

## **Ghost 284**

### Chapter 284: Whispers Beneath the Shrine

The palace shrine stood quietly at the far end of the imperial grounds.

Unlike the grand halls of power—

This place held stillness.

Old stone steps.

Faded carvings.

The faint scent of incense lingering in the air.

It was a place where even whispers felt too loud.

—

That morning, the Dowager Empress had come here.

Few knew.

Fewer understood why.

—

And now—

The Emperor knew.

—

A shadow slipped into his study earlier.

A whisper.

A report.

—

"Her Highness visited the shrine."

"And met the Empress."

—

That was enough.

—

The Emperor had paused only for a moment.

His expression unreadable.

But his mind—

Already moving.

—

His mother and the Empress...

Their relationship had never been smooth.

Cold.

Distant.

Sometimes even hostile.

—

And yet—

She went to meet her.

Alone.

—

"...What did she say?"

—

No answer came.

—

That uncertainty—

That unknown—

Was enough to push him to act.

—

He changed his robes.

Left quietly.

No escort.

No announcement.

—

And now—

He stood at the entrance of the shrine.

—

The air felt different here.

Cool.

Still.

Heavy.

—

He stepped inside.

—

The faint sound of wind brushing against wood echoed softly.

And then—

He saw her.

—

The Empress.

—

Sitting alone.

On a wooden swing beneath an old tree.

—

Her dress moved gently with the breeze.

Her expression calm.

Quiet.

Almost distant.

—

No guards.

No maids.

—

Just her.

—

For a moment—

He didn't move.

—

Then—

He walked forward.

—

The sound of his footsteps was soft.

But she noticed.

—

Her eyes lifted.

Meeting his.

—

A brief pause.

—

Then she spoke first.

"...Your Majesty."

—

He stopped in front of her.

—

"...Were you waiting for someone?"

—

She shook her head slightly.

"No."

—

Silence settled between them.

—

Then—

He asked.

Direct.

—

"...Did my mother give you a hard time?"

—

The question came without decoration.

Without hesitation.

—

His gaze was steady.

But beneath it—

Concern.

—

"...I'm sorry."

—

That surprised her.

—

She blinked slightly.

—

"...She didn't."

—

He studied her.

—

"...You're sure?"

—

She nodded.

"Yes."

—

A pause.

—

Then she added calmly,

"She only spoke a few words."

—

He didn't ask what those words were.

—

Because something in her tone told him—

It didn't matter.

—

Or perhaps—

She didn't want to say.

—

The wind moved again.

The swing shifted slightly.

—

Then—

She spoke.

—

"...What about the nobleman?"

—

His gaze sharpened instantly.

"...What?"

—

She looked at him.

Calm.

Clear.

—

"The one who died recently."

—

"...The same way those girls did."

—

Silence.

—

Heavy.

—

The Emperor froze.

—

"...You remember?"

—

Her eyes didn't waver.

"Yes."

—

His mind moved quickly.

—

Because—

Everyone else had forgotten.

—

The strange deaths.

The girls.

The patterns.

—

It was as if those memories had faded from others' minds.

Blurred.

Distorted.

—

But she—

Remembered.

—

And then—

He understood.

—

"...You're awakened."

—

She didn't respond.

But she didn't deny it.

—

He exhaled slowly.

—

"...That explains it."

—

He stepped closer.

Lowering his voice.

—

"These deaths..."

"They are not normal."

—

"I've been investigating."

—

Her gaze remained steady.

"...And?"

—

His expression darkened.

—

"...It's black magic."

—

The words felt heavy in the quiet shrine.

—

"They didn't just die."

—

"They were drained."

—

"...Consumed."

—

The air felt colder.

—

She didn't react with fear.

—

Instead—

She nodded.

—

"I thought so."

—

He looked at her.

—

"You already knew?"

—

She shook her head slightly.

"Not confirmed."

—

"But..."

—

She paused.

—

"I met two men here."

—

His eyes narrowed.

"...Who?"

—

"Travelers from the north."

—

"They spoke of similar things."

—

Her voice remained calm.

But each word—

Carefully placed.

—

"They said..."

"...in the northern regions..."

"...black magic is stronger."

—

"They called it..."

"...human-ghost breeding."

—

Silence.

—

The Emperor's expression changed.

—

Because—

He had heard that before.

—

"...The barbarians."

—

He muttered.

—

"They spoke of it too."

—

"Strange rituals."

—

"Humans... becoming something else."

—

"Ghosts gaining form."

—

"Life... twisted."

—

The shrine felt colder now.

—

The wind—

Heavier.

—

Then—

He spoke.

—

"...I was planning to go there."

—

Her gaze shifted slightly.

—

"To the north?"

—

"Yes."

—

He looked at her.

—

"...But not yet."

—

"I need to confirm more."

—

"If this is connected..."

"...then this is bigger than the palace."

—

She nodded.

—

"...It always was."

—

Another silence.

—

Then—

She said quietly,

"...What if it's connected to us?"

—

His gaze sharpened.

—

"...Explain."

—

She looked at the ground briefly.

—

Then back at him.

—

"The night at the lake."

—

"My body moving."

—

"No control."

—

"That wasn't natural."

—

He didn't deny it.

—

"...No."

—

She continued,

"...What if we were targeted first?"

—

"...And now..."

"...it's spreading."

—

The thought lingered.

Dark.

Unsettling.

—

The Emperor's expression hardened.

—

"...Then we find them."

—

"And end it."

—

Simple.

Direct.

—

But his voice carried something more.

—

Determination.

—

Not just as a ruler.

—

But as someone—

Protecting something.

—

Someone.

—

She looked at him.

—

"...Together?"

—

He didn't hesitate.

—

"...Yes."

—

The word echoed softly.

—

For a moment—

The distance between them—

Felt smaller.

—

Not erased.

—

But... less.

—

The swing moved gently.

—

The leaves above rustled.

—

And beneath the quiet shrine—

Two people stood.

—

Not just Emperor and Empress.

—

But something else.

—

Two individuals—

Facing something dark.

—

Something unseen.

—

And perhaps—

For the first time—

They were not alone in it.

When the Dead Walked

Dawn broke over the capital, but it did not bring comfort.

Instead—

It brought whispers.

Then fear.

Then chaos.

—

At first, it was only rumors.

Quiet.

Uncertain.

Passed between market stalls and alley corners.

—

"They saw him..."

"No... that's impossible..."

"He died three days ago..."

—

But by noon—

The whispers had become screams.

—

"They're back!"

"The dead are walking!"

—

The entire kingdom trembled.

—

The Streets of Fear

The market that was once filled with laughter now carried tension.

Shops opened late.

Some didn't open at all.

People gathered in small groups, speaking in hushed tones.

—

A woman clutched her child tightly.

"I saw him with my own eyes..."

—

An old man shook his head.

"That boy... we buried him..."

—

Another voice trembled,

"He came to our door last night..."

—

"He spoke... like nothing happened..."

—

Fear spread faster than fire.

—

Not because of what was seen—

But because of what it meant.

—

The Emperor Moves

Inside the palace—

The news reached the Emperor quickly.

—

A messenger knelt.

"Your Majesty... something strange is happening in the capital."

—

He didn't wait.

—

No court.

No delay.

—

He changed into simpler robes.

And left the palace.

—

This time—

Not as a ruler.

—

But as someone searching for truth.

—

Among the People

The Emperor walked through the streets quietly.

No announcement.

No guards in sight.

—

Just him.

—

Watching.

Listening.

—

He stopped near a small crowd.

—

A group of villagers stood together.

Their faces pale.

Their voices trembling.

—

"...Tell me what happened."

—

His voice was calm.

But firm.

—

They turned.

Startled.

—

One man stepped forward.

"You... you want to know?"

—

"Yes."

—

The man swallowed.

Then began.

—

The Story

"It was last night..."

—

"We had just finished dinner..."

—

"The house was quiet..."

—

"Then... we heard knocking."

—

The man's hands shook slightly.

—

"At first... we thought it was a traveler..."

—

"But when we opened the door..."

—

He paused.

His voice faltering.

—

"...It was him."

—

"...My brother."

—

Silence fell around them.

—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

"...Your brother?"

—

The man nodded slowly.

—

"He died."

"Three days ago."

—

"We buried him ourselves."

—

"...I saw his body."

—

"...I carried him."

—

His voice broke slightly.

—

"But last night..."

—

"He stood at the door."

—

"...Alive."

—

The crowd murmured.

—

The Emperor asked,

"...What did he do?"

—

The man's face paled further.

—

"...He smiled."

—

"...Just like before."

—

"He asked why we didn't open the door sooner."

—

"He spoke normally."

—

"...As if nothing happened."

—

A woman beside him whispered,

"...Did you let him in?"

—

The man closed his eyes briefly.

—

"...Yes."

—

Silence.

—

Heavy.

—

The Emperor's voice lowered.

"...And then?"

—

The man opened his eyes again.

—

"...At first... everything seemed normal."

—

"He ate."

—

"He spoke."

—

"He even laughed."

—

"But..."

—

His voice dropped.

—

"...His eyes."

—

"They weren't right."

—

The Emperor didn't interrupt.

—

"...And his body..."

—

"...It was cold."

—

"Like... a corpse."

—

A chill passed through the crowd.

—

The man continued,

—

"...At midnight..."

—

"He stood up."

—

"...And left."

—

"We tried to stop him..."

—

"But..."

—

"...he was stronger."

—

"...too strong."

—

"And when he left..."

—

"He didn't look back."

—

Silence swallowed the street.

—

More Voices

Another woman stepped forward.

—

"It happened to us too."

—

"My daughter..."

—

"She died a week ago..."

—

"...But last night..."

—

"She came back."

—

Tears filled her eyes.

—

"She called me 'mother'..."

—

"She hugged me..."

—

"...But her arms..."

—

"...were cold."

—

Her voice trembled.

—

"...I couldn't feel her heartbeat."

—

The Emperor's jaw tightened.

—

"And then?" he asked.

—

"She disappeared before sunrise."

—

"...Like she was never there."

—

A third voice spoke.

—

"They come at night."

—

"They leave before morning."

—

"They look human..."

—

"But they are not."

—

The Pattern

The Emperor stood silently.

Listening.

—

Each story—

Different.

But the same.

—

Dead.

Returning.

Speaking.

Moving.

—

Then disappearing.

—

"...Not ghosts."

—

He murmured.

—

"...Not alive either."

—

His mind moved quickly.

—

Black magic.

—

The shrine.

—

The northern lands.

—

Human-ghost breeding.

—

Everything—

Connecting.

—

The Fear Grows

Around him—

People began to panic.

—

"What if they don't leave next time?"

—

"What if they stay?"

—

"What if..."

—

"They're not the same anymore?"

—

Children cried.

—

Women prayed.

—

Men stood helpless.

—

Because this—

Was something no one understood.

—

No sword could cut it.

—

No law could control it.

—

The Emperor's Resolve

The Emperor stepped forward.

—

His presence—

Steady.

—

"...Listen to me."

—

The crowd quieted.

—

"If you see them again—"

—

"Do not let them inside."

—

"Do not trust what you see."

—

"They are not who they were."

—

His voice was firm.

Commanding.

—

"But calm."

—

"...We will find the cause."

—

"And we will stop it."

—

The people looked at him.

—

Not knowing who he truly was.

—

But believing.

—

Because his voice—

Carried certainty.

—

The Truth Beneath

As he turned to leave—

His expression changed.

—

Cold.

Sharp.

Focused.

—

"...It's begun."

—

This was no longer hidden.

No longer quiet.

—

The darkness—

Had stepped into the open.

—

And now—

The entire kingdom would feel it.

—

The Storm Approaches

The sun began to set again.

—

And with it—

Fear returned.

—

Because night—

Was coming.

—

And with it—

—

The dead.

—

Walking.

—

Once more.