

Ghost 230

Chapter 230: the breath that returned

The night inside the imperial palace was unbearably quiet.

Even the wind seemed afraid to disturb the stillness surrounding the Empress's chamber.

White mourning lanterns flickered in the corridors outside, casting trembling shadows along the walls.

Servants moved like ghosts, speaking only in whispers.

Everyone knew.

Everyone believed the same thing.

The Empress was dying.

Inside the chamber, the air was thick with the scent of medicinal herbs and burning incense.

The Empress lay motionless on the bed.

Her skin was pale.

Her lips had lost all color.

Each breath she took was faint, almost invisible.

Beside her sat the Emperor.

He had not left the room for five days.

His robes were wrinkled.

Dark shadows circled his eyes.

His hand never released hers.

It was the only warmth she still had.

Around the room sat those who loved her.

Princess Zhi knelt beside the bed, clutching prayer beads.

The Duchess leaned against the Duke, her tears exhausted but still falling silently.

The twins and the Empress's friend sat quietly in the corner.

Even the three ghosts hovered above the bed, their usually playful expressions replaced with grief.

Fen Yu wiped ghostly tears again and again.

"She cannot leave us," she whispered.

The General clenched his fists angrily.

The Scholar stared at the Empress with intense concentration.

Her soul was somewhere far away.

But not gone.

Not yet.

Still... something blocked them.

Some unseen force kept them from pulling her back.

And time was running out.

The Healer's Fear

The healer approached the bed slowly.

His fingers touched the Empress's wrist.

The pulse was weaker than before.

His face paled.

He knew what this meant.

The final moment was approaching.

His eyes shifted toward the Emperor.

How could he say it?

How could he tell the ruler of the empire that the woman he loved was slipping away?

His voice trembled.

"Your Majesty..."

The Emperor did not look up.

The healer swallowed.

"Her pulse..."

Before he could finish—

Something changed.

The Empress's fingers twitched.

So faint that no one noticed at first.

Except the Emperor.

His grip tightened instantly.

He stared at her hand.

"Wait."

The room froze.

The healer leaned closer.

The Duchess stopped breathing.

Princess Zhi's prayer beads slipped from her hands.

The Emperor's voice shook.

"She moved."

The healer quickly checked her pulse again.

It was still weak.

But suddenly—

It beat harder.

Once.

Twice.

Then—

The Empress's chest suddenly rose sharply.

She gasped.

A loud, desperate inhale filled the entire room.

Like someone who had been drowning and finally reached air.

Everyone jumped.

Princess Zhi screamed.

"AH!"

The Duke stepped forward in shock.

The Duchess covered her mouth.

The healer stumbled backward.

The Emperor froze.

For a single moment, no one moved.

Then—

The Empress's eyes opened.

Slowly.

Weakly.

But undeniably open.

The Palace Holds Its Breath

Her vision was blurry.

The first thing she saw was light.

Golden lantern light above her.

Then shadows.

Many shadows.

Voices surrounded her.

Panicked.

Excited.

Crying.

The Empress blinked slowly.

Her throat felt dry.

Her entire body felt heavy.

As if she had returned from somewhere extremely far away.

The Emperor leaned forward suddenly.

"Lian An?"

His voice was trembling.

She turned her eyes toward him.

For a moment, she looked confused.

Then recognition slowly appeared.

"Your... Majesty..."

Her voice was barely a whisper.

But it was enough.

The Emperor's expression shattered.

He grabbed her hand tighter.

"You're awake."

His voice cracked.

"You're awake!"

Princess Zhi burst into tears instantly.

"She woke up!"

The Duchess collapsed to her knees beside the bed.

"My daughter!"

The Duke exhaled heavily, relief flooding his face.

The healer rushed forward again.

"Let me check!"

He grabbed her wrist.

His eyes widened.

"The pulse is stabilizing!"

The entire room erupted into chaos.

The Emperor Breaks

But in the center of that chaos sat the Emperor.

Still holding her hand.

Still staring at her.

As if afraid she might disappear again.

His voice was quiet now.

"You came back."

The Empress looked at him slowly.

Memories rushed through her mind.

The lake.

The darkness.

The white light.

Her parents calling her.

And then—

His voice.

His desperate voice calling her back.

Her lips moved slightly.

"I..."

Her eyes softened.

"I heard you."

The Emperor's breathing stopped.

For the first time in his life...

The ruler of an empire looked completely vulnerable.

He lowered his forehead onto her hand.

And whispered softly—

"Don't leave me again."

The Ghosts Rejoice

Above them, the three ghosts stared in disbelief.

Fen Yu screamed happily.

"She's back!"

The General laughed loudly.

"I knew she wouldn't die!"

The Scholar closed his eyes with relief.

Her soul had returned.

Whatever force tried to take her—

Had failed.

But the Scholar's gaze slowly turned toward the palace walls.

Something dark still lingered there.

Watching.

Waiting.

And it would not give up so easily.

The Palace Reacts

Outside the chamber, the news spread like lightning.

"The Empress woke up!"

"She survived!"

Servants ran through the corridors.

Guards looked stunned.

Even the mourning lanterns suddenly felt unnecessary.

Inside the Dowager's chamber, the old woman froze when she heard the news.

"She... lives?"

Her eyes widened.

For the first time in years—

The Dowager smiled.

"Good."

In Another Courtyard

Far away, in Lady Chen's courtyard—

A teacup shattered against the floor.

"What did you say?"

The servant trembled.

"The Empress... has awakened."

Lady Chen's face turned pale.

Beside her, Shin Gu's smile slowly disappeared.

Impossible.

The ritual had been perfect.

Her eyes darkened.

"Then the game isn't over yet."

Back in the Empress's Chamber

The Empress slowly looked around the room.

Everyone was crying.

Everyone looked relieved.

But her eyes returned to the Emperor.

He still hadn't let go of her hand.

She whispered weakly—

"Why are you crying?"

The Emperor laughed quietly.

Through tears.

"Because you scared me."

For the first time in many days—

The palace felt alive again.

But somewhere in the darkness of the imperial grounds...

Something stirred.

The battle for the Empress's life was not over.

It had only just begun.

Night had already swallowed the palace.

The festival lanterns had long been extinguished, leaving only the pale glow of moonlight over the silent courtyards. But the quiet was deceptive. Beneath it, tension spread through the palace like a slow-moving storm.

Servants whispered.

Guards exchanged uneasy looks.

The news had traveled everywhere.

The Empress had awakened.

She had returned from the brink of death.

From the moment that whisper reached the outer courtyards, the palace atmosphere changed completely.

Hope returned to some.

Fear returned to others.

And somewhere deep inside the palace, a woman sat in silence as the news reached her ears.

Shin Gu's Courtyard

Shin Gu's courtyard was always eerily quiet.

Unlike the lively courtyards of other palace women, hers was simple, calm, almost unnaturally still.

A faint scent of incense floated through the air.

Inside the main chamber, a small altar stood near the wall.

Strange symbols were carved into the wooden surface.

Thin sticks of incense burned slowly before a dark idol.

Shin Gu knelt in front of it.

Her eyes were closed.

Her breathing slow.

She had been meditating for hours.

The ritual she performed five nights ago had required enormous spiritual power.

Drawing a soul away from its body was not a simple task.

Even powerful cultivators would hesitate before attempting it.

But Shin Gu was confident.

Everything had gone perfectly.

She had felt the Empress's soul slipping away.

Pulled slowly toward the void she created.

There had been no mistakes.

No interruptions.

No witnesses.

And now—

The Empress should be dead.

A maid suddenly rushed into the courtyard.

Her footsteps were hurried, almost panicked.

"Lady Shin Gu!"

Shin Gu's eyes opened slowly.

She did not turn around.

Her voice was calm.

"What is it?"

The maid bowed deeply, her voice shaking.

"News has spread through the palace..."

She hesitated.

Then forced herself to speak.

"The Empress has awakened."

Silence.

The incense smoke twisted slowly through the air.

Shin Gu did not move.

The maid swallowed nervously.

"Your Ladyship...?"

Shin Gu finally turned.

Her expression was perfectly calm.

But her eyes...

Her eyes had turned cold.

"What did you say?"

The maid lowered her head even further.

"The Empress... regained consciousness."

"She is alive."

The room suddenly felt colder.

The incense flame flickered violently.

For the first time since entering the palace—

Shin Gu's composure cracked.

The Shattered Calm

Her hand suddenly slammed against the altar.

The small wooden idol fell to the floor with a loud crack.

The maid gasped.

Shin Gu stood slowly.

Her long sleeves trembled slightly.

"That is impossible."

Her voice was no longer calm.

The ritual she performed had been perfect.

The Empress's soul had already crossed the boundary.

No ordinary person could return from that.

Unless—

Her eyes narrowed.

Unless someone interfered.

But who?

The Emperor?

Impossible.

He had no knowledge of spiritual cultivation.

The palace monks?

No.

Their abilities were far too weak.

The three ghosts?

Shin Gu's gaze darkened.

Those annoying spirits had tried to approach the ritual barrier before.

But they were not powerful enough to break it.

So what happened?

Why did the Empress return?

The Broken Ritual

Shin Gu walked slowly toward the altar.

Her fingers traced the strange symbols carved into the wood.

They were ancient.

Forbidden.

Techniques used by ghost breeders.

The same cult hidden in the northern mountains.

The same cult she secretly served.

Her eyes darkened with frustration.

"I felt her soul leave the body."

"I felt the life thread sever."

She whispered softly.

"So why..."

Her nails dug into her palm.

"Why did she come back?"

The maid trembled.

She had never seen Shin Gu lose control before.

Suddenly—

Shin Gu closed her eyes again.

Her spiritual senses spread outward.

Searching.

Scanning.

The palace energy currents flowed like invisible rivers around her.

And then—

She felt it.

A faint pulse.

Coming from the direction of the Empress's courtyard.

Life energy.

Weak.

But undeniable.

The Empress was alive.

Shin Gu's eyes snapped open.

Her expression turned terrifying.

Rage Beneath the Calm

For several moments, she said nothing.

Then she began to laugh softly.

The sound sent chills down the maid's spine.

"So..."

"She survived."

Her voice turned quiet again.

Dangerously quiet.

Shin Gu picked up the broken idol from the floor.

She examined the crack across its face.

"This ritual has never failed before."

Her gaze shifted toward the Empress's courtyard.

"Someone protected her."

Her mind began calculating quickly.

If the Empress survived...

Then the Emperor would grow even closer to her.

Lady Chen would lose influence.

And the palace balance would shift completely.

That could not happen.

Shin Gu slowly placed the idol back on the altar.

Her expression returned to its usual gentle smile.

"Interesting."

The maid blinked nervously.

"My lady...?"

Shin Gu waved her hand dismissively.

"Leave."

The maid hurried away immediately.

As soon as the door closed—

Shin Gu's smile vanished.

Her eyes burned with cold fury.

A New Plan

"The first ritual failed."

She murmured quietly.

"But the next one won't."

This time...

She would not rely only on spiritual manipulation.

She would weaken the Empress first.

Break her spirit.

Destroy the support around her.

Then finish the ritual when her soul was vulnerable again.

Shin Gu walked toward the window.

Moonlight illuminated her pale face.

Her lips curved into a cold smile.

"Wake up as many times as you want."

"But eventually..."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You will still die."

Far away—

Inside the Empress's chamber—

The Emperor sat beside her bed, unaware of the shadow that had just deepened around the palace.

But the three ghosts floating above the ceiling suddenly shivered.

The Scholar looked toward the distant courtyard.

And whispered quietly—

"She knows."

The real war inside the palace...

Had only just begun.