

Chapter 3 Old Friends

Even turned to ashes, he couldn't have misheard that voice.

By the Yellow Springs, the one time that White Impermanence had mentioned Helian Yi's name as if it was but a trivial thing had left Jing Qi unmoved. So many years had passed, spent deliberately trying to forget, that this name had been buried in the depths of his memory and was not meant to be dug out. Yet, he still remembered his voice, remembered his quirks, remembered how he couldn't help but brush Jing Qi's hair aside whenever he touched his forehead.

All those things seemed deeply carved into his bone marrow. At times, he thought of how, should he not have been so deeply entangled with Helian Yi during those times, there would have been no Lord Seventh sitting by the Three Lives Rock for sixty years.

Such an ill-fated relationship was akin to being hit by bird excrement right as one went out a door. One could think of a thousand ways to circumvent it, could rack their brain to come up with a parry, yet the bird would always come flying out of nowhere, in a sudden ambush, and precisely hit one's skull with a clump of celestial dejection sooner or later, like an evidence of relentless bad luck.

Jing Qi sighed inwardly. He knew that the rhythm of his breathing had changed from the moment Ping'an startled him awake. He saw no point in pretending any longer and opened his eyes.

What he saw was a boy, merely in his early teens, but already growing into a promising young man.

Yet, Jing Qi thought, this Helian Yi... also looked quite soft.

As the boy saw Jing Qi's eyes open, the anger disappeared from his face in an instant. He leaned closer, and gently asked: "How are you feeling? Do you feel any pain?"

In his first human life, when he'd see this figure—of dear love, of deep pain, his heart would well up in a whirlwind of emotions, pounding incessantly. But centuries have passed since then.

Looking at him, Jing Qi didn't feel much. He thought, is this what Helian Yi was like? Somehow... everything felt off.

Helian Yi watched how dazed and silent he was; attributed that to the fever and carefully touched his forehead. He frowned, turned to ask the personnel, “Are the medicines not good enough? The fever will damage his brain if it continues!”

Jing Qi thought, *my brain was damaged to begin with, let it burn a bit longer, so it can melt down and be rebuilt—that will save us some effort.*

He returned to his senses, suddenly realising how inappropriate it was of him to lie down while a person of such high rank was standing by—he motioned to sit up, swallowed to ease his throat and spoke: “Your highness...”

Helian Yi hurriedly pushed him back down and chuckled: “You’re the sick one here, yet you’re still being overzealous with the formalities. Lay down, and don’t move.”

The current Emperor had his fair share of shortcomings; he was whimsical, went through fits of chronic dementia every other day, and committed to put the first-born of the empress on the throne rather than his older sons. Helian Yi was merely a newborn when he’d decided to establish this tiny meatball as the crown prince before he was even a month old, only to then shove him to the back of his mind and ignore him for the next ten-plus years.

To put it bluntly, it was likely that his current highness the crown prince meant less to his father the Emperor than the crested myna birds¹ he kept in his study.

Helian Yi had a wolf and a tiger for elder brothers; the second, Helian Qi, was a decade older than him, and the oldest, Helian Zhao, was an accomplished man already. No one really paid attention to this unassuming crown prince, mostly considering him as yet another of the emperor’s jokes, following “the Great Parrot General,” “her Ladyship the Imperial Tutor,” or better yet, the “Prime Minister of folklore storytelling.”

The only person he was really close to was Prince Nan’ning’s heir, Jing Beiyuan, raised in the palace since childhood. He was still quite young, had lost his parents’ guidance, and as if tainted by the outstanding incongruence of his imperial uncle in golden robes, himself showed signs of incongruent shortcomings. The two were of different ranks, and they were polar opposites by nature, but they were good companions in misery; both birthed by their mothers, both discarded by their fathers.

¹ 八哥 (bā gē) or crested myna is a bird species of China. They are popular cage birds due to their melodious birdsong and their ability to imitate human speech. They are black in color, with a crest of feathers on their foreheads, covering their nostrils. ([Source 1](#), [2](#))

Helian Yi sighed, tucked him into the covers, and gently patted him as if he was comforting a kid: “I probably shouldn’t say this, but don’t be too sad. The late prince’s passing actually set him free. The funerals have been taken care of. You’ll come back to the palace with me, and it will be as if nothing has changed.”

Jing Qi didn’t make a sound, only quietly observed the boy’s side profile.

At that time, they had had nothing to rely on. As children, they grew up together, and the feelings they bore for each other ran deep—yet they grew to later be apart in life and death.

Jing Qi realized, bewildered, that the love and hate he’d felt while waiting for him all this time by the Bridge of Surrender, those feelings he could never let go of, had seemingly swayed until they dissipated, leaving but a gaping hole in his chest.

Helian Yi noticed his big eyes welling up from the fever, and seemingly at a loss, he couldn’t help but poke his forehead. “Bei yuan?”

Jing Qi blinked. “Ah... yes, yes, I know that.”

“What do you know?” Helian Yi asked, unsure how to react. Ping’an arrived with a bowl of medicine, which Helian Yi seized in passing. He asked Ping’an to stand aside and worked to hold Jing Qi in his own arms to feed him.

Jing Qi felt his warm breath as he was held against the boy’s body—not thinking things through, he subconsciously moved to dodge him. He couldn’t help leaning backwards, tensing his entire body as he raised a hand to shield himself.

Only then did he realize that, at the time, he hadn’t yet fallen out with Helian Yi; they were just two boys close to each other, and this overly guarded posture was much exaggerated. It felt as if the fever was turning his dizzy brain into mush, events of his past life mixing together with the current one.

But Helian Yi didn’t think much of it. He felt, seeing Jing Qi’s pale face as he withdrew, that he simply didn’t want to drink the medicine, and thus vigorously held him by the nape as he said, smiling: “Why are you dodging? How old are you, that you still avoid drinking medicine?”

Jing Qi went along with it, blaming a pretended dislike of bitter flavors for his unwillingness to drink. He swept a glance at the murky soup, then back at Helian Yi, and continued reclining back.

Helian Yi bent his neck and took a small sip of medication, then turned to Ping'an and said: "Go fetch some candied fruits for your master."

Ping'an didn't know why, but his highness the crown prince, who was warm and gentle to everyone, elicited a sense of fear within his heart. He didn't dare ask anything and hurriedly voiced his assent as he went to get the candied fruits from a small table.

Helian Yi coaxed Jing Qi: "I tried, it's not bitter—just a few sips, and I'll give you candied fruit when you're done drinking, alright?"

Jing Qi felt goosebumps all over his body—suddenly understanding the meaning of "the mind is enslaved to the body."² He silently grabbed one side of the bowl, alongside Helian Yi's own hand, and drank.

They exchanged a few unimportant words, most of them being Helian Yi slipping in indirect advice, and Jing Qi overly conscious of his every reaction. The medicine was mixed with a sleeping aid, so as he was drinking, he felt his eyelids getting heavier. Helian Yi, sitting on his bed, said with a gentle voice, "You can fall asleep. I'll watch over you while you do, then I'll go."

Jing Qi thus cooperated, closing his eyes—heard the other boy sigh.

Of course, he knew why Helian Yi sighed. The empress had passed a long time ago, the emperor had lost all interest in ruling the country; the eldest and second imperial princes handled affairs and relished in a hungry race for power; ministers were each sharper than the other when it came to fighting, each more useless than the other when it came to handling matters—the levels of absurdity reached were high enough to make one sigh in exasperation.

If Helian Yi was really all he seemed, a gentle and refined good-for-nothing, so would it be—yet as it turned out, he wasn't.

No one knew better than Jing Qi how this man held in mind the vast expanse of the country, born predestined to rise to the top and elevate the Heavens and the Earth. At times, Jing Qi wondered exactly how big of a mess the current emperor had caused, he whose all-time favorite recreation was to listen to his domesticated birds screaming at each other in his study, simply by appointing Helian Yi as the crown prince.

² 心为形役 (xīn wéi xíng yì): literally the heart is restricted by the body. This idiom means taking an action that goes against one's true convictions. It comes from Jin dynasty poet and writer Tao Yuanming's "A Poem on Going Back Home" (归去来兮辞). ([Source 1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

The room was silent. The faint scent of incense emanated from Helian Yi's body. Jing Qi remained in a daze before he let go of all concerns and fell asleep, until he was awoken by Ping'an later in the evening, drenched in sweat. The fever had gone down, and he felt a bit clearer already.

Tonight was the late prince's seventh night of mourning. All visitors had had someone deliver gifts, and all were now gone. A filial son ought to keep watch in the funeral hall, and Jing Qi thus hurried to make himself presentable. As he was unsteady on his legs, Ping'an extended a hand to help support him, which Jing Qi waved off: "That's unnecessary, I'm not that helpless. You can just go."

The atmosphere was gloomy in the funeral hall. By the doorway hung a big white lantern, swaying at every gush of wind, seemingly leading straight to the other world. The senior steward had been waiting there for a while. He had prepared the incense, papers, candles and the other necessary items.

Upon seeing Jing Qi arrive, he summoned people to bring a fox fur for him to wear for the night.

Jing Qi had been reborn a fox and suffered the pain of being skinned alive—seeing such an object was quite distressing. Hurting the senior steward's dignity not being an option, he could only frown slightly, staying put and well-behaved as the senior steward wrapped it around his shoulders with a trembling hand.

Afterwards, he discretely scratched the fur a few times with his small hand. He thought, you've suffered, brother; tonight, I will burn more paper offerings for you—take them along as bribery in the other world, so you don't have to endure being but a mere leather bag in your next life.

The senior steward guided him by the hand towards the memorial tablet and bowed: "Young prince, please bow low for the late prince. From now on, you will be in charge of the Nan'ning estate."

The helplessness of old age tainted his wrinkled face. Jing Qi used his hand as a support to kneel down and, as per the customs, bowed several times for his sordid princely father whose face he had already long forgotten.

The seventh night of mourning was the day a wandering soul would come back to accept food offerings. Jing Qi wasn't sure whether his father, devoted to chasing his late wife, even remembered that he still had a son in the human world. Jing Qi also didn't know, now that he'd returned to the human world, whether he could still see the spirits of the nether or not. He felt a faint sense of longing at that thought.

In the end, even though he didn't feel much, coming back to this life and getting to see old friends... was quite a nice thing.

At the same time, a servant came to announce the visit of the Great General Pacifier of the west, and the senior steward soon followed. Jing Qi, first a bit startled, hurriedly said: "Invite him in!" His words were tinted with eagerness.

This Great General Pacifier of the west, Feng Yuanji, was one of the late prince's very few friends. In fact, Jing Qi even ought to call him his shifu³, as what little martial art he knew, he had learned from this very Great General Feng.

After a while, a sturdy man came in, walking in long strides, closely followed by Ping'an jogging along.

Jing Qi knew him not to follow conventions, so he didn't bow upon seeing him—only giving him a faint, sorrowful smile, as he remembered rather clearly that Feng Yuanji's own life was nearing its end.

Feng Yuanji saw this as Jing Qi mourning his father, and sighed as he extended his hand, as large as a palm leaf, to gently pet his head. He said: "You've been through a lot." He then in turn bowed to the late prince's funeral tablet. Jing Qi returned the gesture and told Ping'an: "Go fetch a praying mat for the Great General."

The senior steward said, mouth agape: "This..."

Jing Qi waved his hand: "There's no harm in that, just go fetch it. You can all go, I wish to speak with the General."

The senior steward had been the most loyal to the Nan'ning estate for his entire life; he had always closely followed the rules. Though Jing Qi was only ten years old, in his mind, the late prince was no longer, and he now trusted the young master. He didn't argue, and bowed before withdrawing.

There were only two people and a brazier left in the funeral hall. Feng Yuanji let himself fall seated on the praying mat—he was a rough man, only good at fighting, and struggled to find words, even after thinking for a while. He sounded a bit awkward: "That good old Mingzhe... wasn't very useful when he was alive—now that he's gone, you... you must take good care of this little rag paper body of yours."

³ 师父 (shifu) or shifu: literally a combination of "teacher" (shi) and "father" (fu), often used to refer to or address one's teacher in any sort of skill or art. It is also commonly used as a respectful way to address any skilled worker, craftsperson, or artist. In this instance and in Wuxia genre fiction in general, shifu refers to the male individual from whom one received their formative martial arts training. They are also often the leader of a particular sect or school of martial arts. ([Source](#))

Jing Qi's lips curled in a smile. He stretched his legs, sat more relaxed on the floor as he idly threw paper offerings into the brazier: "I'll be alright. You're about to leave the capital, right, General?"

Feng Yuanji started, looked up at him: "...How did you know?"

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