

Ghost 231

Chapter 231: the decision to return

Morning light slowly filtered into the Empress's chamber.

The pale golden rays slipped through the silk curtains and settled softly across the bed where the Empress lay.

For five days the room had felt like a place between life and death.

Medicine bowls.

Burning incense.

Silent prayers.

Tears.

Fear.

But today... something had changed.

The Empress's breathing was steady now.

Her pulse no longer felt like a fading thread.

The healer stood nearby, still stunned by the miracle he had witnessed only hours earlier.

The woman who had been declared beyond saving had suddenly gasped for air and opened her eyes.

Even now he could hardly believe it.

Across the room, servants whispered excitedly while trying not to disturb her rest.

"Her color has returned."

"Heaven truly protected the Empress."

"After five days... she still woke up."

Inside the chamber, however, the atmosphere was different.

Not just relief.

But warmth.

Life had returned to the room.

And the center of that warmth sat beside the bed.

The Emperor.

He had not moved from his place.

His fingers still held the Empress's hand gently, as if afraid that if he let go, she might disappear again.

For five days he had lived in fear.

For five days he had listened to people whisper about her death.

But he refused to believe it.

And now—

She was breathing.

Alive.

Right in front of him.

His gaze softened as he watched her sleeping face.

A faint warmth touched his chest.

She came back.

The Empress Awakens

The Empress's eyelashes trembled.

Slowly... her eyes opened.

The first thing she saw was sunlight.

Soft and comforting.

For a moment she felt disoriented.

Her body felt weak.

Heavy.

As if she had traveled an enormous distance.

Memories flashed through her mind.

The white light.

Her parents.

Their gentle voices calling her.

The warmth of their embrace.

And then—

Another voice.

Desperate.

Broken.

Calling her name again and again.

Come back.

Please come back.

Her eyes slowly focused.

And she saw him.

The Emperor.

Sitting beside her bed.

His expression changed instantly when he realized she was awake.

"Lian An?"

His voice was quiet.

But filled with emotion.

The Empress blinked slowly.

Then a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"Your Majesty..."

Her voice was weak.

But it was enough.

The Emperor exhaled sharply.

For the first time in days, the tension left his shoulders.

"You're awake."

He tightened his hold on her hand slightly.

"You scared everyone."

News Spreads in the Room

The Duchess, who had been sitting nearby, immediately noticed the movement.

Her eyes widened.

"She's awake!"

The cry echoed through the chamber.

Instantly everyone rushed forward.

"An'er!"

"My daughter!"

The Duchess fell beside the bed, tears streaming down her face.

The Duke stepped forward quickly, his normally stern expression breaking.

Princess Zhi gasped loudly.

"She woke up!"

Even the twins and her friends rushed closer.

The room suddenly filled with voices.

Tears.

Relief.

Happiness.

The Empress looked around slowly, her heart warming as she saw their faces.

Her mother crying beside her.

Her father trying to hide his emotion.

Her sister wiping tears with shaking hands.

Her friends staring at her in disbelief.

Princess Zhi clasping her hands together as if thanking the heavens.

For a moment she felt overwhelmed.

When she had walked toward the white light...

She thought she had nothing tying her back to the world.

But seeing everyone here now—

She realized she was wrong.

Very wrong.

Her Mother's Embrace

The Duchess gently leaned forward and hugged her carefully.

"My child..."

Her voice trembled.

"You almost left us."

The Empress felt warmth spread through her chest.

Her mother's arms trembled slightly as she held her.

For five days the Duchess had feared losing her daughter forever.

The Empress slowly lifted her weak arm and touched her mother's hand.

"I'm sorry."

Her voice was soft.

"I made everyone worry."

The Duchess shook her head quickly.

"No."

"You came back."

"That's all that matters."

Tears slid down her cheeks again.

The Duke's Quiet Relief

The Duke stood beside the bed, his tall figure casting a shadow across the room.

He had been silent the entire time.

But his eyes softened when he saw his daughter awake.

"You always were stubborn."

His voice carried a faint warmth.

"Even death couldn't take you."

The Empress laughed weakly.

Her father rarely showed emotion.

But she knew how much he cared.

"I couldn't leave so easily."

Princess Zhi's Tears

Princess Zhi suddenly pushed through the group and rushed to the bed.

Before anyone could stop her, she wrapped her arms around the Empress carefully.

"You idiot!"

Her voice broke.

"Why did you scare us like that?"

The Empress blinked in surprise.

Then she smiled gently.

"I'm sorry."

Princess Zhi sniffed loudly.

"You promised to cook for me again."

"You can't die before that."

The Empress laughed weakly.

"I'll cook."

"Anything you want."

Princess Zhi immediately brightened.

"Then you're not allowed to die."

The Emperor Watches

Throughout the entire scene, the Emperor remained silent.

He watched them carefully.

His heart felt strangely warm.

Seeing her surrounded by people who loved her...

Seeing her smile again...

It was something he never expected to feel.

Then the Empress's gaze slowly returned to him.

For a moment the room seemed to fade away.

Their eyes met.

She could still remember his voice.

The desperation.

The fear.

The way he called her back from the white light.

And suddenly she understood something.

He cared.

More than she ever imagined.

Her lips curved slightly.

"I heard you."

The Emperor frowned slightly.

"Heard what?"

Her voice softened.

"When you called me back."

The Emperor froze.

For a brief moment, emotion flashed across his usually calm face.

Then he looked away slightly.

"...Good."

His voice was quiet.

"Because I wasn't letting you leave."

The Empress's Realization

As everyone continued talking happily around her, the Empress leaned back slightly against the pillows.

Her body was still weak.

But her heart felt full.

Before returning, she had hesitated.

The white light had felt peaceful.

Warm.

Safe.

But now—

Seeing her mother.

Her father.

Her sister.

Her friends.

Princess Zhi.

And even the Emperor.

She knew something clearly.

She made the right choice.

Returning to this world...

To this palace...

To these people...

Was the right decision.

Her fingers tightened slightly around the blanket.

She wasn't going anywhere.

Not anymore.

The Ghosts Celebrate

Invisible to everyone else, three familiar figures floated near the ceiling.

Fen Yu wiped her eyes dramatically.

"She's back!"

The General crossed his arms proudly.

"I told you she wouldn't die."

The Scholar smiled faintly.

Her soul had returned completely.

But his gaze slowly shifted toward the distant palace walls.

Because he could still feel it.

A dark presence.

Watching.

Waiting.

And the moment the Empress opened her eyes...

That presence had also awakened.

The real battle inside the palace had only just begun.

Morning sunlight spread across the imperial palace like a quiet blessing.

For five days the palace had lived beneath the shadow of death.

White mourning banners hung from every corridor.

Silk strips fluttered from rooftops.

Lanterns burned dim and cold, casting pale light over silent courtyards.

Servants walked with lowered heads.

Ministers spoke in hushed voices.

The entire palace had believed that the Empress was dying.

But now everything had changed.

The news had already traveled across every courtyard, every corridor, every kitchen and guard post.

The Empress had awakened.

She had returned from the edge of death.

And the palace could feel the shift in the air.

Hope had replaced sorrow.

Life had returned where grief once ruled.

The Dowager's Decision

Inside the Dowager Empress's chamber, several maids stood quietly with lowered heads.

The Dowager sat near the window, listening as one of her servants delivered the morning report.

"Your Majesty... the healer confirmed the Empress's pulse has stabilized."

"She woke early this morning and spoke with her family."

The Dowager closed her eyes briefly.

A slow breath escaped her lips.

For the past few days she had felt an uncomfortable heaviness in her chest.

She had not liked the Empress.

Not at first.

The girl was too stubborn.

Too different from the noble ladies she expected her son to marry.

But she had never wished death upon her.

When rumors began spreading that the Empress would not survive the night, something inside the Dowager had tightened painfully.

Perhaps guilt.

Perhaps regret.

Now hearing that the girl had awakened...

The weight inside her heart finally lifted.

"Good."

Her voice was calm.

But the relief behind it was unmistakable.

She opened her eyes and looked toward the head maid.

"Send an order immediately."

The maid bowed.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Dowager continued speaking.

"All mourning banners are to be removed."

"The palace will return to normal."

The maids looked slightly surprised.

It was rare for mourning decorations to be removed so quickly.

But none of them questioned her order.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Dowager leaned back slowly.

"Since heaven chose to return her life..."

Her gaze drifted toward the distant direction of the Empress's courtyard.

"...then we will not continue mourning someone who refuses to die."

A faint smile touched her lips.

The Palace Awakens

Soon after the order spread, the palace servants rushed into action.

White banners that had hung like ghosts for days were carefully removed.

Silk mourning cloth was folded and carried away.

Lanterns were replaced with brighter ones.

Courtyards once filled with sorrow slowly regained their warmth.

Servants moved quickly across rooftops and corridors, climbing ladders to remove the pale decorations.

In one corner of the palace, a group of young maids whispered excitedly while rolling up a long banner.

"I still can't believe it."

"She was dying yesterday."

"And today she woke up!"

Another maid nodded eagerly.

"The healer said it was a miracle."

"Her pulse had almost disappeared."

One of the older servants shook her head slowly.

"That is heaven's protection."

"The Empress must have great blessings."

The younger maid leaned closer.

"Everyone is saying the same thing."

"That the gods protected her."

Another maid added quietly,

"After everything she has endured in this palace... perhaps heaven truly took pity on her."

They continued working while whispering among themselves.

More and more servants began discussing the miracle.

Gossip Spreads

In the palace kitchens, cooks and kitchen maids gathered near the large preparation tables.

The smell of fresh broth filled the room.

But instead of discussing food, everyone spoke about the same topic.

"The Empress returned from death."

A kitchen maid lowered her voice.

"My cousin works in the Empress's courtyard."

"She said the Emperor refused to accept that the Empress was dying."

"He sat beside her bed for five days."

A cook raised his eyebrows.

"Five days?"

"Yes."

"He barely slept."

The other servants exchanged surprised looks.

"I thought His Majesty favored Lady Chen."

Another servant snorted softly.

"Maybe before."

"But after this... things may change."

One of the older cooks stirred the pot slowly while speaking.

"The Empress must have powerful fortune."

"Otherwise no one survives such a fate."

Another maid nodded firmly.

"Yes."

"Everyone in the palace is saying the same thing."

"The Empress is protected by heaven."

Guards Talk in the Courtyard

Even the palace guards could not resist the gossip.

Two guards stood near the eastern gate watching servants carry away the last mourning lantern.

"I heard she stopped breathing completely."

"Then suddenly she gasped."

The second guard shook his head.

"That's impossible."

"That's what the healer said."

The first guard lowered his voice.

"They say her soul had already left her body."

"And then returned."

The second guard glanced around nervously.

"Don't say things like that."

But even he looked uneasy.

"Still... it does seem strange."

The first guard crossed his arms.

"Strange or not, the palace is lucky."

"If the Empress had died..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

Both guards knew what chaos would have followed.

The Dowager Watches

Later that afternoon, the Dowager stepped out into her courtyard.

The white banners were gone.

The palace once again looked bright and orderly.

The atmosphere felt lighter.

Servants passed by carrying flowers and fresh decorations.

The Dowager observed everything quietly.

Her head maid spoke softly beside her.

"The palace servants are saying the Empress is blessed by heaven."

"They believe the gods protected her life."

The Dowager was silent for a moment.

Then she gave a small nod.

"Perhaps."

She turned slightly toward the Empress's courtyard.

The girl had been stubborn from the beginning.

Strong.

Difficult to break.

Even death could not take her.

A faint smile appeared on the Dowager's face.

"Maybe the palace needed someone like her after all."