

Ghost 225

Chapter 225: five days between life and death

Five days.

Five unbearable, endless days.

The palace no longer felt like a palace.

It felt like a mourning hall waiting for a coffin.

The Empress's Chamber

The incense had burned continuously for five days straight.

Her chamber smelled of medicinal herbs, sandalwood smoke, and fear.

The Empress lay exactly where she had been placed the night she was pulled from the lake.

Pale.

Too pale.

Her lips had lost their color entirely.

Her pulse — once faint — had grown even weaker.

The healer no longer gave reassurances.

He simply worked.

Quietly.

Persistently.

As if defying fate with stubborn hands.

But even he knew.

If she did not wake soon...

Her body would follow her soul.

The Courtyard of Waiting

Outside, her courtyard had become a place of vigil.

The Duke sat upright despite exhaustion, refusing to leave.

The Duchess leaned against a pillar, fingers constantly turning prayer beads.

Lian Rou had not spoken much in five days. His anger had solidified into cold silence.

Her younger sister's eyes were swollen from crying.

Her friends from the restaurant sat near the stone table, fists clenched, unable to accept the stillness inside that room.

Princess Zhi came every morning at dawn.

She would sit by the threshold and chant quietly.

Sometimes her voice broke.

But she never stopped.

Because if she stopped chanting—

She feared hope would stop breathing too.

The Emperor

The Emperor had not slept properly in five days.

He sat beside her bed when court ended.

He watched her breathing.

Counted each rise and fall of her chest.

Sometimes he leaned closer to hear if she was still there.

Still alive.

Still his.

He never imagined it would feel like this.

He never imagined the thought of losing her would feel like someone carving into his ribs.

He rested his forehead lightly against her hand.

"Wake up," he whispered.

No answer.

He laughed weakly.

"You argue with me over dumplings and scarves... but now you choose silence?"

His voice cracked.

He closed his eyes.

When did it change?

When did the irritation become concern?

When did concern become attachment?

When did attachment become love?

He did not know.

Perhaps the day she defended Princess Zhi.

Perhaps the night she ran from the dumpling stall laughing.

Perhaps the day she looked proud holding that crooked red-and-black scarf.

Perhaps he had fallen slowly.

Quietly.

Without noticing.

And now—

Now he realized it when she could no longer hear him.

His throat tightened.

"I was blind," he murmured.

"I thought what I felt for Lady Chen was love. It wasn't."

He exhaled shakily.

"It was comfort. Familiarity. Friendship."

"But you..."

He paused.

"You make me feel alive. Angry. Confused. Protective. Happy."

He gripped her hand carefully.

"If you wake up... I will fix everything."

His voice lowered.

"I will apologize. I will stand beside you openly. I will protect you first."

Silence.

Only her shallow breathing answered.

His chest hurt.

"What if it's too late?" he whispered to the empty room.

Princess Zhi

Princess Zhi had never had someone choose her.

Her mother died young.

Her stepmother was cold.

Her husband drifted.

Her child was gone.

The Empress had been the only one who sat beside her without judgment.

The only one who cooked for her without calculation.

The only one who held her hand without political gain.

Now she sat outside, chanting.

"If you leave," she whispered into the beads, "who will scold me to eat?"

Her tears fell quietly.

"You promised to give justice to my baby..."

"You promised we would grow stronger together..."

She wiped her face and resumed chanting.

Because if she let despair win—

Then the palace truly would belong to darkness.

The Dowager's Chamber

In contrast—

The Dowager's chamber was calm.

Too calm.

Food had been laid out carefully.

Lady Chen sat at one side.

Shin Gu at the other.

Both composed.

Both elegant.

They spoke softly.

They smiled occasionally.

The Dowager watched them closely.

Something felt... off.

The entire palace had fallen into gloom.

Even the servants whispered anxiously.

Yet these two—

They were not grieving.

They were not worried.

They were not tense.

They were... relaxed.

Lady Chen laughed lightly at something Shin Gu said.

Shin Gu smiled in return, lowering her eyes modestly.

The Dowager's brows tightened slightly.

It was not wrong to continue living.

Life did not stop for one person.

But—

The atmosphere was strange.

Too light.

Too unaffected.

"Have you visited the Empress?" the Dowager asked suddenly.

Lady Chen paused only a fraction before answering gently.

"She needs rest. Too many visitors may disturb her."

Shin Gu nodded politely.

"Yes, Your Majesty. We pray for her from afar."

The Dowager studied them.

They looked sincere.

Calm.

Unbothered.

She felt a small flicker of discomfort.

Then she suppressed it.

They had done nothing.

There was no proof.

Rumors were not evidence.

And she was not a woman ruled by suspicion without cause.

"Everyone must move forward," she said evenly.

"We cannot halt the palace for one illness."

Lady Chen nodded obediently.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

But as the Dowager lowered her gaze—

She did not see the brief glance exchanged between Lady Chen and Shin Gu.

A glance too quick.

Too knowing.

The Palace Mood

Outside, servants whispered more boldly.

"They say Her Majesty's pulse is barely there..."

"They say His Majesty hasn't left her side..."

"They say the Duke will not forgive the palace if she dies..."

The palace was divided.

Grief on one side.

Whispers on the other.

Hope hanging by a thread.

Night of the Fifth Day

By the fifth night—

The healer's expression had changed.

He bowed deeply before the Emperor.

"If Her Majesty does not wake by dawn..."

He did not finish the sentence.

He did not need to.

The Emperor dismissed everyone.

He sat beside her again.

The room was dim.

Lantern light flickered.

He leaned close.

"You stubborn woman," he whispered.

"You always fight. Why are you not fighting now?"

His voice trembled.

"Don't leave me."

That was the first time he admitted it.

Not to ministers.

Not to the Dowager.

Not even to himself before this.

But now—

Alone—

He said it.

"I love you."

The words felt raw.

Unpolished.

Too late.

"Wake up and scold me for being foolish."

His tears fell onto her unmoving hand.

Outside—

Princess Zhi continued chanting.

The Duke stood guard.

Her friends refused to leave.

Inside another chamber—

Lady Chen lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

Not crying.

Not smiling.

Just thinking.

And Shin Gu—

In her own room—

Stared at the night sky with unreadable eyes.

The air felt heavy.

As if something unseen hovered above the palace.

Waiting.

Watching.

And somewhere far away—

Between light and shadow—

The Empress's soul stood at a threshold.

Unaware—

That an entire palace was waiting for her to choose

Five days.

Five days without food.

Five days without proper rest.

Five days hovering beside a body that was still warm but no longer fully inhabited.

The three ghosts had not left the Empress's chamber since that night.

Not once.

Fen Yu sat cross-legged near the head of the bed, her usually sharp tongue completely silent. Her translucent fingers hovered inches above the Empress's forehead, trembling as she tried to sense the soul's anchor point.

Nothing.

Only cold emptiness.

The General stood near the foot of the bed, arms crossed, but for once his posture was not proud — it was helpless. His spiritual aura flickered faintly, unstable, weakened from constant attempts to push energy into her.

The Scholar stood by the window, chanting ancient stabilizing mantras under his breath, sweat beading on his ghostly brow despite not possessing a physical body.

They had tried everything.

Every technique the old shaman taught them.

Every forbidden resonance call.

Every soul-binding echo.

But her spirit—

It was drifting farther.

And now—

They could feel it.

A thinning.

A stretching.

Like a silk thread pulled too far.

Fen Yu's voice cracked first.

"She's leaving."

The words trembled in the air.

The General immediately snapped, "Don't say that!"

But even as he said it, his voice broke.

The Scholar closed his eyes.

He felt it too.

The connection that once felt like a glowing bridge between realms had become faint — like a star dimming before dawn.

"She's beyond the threshold," the Scholar whispered.

Fen Yu shook her head violently.

"No! She promised us! She said she wouldn't leave us alone again!"

Her voice echoed through the chamber, but no living human heard it.

She slammed her ghostly fist against the edge of the bed.

For once, it passed straight through.

Powerless.

The General stepped forward.

"I'll force the tether," he growled.

"You'll burn yourself out," the Scholar warned.

"I don't care!"

The General placed both hands above the Empress's chest and released a surge of spiritual force — bright blue energy spilling from him like flames.

It poured downward into her body.

For a moment—

Her breathing hitched.

The three ghosts froze.

But then—

The energy slipped through her like water through sand.

No resistance.

No anchor.

The General staggered backward, nearly collapsing.

Fen Yu caught him.

"You idiot!" she sobbed. "If you fade, what good are you to her?"

The General clenched his jaw, eyes blazing.

"I'd rather disappear than watch her go."

The Scholar's hands trembled as he pressed his palm lightly above her heart.

"She can't hear us anymore."

Fen Yu turned slowly.

Her usual arrogance, her teasing pride, gone completely.

"She always hears us," she whispered.

"She scolds us even when we whisper..."

Her lower lip quivered.

"She calls me monkey... she yells at him... she feeds us even when she's tired..."

Her voice cracked fully now.

"Who's going to cook for us?"

Silence swallowed the room.

The General looked at the Empress's face.

Pale.

Still.

Too still.

"She chose us," he murmured.

"She didn't need to."

"She could've ignored us."

"But she stayed."

The Scholar nodded slowly.

"She anchored us. Strengthened our cultivation. Gave us purpose."

He swallowed hard.

"If she leaves... our tether weakens too."

Fen Yu looked horrified.

"You mean—"

"Yes," the Scholar said softly.

"If her soul fully departs... our connection to this realm may collapse."

For the first time since they became enlightened—

The three ghosts felt fear.

Not of fading.

Not of punishment.

But of being alone again.

Fen Yu crawled closer to the Empress's pillow.

She leaned near her ear.

Her voice trembled like a child's.

"Hey..."

"You stubborn woman..."

"You said we'd fight ghost breeders together."

"You said we'd get stronger."

"You said you wouldn't leave new mess for us."

Tears — real spiritual tears — shimmered and fell like silver droplets through the air.

"If you leave... who will bully us?"

The General turned his face away.

The Scholar's chant faltered.

The air around the Empress's body grew colder.

The thread weakened further.

They could feel it now—

Her soul drifting toward light.

Fen Yu suddenly screamed.

"No! You don't get to rest! You promised!"

She grabbed at the air above the Empress's chest, as if trying to physically hold onto something invisible.

Her fingers trembled.

And for one split second—

She felt it.

A flicker.

Faint.

So faint it was almost imagination.

"She heard!" Fen Yu gasped.

The Scholar stepped forward quickly.

"Again! Call her again!"

The three of them joined hands.

Their spiritual auras intertwined — blue, silver, and pale violet.

They focused everything they had left into one desperate call.

Not a technique.

Not a mantra.

But a plea.

"Come back."

"Come back to us."

"Don't leave us alone."

The chamber trembled faintly.

Lantern flames flickered.

Outside, Princess Zhi's chant stuttered.

Inside—

The Empress's fingers twitched.

Barely.

So slight that even a human eye would miss it.

But the ghosts saw.

They froze.

Hope flared in their chests like wildfire.

"She's not gone yet," the Scholar breathed.

"She's at the edge."

The General clenched his fists.

"Then we don't let her cross."

Fen Yu wiped her tears angrily.

"You hear that, Lian An?!"

"If you die, I'm haunting you forever!"

Her voice cracked again.

"Come back..."

And somewhere—

Very far away—

A fading soul paused.