

Free Chapters

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OFFICIAL COVER/AUDIO DRAMA ART



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Jie Xia Chen (阶下臣)

Servant of the Throne

By: 寒鸦

Title: Jie Xia Chen: Servant of the Throne

Genre: BL, Historical

Tags: Drama, Palace Politics, 1v1, Dogblood, Slight Angst, One-Sided Pining, Ming Dynasty, Sweet Couple, HE

Brought to you by: ManBo¹

Translator: Abo Dammen

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Content Warnings: Torture, Dubcon, R18+, etc.

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Please be mindful of the content warnings provided at the start of chapters.

Synopsis:

[Loyal Dog, Licking Dog², Crybaby, Ruthless Eunuch shou x Flirtatious, Scheming, Warm-hearted Prince gong]

Everyone described His Highness as a good-for-nothing, down-on-his-luck prince³—a man who showed no desire to fight for the throne and loved nothing more than to frequent brothels. However, the goodness of the Fifth Prince was something outsiders would never be privy to. He alone knew it, and the kindness His Highness had bestowed upon him, he stowed deep into his heart.

The word "love," was one he dared not utter aloud.

He was but a palace slave within these imperial walls. Despite possessing power capable of overshadowing the skies, he was but a servant. How could a servant love his master? How would he even be worthy of such a thing?

All he sought was to be the fierce hound at His Highness's feet, the powerful minister at his steps...⁴

The Fifth Prince: "Enough. Cease this melancholy, Chief He. There is no need to beat around the bush. I like you."

Chief He: ???

¹ Just a fun fact, but the audio drama for this novel is also hosted on the Chinese platform Manbo.

² 舔狗 (tiǎn gǒu): slang for someone who fawns over another, overly doting/clingy

³ 烂泥扶不上墙 (lǎnní fú bù shàng qiáng): "Good-for-nothing" (lit. "rotten mud that cannot be helped onto a wall"). A brilliant and very common idiom describing someone useless who cannot be helped to succeed no matter how much you try

⁴ 阶下权臣 (jiēxià quánchén): Literal translation. This is a clever play on words. 阶下 (jiēxià) usually means "at the steps (of the throne)," but it can also evoke 阶下囚 (jiēxiàqiú), meaning "prisoner (could be that he also wants to imprison (?) himself in ZC's life)

Chapter 1: Formal Visit (拜会)

Translated by: **Abo Dammen & Mantou**

Edited by: **Mantou & Abo Dammen**

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"Fifth Brother, we have already waited for half a *shichen*⁵. Can't we leave?" Little Thirteen could not stay put on the chair any longer, his derriere fidgeting all over as vexation pervaded his countenance.

Throwing him a glance, Zhao Chi chided, "Make no haste."

Zhao Jingtong, addressed as Little Thirteen, was of a disposition that was most impatient. He called out to the eunuch waiting at the front. "You there, come here."

This little eunuch was a pretty quick one—all it took was a matter of steps for him to nimbly present himself before the Thirteenth Prince, bowing down as he uttered in a voice thin and gentle, "This lowly servant is called Xi-Le⁶, Your Highness the Thirteenth Prince."

"Pah... what a dreadfully tawdry name," Thirteen muttered. "When will He An return?"

⁵ 时辰 (shichen) - a traditional unit of time (2 hours). In historical Chinese contexts, a shichen referred to a two-hour period of time in the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches system. Therefore, half a shichen means one hour.

⁶ This name, 喜乐, is a common word that means 'joy/happiness'. As we will see, the naming convention for He An's subordinate eunuchs are such that they all start with 'Xi-' (itself meaning 'joy') and are noun phrases with a meaning related to joy or happiness.

"The Chief⁷ has gone to the Imperial Manor today to audit the accounts. He'd set off early, and should thus be returning soon. It is likely that he will return in just another half a *shichen*," responded Xi-Le.

"You'd said the same thing half a *shichen* ago!" Zhao Jingtong was enraged. "Or have you forgotten what you'd previously said?"

"This humble subject asks that Your Highness continue waiting patiently," said Xi-Le, his body bent in a deep bow, his voice a soft and placating murmur.

"Ey? Listen to me, you slave—" Zhao Jingtong raised his hand, ready to strike.

"Thirteen." Zhao Chi stopped him with a sharp tone. "You are currently in He-gonggong's⁸ residence. Would you truly lose your temper, and even attempt to strike his servant?"

"Fifth Brother! Just look at his smiling face—neither a change in expression nor a trace of frustration. It is as if he is toying with me!" Thirteen was utterly enraged. "Both he and He An are servants of our imperial family. What does a little eunuch amount to? Why can't I hit him?"

"You are making a scene," said Zhao Chi.

He then told Xi-Le, "Xi-Le-gonggong, Thirteen is young and ignorant, so his tongue knows no restraint. Please do not take his words to heart."

"However His Highness chooses to discipline this servant is only his right," said Xi-Le deferentially. "This humble servant dares not think otherwise."

Zhao Chi responded with a slight nod. His gaze then shifted towards the mahogany box placed on the small table beside the chair. He had been away from the capital for countless years. Everything had remained the same, save for the people.

After returning to the capital the previous day, the first thing he did was to head to his residence to pack things up. When the main door was opened, a murder of crows scuttled away from the courtyard, their raucous caws echoing as they soared in the sky. Inside the manor were broken walls, collapsed tiles, and wild weeds that had grown tall and rampant.

⁷ 督公 (Dū gōng) - A title of respect for a high-ranking eunuch who oversees one or more directorates (e.g., the Directorate of Ceremonial). "公" (gōng) is an honorific suffix. It is an honorific for the head of the Eastern Depot (东厂, Dōng Chǎng). While historically precise for the head of the Eastern Depot, the title 督公 is being applied to He An as a general term for a powerful and high-ranking eunuch official. We will be using Chief instead of transliterating it.

⁸ 何公公 (Hé gōnggong) - "公公" (gōnggong) is a specific term of address for a senior eunuch

It was clear at a glance that it was an abandoned house that hadn't been tidied in many years.

Dust drifted down from the rafters, choking Bai Qiu up so much that he could not stop coughing.

"Does a prince like you intend to stay in such a place first thing after returning to the capital?" asked Bai Qiu. "Isn't there anyone to manage the house for you?"

"Where else?" Zhao Chi, on the other hand, paid it little mind. "I have no fiefdom. If I don't live here, the only arrangement the Directorate of Ceremonial⁹ would make for me is to lodge at the Ten Princes' residence¹⁰, where I would have to vie for space with Old Thirteen. Wouldn't it be inconvenient? At least I'd have a separate residence to stay in here. Are you unaccustomed to it, Xiao-shishu¹¹?"

"There is no place like this in the Qingxing Pavilion," Bai Qiu said, still coughing. "How many years has it been since anyone last cleaned this house?"

"Eight or nine years, perhaps." Propping up a dilapidated chair, Zhao Chi sighed. "This estate was originally the old property of the Lan family. After the Lan family's troubles that year, this residence was the only thing left to Honorable Consort Lan. When my mother hung herself in the cold palace some time later, the house came under my name."

After putting the chair down properly, Zhao Chi brushed the dust off the surface. "Have a seat, Xiao-shishu."

Bai Qiu took a seat opposite him. "What are your plans from here on out, Your Highness?"

After spending a moment in thought, Zhao Chi said, "In the capital's brothel lanes, starting from the east, there are no less than eight or ten establishments...there's no need to rush; we can take it slow—"

"I wasn't talking about that!" Bai Qiu exclaimed, the vexation in his voice one of someone despising iron for not turning into steel. "Be serious!"

⁹ 司礼监 (Sìlǐjiàn): The Directorate of Ceremonial. This was a eunuch-run agency during Ming Dynasty responsible for reviewing imperial edicts, managing rituals, and often wielding enormous political influence

¹⁰ 十王府 (Shí Wángfǔ): was a large-scale princely residence complex built outside the eastern wall of the Imperial City during the Yongle era (1403-1424) under Emperor Chengzu Zhu Di of the Ming Dynasty, after he moved the capital to Beijing. According to the "Veritable Records of Ming Chengzu," the architectural complex served the dual functions of providing residences for imperial princes before marriage and lodging for enfeoffed princes during their tributary visits to the court

¹¹ 小师叔 (Xiǎo Shīshū): or "Martial Uncle." A term of address for a junior male member of one's martial arts sect who is of the same generation as one's master

"Don't be angry, Xiao-shishu. I'll tell you," Zhao Chi chuckled. "I must enter the palace to seek an audience with the Emperor first thing tomorrow morning. Having been away from the capital for so long, it would be unpardonable not to go and greet His Majesty."

"I expect the Emperor will refuse to see you."

"That would hardly be strange. He now resides in the Western Gardens¹², wholly devoted to the cultivation of immortality. He is a busy man—where would he find the time to see an unfilial son such as myself?"

"What will you do if the Emperor refuses to see you?"

Zhao Chi thought for a moment. "If the Emperor refuses to see me, then I shall seek an audience with the Crown Prince. After all, it had been the Eastern Palace's efforts that brought back someone like me who has been exiled abroad for eight years."

He then did a little stretch, before exclaiming, "Ah, time to sleep. Worry not, Xiao-shishu. We will go with the flow and meet each situation as they come with the appropriate strategy. Let us deal with it tomorrow."

"...You're seriously..." Bai Qiu said, despising iron for not turning into steel.

"Your Highness the Fifth Prince, the Crown Prince is inside, occupied with his studies. Do enter quietly, so as not to disturb His Highness the Crown Prince's concentration," a young eunuch said in a hushed, careful tone.

"Many thanks, gonggong. I understand," said Zhao Chi. "Aide Bai..."

"This is a little token of our appreciation—do accept it, gonggong." Bai Qiu brought the silvers out.

"Ah, this simply cannot do. This lowly servant absolutely dares not accept your money..."

"Gonggong, there is no need to stand on ceremony," said Zhao Chi. "We will be returning frequently to the Eastern Palace hereafter, and will hence be troubling you with matters of all sorts."

¹² 西苑 (Xī Yuàn): The Western Gardens. This was a vast imperial garden and palace complex (in Beijing, now part of Zhongnanhai) where several Ming emperors, most notably the Jiajing Emperor, retreated to live in seclusion while pursuing Daoist alchemical practices for longevity. The Taiye Lake originally formed the core of the Western Gardens, with parklands on the shores, enclosed by a red wall in the western part of the Imperial City.

The young eunuch's face broke into a delighted smile. "In that case, this lowly servant would rather accede to your order than refuse your courtesy. I will be accepting it, then?"

"Please do."

"Alright. Do enter quickly, Your Highness, so as to not keep the Crown Prince waiting."

There was incense burning within the Duanben Palace¹³. The smoke was growing considerably dense, so the moment Zhao Chi entered, he immediately found it stifling. He had no idea how the Crown Prince, Zhao Yiming, had been enduring it.

He let out two muffled coughs, suppressing the discomfort before turning towards the Western Study beside him. The Crown Prince was sitting on a couch by the window, reading a book.

Zhao Chi paid his respects in full: he swept his robe aside, knelt, and kowtowed as he gave his greetings. "Zhao Chi, your chen-di¹⁴, has returned to the capital, and has come specially to pay his respects to the Crown Prince."

The Crown Prince was flipping through the book, one page after another.

For a moment, nothing could be heard but the rustling of pages. It was only after a long while that Zhao Chi heard the Crown Prince respond in an exasperating slow drawl, "Oh, it's Old Fifth. All these years without seeing you, and it seems you've shot up considerably in height. Your features have developed, too."

"Indeed, chen-di has returned."

"Hm," the Crown Prince responded indifferently, before continuing, "You may rise. One of you, prepare a seat and serve tea."

Only after Zhao Chi had taken his seat in the lower position did the Master of the Eastern Palace¹⁵ finally close his book and begin to converse with him.

The two chatted a little about a few of the amusing incidents of their childhood—they recalled the time they'd once set fire to the Grand Tutor's beard, before reminiscing about

¹³ 端本宫 (Duānběn Gōng): This is the actual historical name for the Crown Prince's residence in the Ming Dynasty palace (in Beijing, part of the Forbidden City)

¹⁴ 臣弟 (chéndì): A formal self-reference used by a prince when speaking to the Crown Prince or Emperor. It combines the humility of 臣 (subject/official) with the familial relation of 弟 (younger brother).

¹⁵ 东宫 (Dōng Gōng): Eastern Palace. Here, it's used metonymically to refer to the Crown Prince himself.

the time they'd raided the bird's nest in Consort Zhuang's palace tree. Having chatted for a few minutes, an atmosphere of fraternal harmony began to emerge.

Finally, the Master of the Eastern Palace said calmly, "Fifth Brother, you must have suffered during your years outside the capital."

"In response to the Crown Prince, this humble subject has merely been wandering the world outside these few years. So much time has been squandered away that I dare not speak of hardship." Zhao Chi behaved exceedingly reverently before the Crown Prince. "Rather, I must thank my Elder Brother the Crown Prince for his concern over his fifth brother, and for finding a way to help him return to the capital."

"Heh..." While teasing the parrot by the window, the Crown Prince responded, "If we are to speak of merit in this matter, the credit should likely go to Zheng Xian, the Eunuch Director of Brush-writing¹⁶ of the Directorate of Ceremonial."

"Zheng Xian?"

"Fifth Brother has been away for several years. Have you forgotten even Zheng Xian?"

"Chen-di naturally remembers," said Zhao Chi. "Was Zheng Xian not originally the Senior Attendant by Elder Brother's side? He served Your Highness for over a decade. Has he now gotten into the Directorate of Ceremonial and even attained the rank of Third Rank Deputy¹⁷? Zheng Xian sure hasn't risen the ranks slowly."

The Crown Prince chuckled. "His ascent has indeed been swift. A while ago, during the Qiqiao Festival¹⁸, His Majesty recalled that incident from back then, and thought of your mother, Honorable Consort Lan. The emperor may have had his melancholy stirred by the scene, on top of having had two cups of wine, so his heart was softened after a few clever words from Zheng Xian, prompting him to permit your return to the capital."

"Then chen-di must certainly thank Zheng-gonggong."

Before Zhao Chi took his leave, the Master of the Eastern Palace smiled meaningfully and said, "I've heard that Fifth Brother had been suave and romantic during your travels, leaving

¹⁶ 秉筆太監 (bing bi tai jian): were responsible for reviewing and processing all memorials (official documents) sent to the Emperor, and often drafting the Emperor's rescripts. Every Directorate has this official position, under the Superintendent.

¹⁷ Officials (no matter civil or military/文官 or 武官) were classified into 9 ranks: 一品 二品 三品 四品 九品. 一品 is the highest, 九品 is the lowest. Officials in each 品 were still divided into 2 grades: the higher is 正品 and the lower is 从品. They don't mean first-in-command and second-in command but just different classes. For instance, a 正二品 may be a 从一品's deputy

¹⁸ The Chinese Valentine's Day, also known as the Qiqiao Festival, is celebrated as a romantic valentine's day in China

behind numerous tales of your romantic affairs. Now that you've returned to the capital, I'm afraid you're going to have to exercise some restraint."

Zhao Chi clasped his hands in a salute. "Chen-di will bear it firmly in mind."

Zhao Chi exited Duanben Palace, passing through the Dong'an Gate. It was only then that Bai Qiu finally asked, "How did it go?"

"Just as Xiao-shishu predicted, the Crown Prince instructed me to thank Zheng Xian," Zhao Chi answered. "And from the way he'd said it, he wishes for me to make haste quickly."

"This is a tricky one. If you refuse to comply, or if you delay your going, it shows you are not sufficiently obedient. The Crown Prince will likely become wary of you. Therefore, this matter truly cannot be postponed. However, going directly to see Zheng Xian would, without a doubt, be far too conspicuous. If parties with heinous motives were to speak of it carelessly, they would say you have willingly stooped low enough to curry favor with a eunuch. If this reaches the Emperor's ears, I fear he would be even less inclined to see you."

Zhao Chi laughed. "Hey, it's of no real consequence. I shall make the trip."

"This humble subject has long said that your return to the capital would be fraught with peril."

"Not returning to the capital was not a solution either," Zhao Chi laughed lightly. "It would be best for us to find a method to achieve it through indirect means."

"Hmm... indirect means." Bai Qiu, with his hands clasped behind his back, took several steps around the room, before uttering, "He An, the Superintendent for the Directorate of the Imperial Stables.¹⁹"

"Superintendent of the Imperial Stables? He An?" Zhao Chi asked. "What manner of man is he?"

"This person is Zheng Xian's junior. Both he and Zheng Xian belong to the Eastern Palace's faction. Due to Zheng Xian's appointment as Eunuch Director of Brush-writing of the Directorate of Ceremonial, and by virtue of their connection, He An has recently also been rising to fame in the capital as a powerful eunuch. He takes joy in practicing calligraphy, so

¹⁹ 御马监 (Yùmǎjiàn): was one of the Twenty-Four Eunuch Yamen (宦官二十四衙门) in the Ming dynasty. Managed the horses, elephants, and related facilities. While it managed the emperor's horses, elephants, and related facilities, it also controlled a powerful military force, the "Army of the Four Guard Commands" (四卫营), making its superintendent a eunuch with significant military power.

do bring some paper and an inkstone as a present for him. To the uninvolved parties, simply tell them that you've only just returned to the capital, and hence wish to seek out a few fine horses—a task you have entrusted Superintendent He with. Even if anyone overhears it, they will have no way to confirm any rumours of you currying favor with powerful eunuchs.”

“That is a viable strategy,” Zhao Chi quipped. “I shall pay a visit to this person tomorrow, then.”

Before his departure, Bai Qiu said to him, “I’ve just received word that He An has departed from the capital the moment the city gates opened at the break of dawn today.”

“Then I should pay my visit another day,” said Zhao Chi.

Bai Qiu smiled. “Your Highness, this is in fact the most opportune time for you to pay Chief He a visit.”

The gears in Zhao Chi’s head shifted, and he immediately understood himself—by going on his own, he would already be making a sufficient show of his intention for the benefit of the Eastern Palace and Zheng Xian. If the man happened to be absent, it would simply be a matter beyond his control.

“Then I shall bring Thirteen along to serve as a witness,” said Zhao Chi. “This will avoid giving people grounds for gossip.”

“Your Highness is most astute,” Bai Qiu clasped his sleeves, bowing as he paid his greetings

Zhao Chi waited until the *shichen* of the Snake²⁰ before dragging the carefree Thirteenth Prince along to pay a visit to He An’s residences. Although He An was not on duty at the palace that day, he had gone to an Imperial Manor to audit the accounts.

They waited for another half a *shichen*. The tea in their cups had been steeped in two rounds of hot water, but He An was still nowhere to be seen.

The mahogany box contained an invaluable duan inkstone, beneath which was pressed a five-thousand-*liang* banknote. At the moment, it was sitting forlornly on the small side table... It had already been anticipated from the start that he wouldn’t have gotten to give it to him on this day.

²⁰ (Si Shi) 巳時: 9 - 11 am

Zhao Chi had already been waiting for nearly a full *shichen*. Zhao Chi knew that he'd waited long enough; he'd also started guessing that He An would be returning anytime now, so he decided to wait no longer. He stood up and straightened his robes.

Xi-Le was taken aback and asked, "Is his Highness the Fifth taking his leave?"

Zhao Chi said, "It has only been two days since I have returned to the capital. Too many miscellaneous affairs await my attention back at my residence. I shall pay another visit on a different day."

Xi-Le inquired further, "The *shichen* of the Horse²¹ has already passed. Would it not be better if Your Highnesses stay for the midday meal, before departing after noon?"

Xi-Le's words made no sense at all.

For two imperial princes to dine at a eunuch's home while waiting for him—and waiting for a eunuch, at that—how would that be appropriate?

It was known that eunuchs of the Great Duan Court now held power that overshadowed the officials of the court, but this was simply too much.

Zhao Jingtong's face flushed red with anger. "Wretched slave, what are you spouting?! Who is going to show such face to your Superintendent He?! How dare you suggest two imperial princes stay for a simple meal in your home?!"

Realizing he had spoken wrongly, Xi-Le was instantly alarmed. He hastily knelt upon the floor. "Masters, please do not be angry. This lowly servant misspoke. This lowly servant deserves death; he deserves death."

Xi-Le was about to kowtow for forgiveness.

"Enough," Zhao Chi intervened. "Thirteen, let us take our leave first."

Having walked to the main hall's entrance, Zhao Chi turned back. Putting the mahogany box he'd carried with him back onto the table, he then said, "This duan inkstone is something I had sought out with considerable effort. Although it is no rare object, it is a token of my regard. I ask that Xi-Le-gonggong gift it to Chief He on my behalf. I do hope that Chief He will be so kind as to accept it."

²¹ 午时 (wǔshí): The Wu ('Horse') period in the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches system. Specifically refers to 11 AM - 1 PM.

He An had visited an Imperial Manor located nearly a hundred *li* away from the capital. It was only after he had finished auditing the accounts and was on his return journey that he encountered the messenger, who reported to him that the Fifth and Thirteenth Prince had paid a visit to his residence.

"How long have they been there?" he asked.

The messenger eunuch said, "Chief, it has not been too long. Perhaps over half a *shichen*."

"Over half a *shichen*?! Why had you not reported this sooner?!" He An was instantly seized with anxiety. "Return quickly! We must not keep Their Highnesses waiting!"

He dug his heels into his horse's flanks, leaving his guards behind without a second thought, and galloped furiously towards the capital. He whipped his horse relentlessly the entire journey back, not allowing the beast a moment's rest, racing breathlessly into the capital.

His residence had been acquired back when he was but a mere Eunuch Director, and it was located in a very remote place. It took him some time to reach the entrance of his home even after entering the capital. Entering through the back door, he urgently asked, "Is his Highness the Fifth and his company still here?"

How would the menial servants know? They all shook their heads.

Furious, He An cursed as he strode along, "Useless wretches! Did this master raise you all to eat dry rice²²?! Not a single one of you can be relied upon at a critical moment like this!"

Chief He's fits of madness were nothing new; they were a common occurrence by this point. On days that things do not go well, even the dogs and cats in the residence would be cursed by him to the point of losing all their wills to live. Therefore, everyone had already gotten accustomed to it, simply continuing to go about their own tasks.

When he entered the bedchamber, a nimble-fingered young eunuch, Xi-Yue, was already there to help him change his clothes.

The dog days of summer²³ were a sweltering period of time. He An's body had long since been soaked through. He ordered Xi-Yue to fetch water so that he could carefully wipe

²² 吃干饭 (chī gānfàn): A common and insulting idiom meaning to be useless/idle

²³ 三伏天 (Sānfútiān): also called "dog days of summer", refers to three 10-day periods that are predicted to have the hottest days of the year.

himself down. He then changed into his favorite violet robe embroidered with a mang²⁴ python, re-fastened his hairbun, and applied fragrant powder onto his body. By the time he'd finished making himself presentable, Xi-Le had already arrived outside the room.

"Is his Highness the Fifth still having his meal?" He An asked from within the room. "I will go attend to him at once."

"Shifu²⁵, His Highness has already taken his leave. I tried to make him stay, but to no avail," said Xi-Le. "His Highness had only just left, so the tea is still warm."

"He's left?" He An paused in shock, his hands stopping on the frog buttons he was tying.

Xi-Le lifted the door curtain and entered. He caught sight of his master's look of utter dismay, and did not want him to feel upset, so he hurriedly added, "His Highness had already waited a full shichen! He was sincere about wanting to see you. He only departed because he could no longer wait."

He An's eyes finally shifted. He muttered, "Yes, of course. How could a servant like me keep His Highness waiting? I had indeed been far too late."

"His Highness has also left you a gift," Xi-Le said. "It's a mahogany box."

"A gift for me?" It was only then that a flicker of liveliness emerged on He An's countenance. "Where is it?"

"It's on the tea table in the outer hall. This lowly one dares not touch it," said Xi-Le. "I'd feared that you would be displeased if I moved His Highness's belongings."

After fastening his buttons, He An went straight to the front hall. The mahogany box remained on the small side table. Beside it was a nearly full cup of unfinished tea.

He An touched the teacup. Indeed, it was still warm.

It was as if the Fifth Highness's hand had only just been resting upon it...

²⁴ 蟒 (mǎng) refers to a mang python, a four-clawed dragon-like creature. High-ranking eunuchs were often granted the privilege of wearing robes with python embroidery, a symbol of immense power and favor, second only to the five-clawed dragon reserved for the emperor. The color violet and specific design also denote high status

²⁵ 师傅 (Shifu): is used by an apprentice speaking to their mentor. Since a lot of honorifics are being used to address He An, we will be transliterating this one.

He An, looking as if guilty of something, hurriedly retracted his hand, before looking at the mahogany box again. It was only after a moment that he held it up, even more cautiously than he would a ruler's jade seal.

He sat down and opened the mahogany box. In the box was a duan inkstone.

"It is a fine inkstone. His Highness was most thoughtful." Next to the inkstone was a note, upon which a line of poetry was inscribed. The handwriting was elegant and neat; slim but strong. It was a line from **《A Spring Evening, Accompanied by the River, the Flowers, the Moon》**.²⁶

—— *Who had been the first man to catch sight of the riverside moon? When had the riverside moon first cast her light upon mankind?*

He An smiled. His thin, gloomy face finally seemed to clear, as if clouds parting to reveal the sun and moon. "His Fifth Highness remembers me after all..."

He closed the box, and the look on his face was one of pure solemnity as he carried it reverently to his study. It was only after closing the study door that he took the mahogany box out, pried it open, and carefully appraised its contents once more. With the utmost care, he took the note out, pressed it beneath his nose, and took in a deep inhale of its scent. He felt as if he could catch a whiff of the scent on the Fifth Prince's fingertips amidst the fragrance of ink.

"Your Highness...it's been eight years. This lowly servant... has missed you so." His voice trembled as he spoke.

The mere smell of this faint, elusive scent was enough to quake his body and redden his eyes.

Outside the window under the eaves, a wind chime was stirred by the breeze, sending a series of clear, crisp notes ringing and lingering incessantly in one's ears.

Author's Notes:

1. There are quite a few errors in this novel.
2. The gong is a truly promiscuous man. Before meeting the shou, he'd had a rich repertoire of romantic experiences, on top of having been forced to have amorous relations with the emperor's consort. After confirming his relationship with the shou, he hadn't had any involvement with anyone else.
3. That's all.

²⁶ [《春江花月夜》](#) by Zhang Ruoxu (张若虚), a Tang dynasty poem.

Chapter 2: Jiang Yue (江月)

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