ministers nodded.

"Yes... that is possible..."

—

"People exaggerate..."

—

"Fear spreads quickly..."

—

For a moment—

The court seemed to stabilize.

—

But then—

—

The doors burst open.

—

"Your Majesty!"

—

A guard rushed in.

Breathing heavily.

—

The entire court turned.

—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

"...Speak."

—

The guard dropped to his knees.

—

"Urgent news from the Chaeng family!"

—

The Chaeng family stiffened.

—

"...What happened?"

—

The guard's voice trembled.

—

"...The Chaeng family's daughter..."

—

A pause.

—

"...has committed suicide."

—

Silence.

—

Complete.

Absolute.

—

No one moved.

—

No one breathed.

—

The words—

Hung in the air.

Heavy.

Unreal.

—

"...What?"

—

The Chaeng family head stepped forward.

His face pale.

—

"...Say that again."

—

The guard lowered his head.

"...She has taken her life."

—

Shock rippled through the hall.

—

"No..."

—

"How is that possible?!"

—

"She was just—"

—

"Marriage was announced—"

—

The Cheng family froze.

—

Cheng Meli's expression shattered.

—

"...No..."

—

His voice barely came out.

—

"This... this can't be..."

—

The Chaeng family head staggered slightly.

His composure breaking.

—

"...Impossible..."

—

The Emperor did not speak immediately.

—

His gaze darkened.

Deepened.

—

Because this—

Was not coincidence.

—

A marriage announced.

A reward granted.

—

And immediately—

Death.

—

Too fast.

Too precise.

—

The hall erupted.

—

"Investigate!"

"This is suspicious!"

"She wouldn't do this!"

—

The Emperor finally raised his hand.

—

Silence returned instantly.

—

"...Seal the Chaeng residence."

—

His voice was cold.

—

"No one enters."

"No one leaves."

—

The guard bowed.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

—

The Emperor continued,

"...This is not suicide."

—

The entire court froze again.

—

"...It is a message."

—

A chill ran through every official present.

—

Because now—

They understood.

—

This was no longer politics.

—

This was something darker.

—

Something—

That had begun to move openly.

—

And the court—

Had just witnessed—

The beginning of something far more dangerous.

—

The Emperor's gaze swept across the hall.

—

Sharp.

Unforgiving.

—

"...Find the truth."

—

Because now—

There was no doubt.

—

The game—

Had changed.

Four Deaths and One Truth

The imperial court did not recover from the first shock—

Before the second one arrived.

—

The guard who had delivered the first news had not yet lifted his head.

His breathing was still uneven.

His hands trembling against the marble floor.

—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

"...You are not finished."

—

The guard stiffened.

Then—

Lowered his head further.

—

"There is... more, Your Majesty."

—

A chill swept through the court.

—

The Emperor's voice dropped.

"...Speak."

—

The guard swallowed.

—

"...Other guards have just arrived from the Chaeng residence."

—

"Three more girls..."

"...who had given testimony earlier..."

"...have also committed suicide."

—

Silence.

—

No—

Not silence.

—

Something deeper.

Heavier.

—

The kind that suffocates.

—

"...Four?"

—

A minister's voice broke faintly.

—

"Four girls... all dead?"

—

The guard's voice trembled.

"...Yes, Your Majesty."

—

Shock rippled violently through the hall.

—

"This is impossible!"

"Four people?!"

"All at the same time?!"

—

The Cheng family froze in horror.

—

Cheng Meli staggered back.

"...No..."

—

The Chaeng family head's face turned ashen.

—

"This... this is not coincidence..."

—

The Emperor did not move.

—

But his fingers—

Tightened slowly against the armrest of the throne.

—

His mind—

Already racing.

—

One death—

Could be explained.

—

Four—

Could not.

—

"...And?"

—

His voice came again.

Low.

Controlled.

—

The guard continued—

—

"...The merchant involved in the earlier case..."

"...has also been found dead."

—

The court erupted.

—

"What?!"

—

"Five deaths now?!"

—

"This is madness!"

—

The Emperor's gaze turned cold.

—

Five.

—

Not coincidence.

—

Pattern.

—

Controlled.

—

Precise.

—

His eyes narrowed slightly.

—

"...All of them connected."

—

The guard nodded.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

—

The Emperor leaned forward slightly.

—

"...Did they leave anything behind?"

—

A pause.

—

Then—

"...Yes."

—

"They each left a suicide note."

—

The hall stilled again.

—

"Notes?" a minister repeated.

—

"In their own handwriting."

—

Murmurs spread again.

—

"That means—"

"They chose—"

"No."

—

The Emperor's voice cut through sharply.

—

"...It means nothing."

—

Silence.

—

Because his tone—

Carried certainty.

—

Not doubt.

—

He stood slowly.

—

His presence alone forced the entire court into stillness.

—

"...Seal all related locations."

—

"...No one is to speak of this freely."

—

"...No rumors."

—

His gaze swept across the ministers.

—

"Anyone spreading fear—"

"...will be punished."

—

They bowed immediately.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

—

Then—

He turned toward the Chaeng and Cheng families.

—

"...The matter will be addressed after the burials."

—

"...For now—"

"...you may leave."

—

The Chaeng family trembled.

The Cheng family was still in shock.

—

They bowed weakly.

—

"...Yes... Your Majesty..."

—

One by one—

The court emptied.

—

But the whispers—

Did not stop.

—

They spread.

Like wildfire.

—

The Spread of Fear

By noon—

The entire capital knew.

—

"Four girls dead!"

—

"They all committed suicide!"

—

"The merchant too!"

—

"They all wrote notes!"

—

"But—"

—

"They were witnesses!"

—

"Witnesses to what?"

—

"The case—!"

—

"Something is being hidden!"

—

Fear grew.

—

And then—

The darker version began.

—

"They were found with a dead man..."

—

"They were dishonored..."

—

"They killed themselves from shame..."

—

"No—someone killed them!"

—

"No—this is punishment!"

—

"No—this is something evil!"

—

The rumors twisted.

Shifted.

Spread.

—

By evening—

The story had reached the Duke residence.

—

Duke Residence — Wedding Interrupted

The residence had been filled with joy just hours ago.

—

Wedding preparations.

Laughter.

Excitement.

—

But now—

That warmth—

Was gone.

—

The Duke and his brother had returned early.

Their faces serious.

Heavy.

—

Everyone gathered in the main hall.

—

"What happened?" the Duchess asked immediately.

—

The Duke didn't sit.

—

"...The Chaeng daughter is dead."

—

Gasps filled the room.

—

"...What?"

—

"And not just her."

—

"...Four girls."

"...And the merchant."

—

Silence.

—

Lian Hua's face turned pale.

"...All... dead?"

—

Chen Ruyi covered her mouth.

—

"...But... how?"

—

The Duke's brother spoke.

"...All ruled as suicide."

—

"...With notes."

—

The room grew colder.

—

The Empress stood still.

—

Her mind—

Sharp.

—

Too sharp.

—

Because she already knew—

This was wrong.

—

Lian Rou stepped forward.

—

"...This is not suicide."

—

Everyone turned to him.

—

His voice was firm.

Cold.

Certain.

—

"...This is the same person."

—

Silence.

—

"...The one who tried to kill Princess Zhi's baby."

—

"...The one who tried to kill the Empress."

—

"...The one behind everything."

—

The room froze.

—

The Duchess whispered,

"...You're saying..."

—

"...This is all connected?"

—

Lian Rou nodded slowly.

—

"...Yes."

—

The Duke's expression darkened.

—

"...Then this is worse than we thought."

—

The Empress spoke quietly.

—

"...They are cleaning evidence."

—

All eyes turned to her.

—

"...Anyone who knows something..."

"...is being removed."

—

Chen Ruyi trembled slightly.

—

"...Then..."

"...we are also—"

—

"...Targets."

—

The word landed heavily.

—

Lian Hua stepped closer to the Empress.

"...Then what do we do?"

—

The Empress didn't answer immediately.

—

Her eyes—

Calm.

But deep.

—

"...We act normal."

—

Everyone frowned.

—

"...If they think we know—"

"...they will act faster."

—

"...But if we stay unaware—"

"...they will make a mistake."

—

The Duke slowly nodded.

—

"...She's right."

—

His voice turned firm.

—

"No panic."

—

"No rumors."

—

"Continue the wedding preparations."

—

The Duchess looked uncertain.

"...At a time like this?"

—

The Duke replied quietly—

—

"...Especially at a time like this."

—

Because if they stopped—

—

It meant fear.

—

And fear—

—

Was exactly what the enemy wanted.

—

The Hidden Truth

That night—

The Duke residence remained lit.

—

But no one truly rested.

—

Every smile—

Was forced.

—

Every laugh—

Faded quickly.

—

Because beneath everything—

—

They all felt it.

—

Something was watching.

—

Something was moving.

—

And now—

It had shown its hand.

—

Not openly.

—

But clearly enough.

—

Four deaths.

—

One message.

—

Silence.

—

And inside the palace—

The Emperor sat alone.

—

The suicide notes placed before him.

—

His eyes cold.

—

Because he knew—

—

"...This is not the end."

—

"...This is only the beginning."