

Chapter 9 The Balance of Power

Jing Qi was quite naturally gifted when it came to his looks—especially when he smiled softly to people he met, the corners of his eyes and tips of his eyebrows curving, making him look particularly genuine, particularly charming.

Wuxi was only half-listening to Chen Yuanshan's polite, conventional greetings. To him, regardless of whether their heart was sincere or not, whether they harbored hatred for whom they talked face to face, the people here always put on a smile and coddled others as if all in honesty. He considered it an extreme display of futile hypocrisy.

As if he'd sensed exactly this, he turned his face to see prince Nan'ning, mentioned by the emperor, coming their way.

Without knowing why, Jing Qi struggled to keep on his smile as he felt the boy's eyes sweeping over him.

They all talked about the untamed Nanjiang lands, about their uneducated people akin to wild beasts spending their days devouring raw meat and drinking blood. The instant the Nanjiang boy caught sight of him, his body visibly tensed, guarded. He took half-a-step to the side, sizing up Jing Qi, seemingly having caught in one glance that he wasn't as good and harmless as he looked.

Jing Qi understood that this wild animal of a boy also had the intuition of a wild animal; could tell, with one look, who was kind, who was putting up appearances, and who had bad intentions.

He awkwardly rubbed his nose, first saluting Chen Yuanshan: "Many thanks to sir Chen for the trouble he went through for the arrangements of my father's funerals. I am truly humbled to be able to thank you in person."

"The Emperor misses the late prince—this lowly official was merely helping with the related difficulties and wouldn't dare take credit for it. My condolences, prince." Chen Yuanshan bowed his head: "Please, this way."

Great officer of protocols Chen Yuanshan was like an egg without cracks; his character was smooth and without a hitch, always keeping the right distance with everyone. Both the eldest and second imperial princes flew around the emperor's favorite like mosquitoes, trying to sting him but failing to find a place to sink in their prick. One day, even the crown prince himself would embrace such aspirations.

Jing Qi's own vague words of obsequious praise were succinctly deflected. The man was famed for being faithful to the country and its ruler, for his inspiring devotion to righteousness. Jing Qi couldn't take offense since he had a bit of an understanding of the officer's character.

He turned towards Wuxi, easing his feigned smile off his face, and said: "You have all just arrived in the capital, there is still a lot for sir Chen to arrange for your basic needs. I will overstep, and take it upon myself to entertain our esteemed guests on behalf of our emperor by doing the honors."

As the boy had stopped smiling, his face abruptly showed such a particularly solemn expression that, for an instant, Wuxi thought him to look a bit like the Great Shaman of the faraway Nanjiang, much to his surprise—he was a bit stunned, and the hostility he felt against him inevitably eased.

In light of Chen Yuanshan's words, Wuxi asked what only made sense to him: "Is your father dead?"

"Dead" was a word bearing bad luck, and was generally proscribed. He'd just been speaking about the late prince Nan'ning with such disrespect that Chen Yuanshan paused to throw a worried glance at Jing Qi, afraid that the young shaman of the South had offended the prince with his great misstep.

As Chen Yuanshan saw it, though this prince Nan'ning was still a child, he had been raised in the Palace since he was very young and had grown up alongside the imperial princes. This was combined with the close proximity the emperor had with the late prince, or simply due to what was, at the time, considered to be both funny and embarrassing love affairs involving the noble men. In any case, it was rather clear that although the child had no authority nor influence to speak of, the emperor Helian Pei cherished him more than his own three blood sons.

The young shaman was already in the awkward position of being a prestigious hostage, and his personality didn't seem to quite fit in, as he'd already offended the eldest imperial prince's party while he'd barely arrived. Should he also have upset prince Nan'ning, he soon wouldn't feel the itching of lice anymore, nor have to worry about having too many enemies.

Just as he'd come up with conciliating words, Jing Qi nodded, seemingly unaffected: "He did, more than a year ago."

"Oh, that's a long time." Wuxi looked at him with apparent understanding. He said: "That's why, when they mention your dead father, I see that you don't look sad. It's actually because it's been so long."

Chen Yuanshan kept his mouth shut. He saw the young shaman as a curious child, unaware of how small he was in this immense world, reaching out to pet the behind of a tiger laying half asleep, lazy enough not to bother. Misled into feeling safe, he was now climbing on the tiger's back to twirl its beard.

He was firmly convinced that someone like the young shaman would need a certain miracle to manage living peacefully in this place.

Predictably, Jing Qi frowned slightly and answered: "The three years of mourning are not over yet—is the young shaman implying that this prince is unfilial?"

If even clay figures were said to have a bit of a temper, what did that say about prince Nan'ning who was a growing child. Chen Yuanshan didn't know what was wrong with the emperor, looking for a child to take care of another child, as if he was afraid they wouldn't be able to bicker.

He could only smile obsequiously: "A father and his son share an innate bond, what would suggest the young prince is not grieving? Unlike a wounded body, a wounded heart is not as easy to perceive, for it is entirely contained in one's chest. Aren't the young shaman's words hurtful to the young prince's sense of filial piety?"

Wuxi was briefly stunned: "I... that is not what I meant. I didn't say you were bad." He glanced at Jing Qi, thought for a moment, then continued explaining: "Axinlai's father died in the war. He had to go get his father's body on the battlefield to bring him home, carry him on his back. His sister and mother cried a lot. Although he did not cry, we could all see his pain. But you look different from him."

Jing Qi only donned the face of a child; of course, he couldn't argue with Wuxi about these trivial matters, and he'd figured that the kid would simply say whatever was on his mind without beating around the bush. To put it pleasantly, he seemed a bit naive; in truth, he was just a bit dim-witted.

Dropping his facade with a chuckle, Jing Qi spoke pensively: "After my mother passed away, his highness... my father was constantly missing her. Although us living people generally consider the death of a relative to be a sad event... in his case, I believe it was a good thing."

Wuxi nodded silently, as if he'd only partly understood his words.

He lowered his eyes, his long eyelashes obscuring them, seeming to be at a bit of a loss.

Chen Yuanshan couldn't help but look at Jing Qi again. He thought that prince Nan'ning was young in age, but extraordinary in countenance. To his surprise, he

sounded calm and distant when he spoke, neither slow nor rushed. He pushed his tone of voice a bit low, as to suppress its juvenile timbre. There was no artifice in his gestures, and through his unique mannerism faintly transpired an air of freedom and detachment.

He'd also heard that, since early childhood, the prince Nan'ning often came and went to the Eastern Palace, and was quite close to his highness the crown prince... Pieces moved in Chen Yuanshan's mind, and he started getting a few vague ideas.

At that moment, Jing Qi looked up at him and smiled: "Sir Chen, I remember the posthouse not being too far from here?"

Chen Yuanshan startled and hurriedly responded: "Yes. This humble official will leave ahead to inform of our esteemed guests' arrival, so as to avoid them being neglected."

Such a matter naturally didn't require Chen Yuanshan to get involved, but it seemed that Prince Nan'ning had something to say and didn't want him to hear it, as Chen Yuanshan guessed from his expression. Being one to understand and pay attention to details, he found a convenient pretext to leave.

Only then did Jing Qi slowly come to a halt, his face stern: "Young shaman, some things may not be appropriate for me to say."

Wuxi looked up at him.

Jing Qi slowly started: "In the Great Qing, we celebrate 20 year old boys as they finally become adults. If they come from an influential family, or get the scholarly honors at the imperial examination, they can already assist in court hearings and get a spouse from fifteen years old onwards... what I'm about to say next wouldn't be considered to be the words of a child."

Wuxi struggled to understand what he was trying to express.

Jing Qi shook his head, then tilted it towards him. Seeing him from up close, Wuxi properly realized how beautiful prince Nan'ning was; each of his features seemed minutely carved and polished. His princely lifestyle had graced his skin with the particular tenderness and fair complexion of the Great Qing nobles', and his silhouette was still juvenile like that of a child's. Yet, when crossing his pointed gaze, it was easy, from his expression, to overlook all these things and helplessly want to hear what he had to say.

Jing Qi strained his throat to deepen his voice, abruptly shifting to quite a harsher tone as he said: "If you hadn't been this young, if... if you weren't as important as you

are... those things you did today—dying a thousand times wouldn't have been enough to make up for it.”

Wuxi's eyes widened, and he stared blankly at him.

He indeed didn't understand.

Jing Qi narrowed his eyes as he slightly raised his head to stare into the distance, his voice almost a whisper: “You're a newcomer, there are things you don't understand. The person who wished for your death today is the eldest imperial prince, Helian Zhao. You played tricks on Minister Jian Sizong, whose daughter is the imperial prince's concubine. His party currently has the strongest hand in court—not even the crown prince is of any importance to him... So if he wishes harm upon you—”

Quiet until now, Wuxi interrupted him: “Why are you telling me all of this?”

A smile appeared on Jing Qi's face; why indeed was he telling him all of this? Why did Helian Pei specifically pick him to accompany those guests from far away?

Within the court, the blazing struggle to seize power away from the legitimate son was growing ever more intense. Both Helian Zhao and Helian Qi were already showing restless determination. Perhaps, in Helian Pei's eyes, his taciturn youngest son truly was unfit to be the crown prince, to become the emperor. Even if he held the title of the Eastern Palace, he seemed to exist for little more purpose than covering up for scandals.

In the future, regardless of which son would become powerful enough to reach the top, this youngest son who had been made crown prince from birth wouldn't benefit from an easy way out.

Helian Pei's usual tendency not to show him any interest was, in truth, a way to protect him. By letting his older brothers see their little brother as a nobody who knew his place, and by not favoring him, Helian Yi could maybe then manage to go his own way.

What sort of place was Nanjiang? An inhospitable land, brave people, easy to defend, tough to attack. In spring and summer, poisonous miasma would spread. Although the four-hundred-thousand men Feng Yuanji had brought with him were the elite troops of the Great Qing, countless lives were lost in these lands.

It'd been more than one year since Helian Pei last showed his face in court, yet he did come out specifically to welcome the young shaman of Nanjiang, and specifically summoned the mourning prince Nan'ning and the crown prince to come. So did he start paving a way out for his youngest son.

Perhaps Helian Pei knew already that the so-called “prime of one’s life” was but a joke—he was no giant tortoise destined to live thousands of years; once he died, wouldn’t his young, not yet even come of age son subsequently be buried next to him?

Prince Nan’ning had been the crown prince’s study partner since early childhood, had always been close to Helian Yi; he was also close in age to the young shaman. Helian Pei had intentionally called him because he wanted the crown prince and the young shaman to get closer, for childhood affections to remain as time went on. He wanted for Nanjiang to one day be his one escape route—even if the road was long and difficult, even if this was the land of uncivilized barbarians.

What a pity that his good crown prince couldn’t appreciate the kindness.

Jing Qi thought of the expression of fatigue and disappointment that had flashed past Helian Pei’s face, when the lone syllable “Yi” left his mouth, when he’d just remembered that Helian Yi had already left, and how he had failed to contain a sigh.

Helian Pei wasn’t an almighty man in essence. He had no grasp over his court official’s tendencies for sinister designs, no control over his sons’ attempts at fratricide, soon to maybe even reach regicide, as a means to seize the throne. He simply had an honest heart, and only wanted to protect his younger son’s life.

Seven lifetimes of reincarnations, seven lives to witness things worthy of lament and tears, worthy of respect or contempt. Yet, those were never more than specks of emotions within the vast human world.

Wuxi was still watching him with a guarded, unforgiving look in his big round eyes—he really looked like an angry black kitten desperately trying to appear all grown up and threatening. Jing Qi couldn’t resist wanting to reach out and pet his head, but then remembered Minister Jian’s great loss of face and retracted his hand, embarrassed. He rubbed his chin and said: “That was the crown prince’s idea.”

Over his previous lifetimes, Jin Qi’s skin had grown so thick and impenetrable, its deepest layers had turned black. He could tell lies like he would eat or drink, and so he pushed all the responsibilities on Helian Yi’s back without batting an eye—and it was, after all, the emperor’s idea anyway. When he saw the confusion on Wuxi’s face, he added: “The mind of Helian Zhao is now like Sima Zhao¹’s. The crown prince’s

¹ 司马昭 or Sima Zhao, military general and statesmen of Cao Wei (曹魏) during the Three Kingdoms period. The expression 司马昭之心 or “Sima Zhao’s heart or mind” here refers to the intention to usurp the throne, as Sima Zhao laid the foundations for his son, Sima Yan to seize power from the Wei emperor, establishing the Jin dynasty. ([Source](#))

wings have not spread yet, he can't act on his own—soon..." He chuckled coldly. His face was rather neutral, but it still got Wuxi's eyes to widen even more.

Jing Qi's eyes curved up as he smiled, and he said: "The war in Nanjiang... in fact, it wasn't the emperor's idea at all, you get me?"

For half a day, Wuxi had felt like listening to muffled sounds. And yet, that sentence he properly understood. He anxiously grabbed Jing Qi's wide sleeve: "What do you mean?"

Jing Qi turned his head, looking away: "You said your people suffered countless losses. Surely, your heart must be filled with hate against us Great Qing people..."

"I hate that I can't kill every single one of our enemies here." Wuxi said without a bit of hesitation.

Jing Qi choked on the child's indiscriminate honesty, coughed a bit before saying: "But we also lost four-hundred-thousand men—how much is four-hundred-thousand? Should you stack all of their dead bodies, you could break your neck looking up and still wouldn't see the top of the pile."

Wuxi was still fuming.

Jing Qi sighed: "So then, why did we persist in attacking this place? We people from the Central Plains can't go where you live; the journey is inconvenient, there's no way to go back and forth smoothly... Our Great emperor is far away, our officials cannot control you—in fact your Great Shaman is still in charge of everything for your people. What benefit did the Great Qing get from this?"

Wuxi froze. He'd tried to understand this for the whole journey, but couldn't.

Jing Qi's got even quieter, to the point the movement of his lips was barely more than a tremor. Sounding like the wind was carrying his words away, he said: "Because the eldest imperial prince wanted Great General Feng's power, and because Great General Feng wouldn't give it to him, he simply had to find a way for him to die..."

Wuxi was astonished. After a moment, he finally managed to mumble: "So... So why did your Emperor agree?"

Jing Qi sighed again: "The Great Qing is so big, he can't possibly know everything."

Wuxi followed behind him, dumbstruck. By the time Chen Yuanshan had come back and led them to the posthouse, he was still lost in thoughts. For the first time, he understood the meaning of "holding the balance of power." For the sake of getting

what they wanted, one person could cause countless deaths without even one care, and that, because... because he had the highest status, the highest title, because he had the power and the authority.

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