

Chapter 14 New Year Approaching

Though it wasn't the time to light the lamps yet, the rays of the sun had already thinned and the room was plunged in a gloomy darkness.

Helian Qi was sitting on a carved wooden chair. In his hand was a cup of tea he wasn't drinking from, only mechanically digging his finger harshly into the rim of the cup, his gaze anchored to the floor.

Daoist Li was sitting to the side, silent and immobile. His thin body was akin to a withered log nearing its death; one wouldn't even notice his presence at first glance.

All of a sudden, Helian Qi violently slammed the teacup to the ground, causing scorching hot water to splash everywhere. A young servant waiting by the door rushed inside upon hearing the clattering sound and hurried to pick up the scattered pieces, only for Helian Qi to scream at her, "Bitch slave, who allowed you here?! Get out!"

The girl jumped in fright, her thin, delicate fingers bloody from the broken porcelain. Too afraid to speak, she quickly bowed to him and left.

The whole scene happened without Daoist Li moving or speaking, as if he'd been meditating. When the tea splashed on his shoes, he didn't react, not so much as move his foot.

Helian Qi couldn't sit still any longer. He slapped the table as he rose to his feet and paced around the room, "He's but a mere barbarian... and that bastard child whose mother was a whore! The old man grants him the smallest bit of dignity, and now he thinks he can climb above me?!" He slammed the side table with all his might. His anger still burning strong, he swept everything off the table with his long arm, breaking the bonsai and tea set to pieces.

He supported himself with both hands on the table, panting harshly, "If we don't crush him... if we don't crush him, then I'll have to write my own name backwards!"¹

Finally, Daoist Li spoke up, his voice unbearably slow and raspy, sounding like pieces of rusty iron grinding against one another in his throat, "Please stay calm, Your Highness. As I see it, the young shaman of Nanjiang simply happened to arrive

¹ 名字要倒过来写 (míng zì yào dào guò lái xiě), "write (my) name backwards / upside down," said when speaker is extremely certain that their desired outcome will come to pass. Any alternative would be as absurd as the act of writing one's own name upside down / backwards.

together with the Crown Prince, nothing more. It is unlikely they have any connection.”

“Crown Prince?” Helian Qi sat down, laughing wryly as if saying such a title had sullied his mouth. “Helian Yi is but a hairless brat. What sort of crown prince is he?”

Daoist Li nodded. “Precisely. Your Highness ought to do great things. There will be time in the future to deal with them, so why trouble yourself with their case at this moment? A more urgent matter is the eldest son standing at the top; Helian Zhao, this ravenous wolf has been focusing on planting spies in the army. A group of brutish men shouldn’t be too concerning, but if you just let things happen, he may end up reaching his full potential. In that case, if he is to force the emperor to abdicate, the conclusion to this fight may not be favorable.”

Helian Qi sighed deeply.

He kept listening to Daoist Li. “Then there is indeed the small matter of Helian Yi being hand picked by the Emperor as the Crown Prince—even if Your Highness gains enough power in the future, you will still have to spend some energy to become legitimate.”

Helian Qi sneered. “Him and his weak character, greeting all the castrates in the palace—does he even have the shoulders to hold up half of a crown? Our esteemed father’s birds have more prestige than he does.”

Daoist Li smoothed out his sparse beard and shook his head. “Though he’s nothing to worry about, we can’t underestimate him, either. Your highness should also be wary of Jing Beiyuan—this Prince Nan’ning has cut himself off from the world but is still been greatly favored by the emperor over the past years...” He paused for a moment and drew his bushy eyebrows together. “This humble Daoist thinks there is something odd about him. A young man in his teens, not constrained to any parents or siblings, nonetheless able to bear the loneliness and live on his own for the past several years... If he didn’t need to attend court hearings after the new year, chances are he would simply never leave the Nan’ning estate... It really is quite odd.”

Helian Qi responded with irreverence, “Even I can see that he’s but an embroidered pillow that’s happy to eat but too lazy to cook. Why do you worry so much?”

Daoist Li put his cup down. “That may not be exact. It appears that, in the Crown Prince’s heart, Prince Jing holds quite a special place.”

Helian Qi paused, seemingly remembering something, and a salacious expression crept on his face. “Right—Jing Beiyuan may not be useful, but he’s growing more

charming by the day. Helian Yi frequently visiting him, harboring who-knows-what intentions... Heh!”

“The Crown Prince has restrained himself to hard work and frugality for the past years,” Daoist Li said, “earning him the reputation of being harsh on himself yet lenient with others. Perhaps this is only the first sparks of love, not yet necessarily something he is aware of.”

Helian Qi raised a slim eyebrow and asked, “What do you mean?”

A mysterious smile stretched across Daoist Li’s features. “I still need to look into this, but... Today, when I saw prince Nan’ning, I was reminded of someone else. Back when this humble Daoist was going through difficult times, a family gave me assistance. They had a daughter, Cui’er, who turned seventeen this year. Later on, both of her parents caught the plague and died, leaving her alone to beg in the streets. She was found by the leader of a theater troupe who took a liking to her and taught her the ways. Years later, she’d gained a bit of fame for her singing, and recently came to the capital. When she heard of this humble Daoist, she came to me for shelter. Remembering her family’s kindness, I took her in and made her my goddaughter.”

Helian Qi looked dumbfounded, confused as to where he was going.

Daoist Li continued, “Now that I think about it... Cui’er’s features are quite similar to Prince Nan’ning’s. What a coincidence.”

Helian Qi mumbled to himself for a moment, then said with a smile, “I’ll have to see for myself some time.”

Daoist Li smiled and said nothing more.

At this very moment, someone came by the door to announce that a servant of Sir Zhao had come to deliver New Year gifts to His Highness. Frustrated that his train of thought got interrupted, he asked gruffly, “Which Sir Zhao?”

The messenger responded, “Sir Zhao Zhenshu of Beitun.”

Only then did Helian Qi regain his composure; the next moment, indignation had left his face, followed by a meaningful smile. He said, “Hurry up and let them in.”

Soon after, the Zhao family servant arrived, and after him, several large chests that were placed on the floor.

The servant was all smiles as he saluted Helian Qi and paid his respects for the New Year with profound reverence. He opened a chest, which Helian Qi noticed in one glance was full of fabrics, brocades, and the likes. He smiled, exchanged a few pleasantries with the servant, and then had someone make the arrangements so his guest wouldn't feel neglected.

Once the servant had left, Helian Qi stood up and got his trusted aide to take the fabrics out of the chest. As it turned out, there was only one layer of embroidered cloth, beneath which were rows of gold ingots.

Several other chests were similarly filled with dazzling stones, jewels, silver, and gold.

Helian Qi looked at the goods one by one, after which he was satisfied. He then got his servants to put the chests away.

Naturally, those weren't "New Year gifts" that just any family could afford, even among the aristocracy.

With New Year approaching, everyone was in a rush—preparing gifts, paying back gifts, entertaining guests, making offerings to their ancestors, and more. The streets and businesses were bustling, for after a whole year of tightening their belts, people were looking forward to the end of the year to indulge in good food and drink, elation showing on everyone's faces.

Numbers were sparse in the Nan'ning estate. The older servants had been let go in the past few years, and on top of that, Jing Qi found that having too many people around was bothersome, and thus didn't allow Ping'an to go and buy new people. Therefore, during festivities, Ping'an could be seen running around on his short legs, dashing east and tripping west, kicking the back of his head with his own heels in his rush.

Jing Qi was leaning against the doorway of the study, watching him absent-mindedly as he stretched his back. He said, "As it is, I'm just a loafer, no better than a pole obstructing your view, so I'm going out for a walk. I leave it to you, Ping'an."

Ping'an shot him a grave look, and Jing Qi smiled before turning away.

"Where are you going, master? Who should I call to go with you? Should we prepare the horses?" Ping'an asked hurriedly.

Jing Qi waved him off lazily. "Prepare for what? I don't need anyone, I'm just stopping by the young shaman's for a while—that's only a few steps away. If something happens, I'll hear you screaming in the yard just fine from over there."

And Jing Qi strolled out. Ping'an, not having it, was about to throw his accounting book to the side and follow him, but was interrupted by the echo of Jixiang's voice, "Steward Song!² Quick, come and see, Sir Lu sent things over. How should we respond—"

In a flash, this prince who didn't care to maintain their household was gone.

On the way back from Great Scholar Lu's celebration, Wuxi had spoken openly and Jing Qi had returned his openness in kind. Their positions had aligned and they came to stand on the same pirate ship. Ever since then, the unspoken and intangible distance that had existed between them before seemed to have lessened considerably.

Wuxi discovered that, in fact, Jing Qi simply had a lot of things in mind, but was by no means a bad person. Furthermore, he was actively curious, and discussing with him was, in comparison to all these Great Qing people with their mouths full of their "traditional virtues",³ much easier and open, and much less hypocritical.

From the first time he'd taken a stroll through the young shaman's residence and seen the venomous creatures he was keeping for his shamanic arts, Jing Qi had found the place to be a hunting ground for novelty and discoveries. Whenever he found some free time, he simply came over to see if there were any new "tricks."

In truth, Jing Qi's behavior was understandable. In some regards, he could be considered quite experienced and knowledgeable—from the demons and ghosts of the surface to the monsters and devils of the netherworld, from the strange, the malevolent, and the lamentable to the pathetic, he had seen all of it. Often, nothing felt new anymore, and he just felt bored.

However, he'd never stepped foot in Nanjiang in any of his previous lives. The moment he came to Wuxi's residence, everything felt fresh and novel, drawing out of him a desire to travel to the faraway ends of jianghu.⁴

He wouldn't have to worry about anyone, wouldn't have to think about anything. Thinking about it, he'd reincarnated so many times, but all those lives revolved around one person, and he'd never had the chance to pay proper attention to the vast world surrounding him. How unfortunate was that?

² 宋 (sòng) is Ping'an family name.

³ 仁义道德 (rén yì dào dé), lit. "compassion, duty, propriety, and integrity," refers to the system of moral standards within Confucianism, hence "traditional virtues."

⁴ 江湖 (jiāng hú), lit. "river-lake," here refers to the circle within which the characters of a wuxia genre novel or work are active. Classic works have also established jianghu as a world that exists outside of the reach and control of official power structures such as the monarchy. ([Source](#))

Even the other Nanjiang people in the residence were astonished; in the few years they had been in the Great Qing, it seemed that something about witchcraft and poisons terrified all these pampered and princely officials who saw them as dangerous, devilish crafts. They had never seen one rush to come and get a closer look like this.

Since he had found the naive little prince crouching in a corner who, after he'd stared at a multicolored venomous scorpion in the eyes for a while, attempted to grab it by its tail to better study all of its shades, Wuxi couldn't tell whether the young man was a fearless ignorant or just didn't care.

Previously, he'd thought that someone thinking through his every word and action so thoroughly would turn out to be a malicious flatterer, unaware that, as he later came to realize, Jing Qi happened to be so clueless, out of touch, impulsive, and prone to just do whatever he wanted.

Turns out, it was no wonder that the Emperor of the Great Qing spoiled him so much—the youth and his elder were different variations on the same theme.

From then on, whenever Prince Nan'ning would grace them with his presence, the entire household had to brace itself as if facing a great adversary. After all, this little prince could be considered as the only friend who'd managed to get words out of their little master in the past few years—they couldn't possibly let him get too careless, for otherwise he'd die here from his own curiosity.

That day, as Jing Qi arrived at Wuxi's residence, he found it lacking the spirit of New Year's celebrations; nothing was different from the usual. The small sable squatting by the doorway had already gotten familiar with his face; upon hearing movement, it raised its head to throw him a glance with its little eyes, then stopped paying attention and turned its butt to him.

This tickled Jing Qi's heart, who picked up a little stick to tease him with. The sable was reminded of its master berating it the last time he'd tried biting the boy, and thus didn't dare pay any mind to that scourge. It only twisted its neck to look at him with disdain and stuck its butt farther out as it moved to the side while keeping its back turned. Jing Qi mercilessly continued poking it until the little sable got too annoyed to dodge and slipped away, landing into someone's arms in two or three jumps. Aggrieved, it only exposed its tail while digging its head deep; out of sight, out of mind.

Wuxi had immediately come to greet Jing Qi upon hearing of his arrival, yet was met head-on with the sable he'd raised jumping into his embrace as if running for its life. Slightly exasperated, he said, "Don't tease it; its fangs are venomous. I haven't finished preparing the antidote yet."

Jing Qi giggled and stood up, dropping the little stick and flicking dirt off himself. “I liked it as soon as I saw it. How about you let me keep it for a few days?”

The little sable poked its head out, glaring at him, then nuzzled back into Wuxi’s arms, butt out. Jing Qi awkwardly rubbed his chin and Wuxi bluntly responded, “Seems like it doesn’t like you.”

Jing Qi clicked his tongue and followed Wuxi inside, speaking while walking, “How come you don’t do anything for the New Year? Does Nanjiang not celebrate?”

Wuxi remained quiet before he said, “We do.”

Jing Qi was startled. Tilting his head to look at Wuxi, he saw him smoothing out the sable’s fur with both hands, gazing far into the distance. Jing Qi then understood—New Year’s Eve is meant to be spent with one’s family. If one was drifting, away from home on their own, having no one to rely on, what difference did it make to celebrate or not? It merely got other people annoyed, and made loneliness just more visible.

This kid wasn’t big, but his thoughts were quite heavy. Jing Qi reached out to pat him on the arm. Today was cold, and while the little bamboo viper was borrowing the warmth of Wuxi’s body, it was still drowsy from the cold and was shaken awake by the vibration. It stuck its head out to briefly throw a vicious glare at Jing Qi and threaten him with a flick of its tongue, but was then pushed by the cold to go back inside.

Jing Qi said, “There’s a temple fair⁵ in the capital that will start on the first day of the New Year. Since the curfew is lifted on New Year’s Eve, people will be celebrating all night long. You’ve been here for how many years, yet have never gone out to see that? Well, this year, I’m taking you out, so you can experience it for yourself.”

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⁵ 庙会 (miào huì), temple fair, is a folk, religious, seasonal festival that takes place within temples and the surrounding grounds during major holidays such as (Chinese) New Year, Lantern Festival, etc. Activities include religious ceremonies and rituals, folk art performances, markets, etc., catering to a mix of religious, spiritual, economic, social, artistic and entertainment needs of the common people. ([Source 1](#), [2](#))

