

Ghost 285

Chapter 285: Whispers Before the Storm

By the next morning, the capital had changed.

Not in appearance—

The same streets.

The same houses.

The same markets.

—

But the air—

Was different.

—

Heavy.

Restless.

Uncertain.

—

The whispers that had begun as scattered fear had now woven themselves into every corner of the city.

And today—

No one spoke loudly anymore.

—

They whispered.

—

The Market of Fear

The once-busy marketplace had slowed.

Shops opened late.

Some merchants didn't open at all.

—

A fruit seller leaned toward another.

"...Did you hear?"

—

The other nodded immediately.

"Everyone heard."

—

"They're saying the dead came back."

—

"Not saying."

—

"...They did."

—

Nearby, a group of women huddled together.

One of them clutched prayer beads tightly.

"My neighbor's son... he returned last night."

—

"...He spoke."

—

"...He even smiled."

—

Another woman whispered,

"But he died last week..."

—

The first woman nodded, her eyes wide.

"That's why it's terrifying."

—

Children and Shadows

Even children—

Who once ran freely through the streets—

Now stayed close to their parents.

—

A small boy asked softly,

"Mother... if I die... will I come back too?"

—

His mother froze.

—

Then quickly pulled him closer.

"Don't say such things!"

—

But her hands—

Were trembling.

—

Because she didn't know the answer.

—

The Elders Speak

At the edge of the market—

A group of elders sat together.

Their expressions were grave.

—

One of them spoke slowly,

"This is not normal."

—

Another nodded.

"...It's a sign."

—

"A sign of what?"

—

The oldest among them looked at the sky.

—

"...Doom."

—

Silence fell around them.

—

"When the dead walk among the living..."

—

"It means the balance is broken."

—

"And when the balance breaks..."

—

"...disaster follows."

—

The younger men nearby shifted uneasily.

"...What kind of disaster?"

—

The elder's voice dropped.

"...War."

"...Famine."

"...Or something worse."

—

Fear Spreads Like Fire

The rumors didn't stay in one place.

—

They spread.

—

From the market—

To the streets—

To the homes—

To the temples—

—

Everywhere.

—

"Don't open the door at night."

"Don't answer if someone calls your name."

"Don't look into their eyes."

—

Rules.

Superstitions.

Desperation.

—

People began lighting incense outside their homes.

—

Praying.

—

Offering.

—

Begging.

—

For protection.

—

The Shrine Crowds

At the temple—

Crowds gathered like never before.

—

Kneeling.

Crying.

Praying.

—

"Protect us..."

—

"Keep them away..."

—

"Let the dead stay dead..."

—

The priests tried to calm them.

—

But even they—

Looked uncertain.

—

Inside the Palace Walls

Even within the palace—

The whispers had reached.

—

Servants spoke quietly.

—

"...I heard it's happening in every district."

—

"...Some say even nobles have seen it."

—

"...No one is safe."

—

Fear—

Did not recognize status.

—

The Duke Residence

At the Duke residence—

The atmosphere remained controlled.

—

But not calm.

—

The family had already heard.

—

Lian Hua sat unusually quiet.

"...Is it true?"

—

Lian Rou nodded slowly.

"Yes."

—

Chen Ruyi looked down.

"...This is worse than we thought."

—

The Duke stood by the window.

Silent.

—

Then he spoke.

"...This is only the beginning."

—

Everyone looked at him.

—

"If the dead are walking..."

—

"...then something is forcing them."

—

His gaze hardened.

—

"And that something..."

—

"...is not human."

—

The Empress's Thoughts

In her chamber—

The Empress stood still.

—

Her mind—

Clear.

—

"...It's spreading faster."

—

Faster than expected.

—

The lake.

—

The attack.

—

The shrine.

—

The northern whispers.

—

Now—

The dead.

—

All connected.

—

She closed her eyes briefly.

—

"...So this is what they were building."

—

The Emperor's Realization

In the palace—

The Emperor stood alone.

—

Looking at the reports.

—

Each one worse than the last.

—

Sightings.

Disappearances.

Strange behaviors.

—

"...Not isolated."

—

"...Not random."

—

"...A system."

—

His fingers tightened.

—

"...Someone is controlling this."

—

And whoever it was—

—

Was powerful.

—

The People Prepare

Back in the capital—

The fear had turned into action.

—

Doors were reinforced.

Windows sealed.

Lanterns left burning through the night.

—

Families stayed together.

—

No one walked alone anymore.

—

The elders spoke again.

—

"We must prepare."

—

"For what?" someone asked.

—

The answer came slowly.

—

"...For survival."

—

Night Falls Again

As the sun began to set—

The city grew quieter.

—

Too quiet.

—

Because everyone knew—

—

What came with night.

—

People closed their doors early.

—

Lights dimmed.

—

Prayers whispered.

—

And hearts—

Raced.

—

Because somewhere—

In the darkness—

—

Something was waiting.

—

And when the night fully fell—

—

The whispers would return.

—

The footsteps.

—

The voices.

—

The dead—

—

Walking again.

The Message of Doom

The night wind moved silently through the hidden courtyard.

No lanterns.

No servants.

No sound—

Except the faint rustle of robes.

—

Shin Gu stood beneath the shadow of a withered tree.

Her fingers moved calmly as she sealed a small scroll.

No hesitation.

No doubt.

—

The message was short.

Simple.

Cold.

—

"The doom has begun."

—

She handed it to a cloaked figure.

"Deliver it."

—

The figure bowed.

And vanished into the darkness.

—

Shin Gu's lips curved slightly.

—

"...Now let's see how long they can hold on."

—

The One Who Laughs

Far from the capital—

In a hidden chamber lit by dim blue flames—

A man sat lazily on a carved chair.

—

The scroll arrived.

—

He opened it.

Read it once.

—

Then—

Laughed.

—

A low, amused laugh.

Echoing against stone walls.

—

"So..."

—

"It has started."

—

His eyes gleamed with something unnatural.

—

"...Good."

—

He stood slowly.

Walking toward a large map spread across the wall.

—

The capital marked clearly.

—

His fingers traced it.

—

"The royal family..."

—

"...has ruled long enough."

—

His smile widened.

—

"...It's time for it to end."

—

He turned slightly.

Looking toward the shadows behind him.

—

"Prepare."

—

"This world will belong to those who deserve it."

—

"...The intelligent."

—

"...The strong."

—

"...And those who follow me."

—

His voice dropped.

—

"The rest..."

—

"...will disappear."

—

Chaos in the Capital

Back in the capital—

The situation worsened.

—

Night after night—

More sightings.

More fear.

More chaos.

—

Some of the dead—

Did not leave before sunrise.

—

Some—

Became violent.

—

Attacks.

Disappearances.

Screams in the dark.

—

The city—

Was no longer safe.

—

The General's Report

Inside the palace—

The doors of the Emperor's chamber opened forcefully.

—

The General entered.

His expression tense.

Urgent.

—

"Your Majesty."

—

The Emperor looked up.

"...Report."

—

The General stepped forward.

—

"The capital is in chaos."

—

"People are panicking."

—

"More incidents have been reported."

—

"Dead individuals returning..."

—

"...and this time—"

—

He paused.

—

"...some are attacking the living."

—

Silence filled the room.

—

The Emperor's gaze darkened.

—

"...How many?"

—

"At least twelve confirmed incidents."

—

"More unreported."

—

The Emperor stood slowly.

—

"...It's escalating."

—

The General nodded.

"Yes."

—

"People are saying..."

—

He hesitated slightly.

—

"...that this is the end."

—

"...A sign that the kingdom is doomed."

—

The Emperor's expression hardened.

—

"...Superstition."

—

But even as he said it—

He knew—

This was no longer just fear.

—

This was real.

—

The Emperor's Decision

He walked toward the window.

Looking out over the palace.

—

The city beyond—

Unseen.

But felt.

—

"...This cannot continue."

—

The General stepped forward.

"What are your orders?"

—

The Emperor didn't hesitate.

—

"...I will go to the shrine."

—

The General blinked slightly.

"...The monk?"

—

"Yes."

—

"...If this is black magic..."

—

"...then we need spiritual intervention."

—

He turned.

—

"Even if it is temporary."

—

"We need to stabilize the situation."

—

The General nodded immediately.

"I will prepare—"

—

"No."

—

The Emperor stopped him.

—

"I will go alone."

—

The General frowned.

"Your Majesty, that is not safe."

—

The Emperor's voice lowered.

—

"...Nothing about this is safe."

—

"But this must be done."

—

At the Shrine Again

The shrine stood as it always did.

—

Quiet.

Still.

Unmoving.

—

But tonight—

It felt heavier.

—

As if it knew.

—

The Emperor stepped inside.

—

The monk sat beneath the ancient tree.

Eyes closed.

Breathing steady.

—

As if he had been waiting.

—

"...You came."

—

The Emperor stopped.

"...You knew I would."

—

The monk opened his eyes slowly.

—

"...The balance is breaking."

—

The Emperor stepped closer.

"...You know what's happening."

—

The monk nodded.

—

"The dead are being pulled back."

—

"Not by will."

—

"...By force."

—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

—

"...Black magic."

—

The monk didn't deny it.

—

"...Something ancient."

—

"...Something forbidden."

—

The air grew colder.

—

"...Can you stop it?"

—

The question was direct.

—

The monk looked at him quietly.

—

"...Not completely."

—

"...But I can slow it."

—

"...Contain it for a while."

—

The Emperor nodded.

—

"That's enough."

—

"For now."

—

The Ritual Begins

The monk stood.

—

The air shifted immediately.

—

Incense burned stronger.

—

The wind stilled.

—

"Prepare yourself."

—

The Emperor didn't move.

—

"I don't need protection."

—

The monk looked at him.

—

"...This is not a battle of swords."

—

"...This is a battle of will."

—

The Emperor's expression didn't change.

—

"...Then I will not lose."

—

The monk nodded.

—

"Good."

—

He began chanting.

—

Low.

Ancient.

—

The ground seemed to respond.

—

The air grew heavy.

—

Energy—

Invisible—

But powerful—

Moved.

—

Far away—

In the capital—

—

The restless movement of the dead slowed.

—

The aggression—

Lessened.

—

The chaos—

Paused.

—

A Temporary Calm

Back in the city—

People noticed.

—

"They're not coming tonight..."

—

"The streets are quiet..."

—

"...What changed?"

—

No one knew.

—

But relief—

Spread.

—

Even if only slightly.

—

The Calm Before the War

At the shrine—

The ritual ended.

—

The monk exhaled slowly.

—

"...It will hold."

—

"...For a while."

—

The Emperor nodded.

—

"How long?"

—

"...Not long enough."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

The monk spoke again.

—

"...The source must be destroyed."

—

"...Or this will return."

—

Stronger.

—

Worse.

—

The Emperor turned.

—

"...Then we find it."

—

His voice—

Calm.

—

But filled with resolve.

—

Because now—

There was no doubt.

—

This was war.

—

Not of kingdoms.

—

But of existence.

—

And somewhere—

In the shadows—

—

Someone was waiting.

—

Smiling.

—

Because this—

Was only the beginning.