

Chapter 16

A Beauty Beneath the Moon

Jing Qi subconsciously retreated one step. “I’ve troubled Your Highness with worry, but I’m better already.”

“You sure got better quite fast!” Helian Yi snorted coldly.

Perhaps the crowd was too noisy, or maybe it was the bit of wine he’d drunk getting to his head, but the young heir to the throne suddenly felt something constricting his chest, and his brows slowly drew together.

He also felt that for such a trivial matter, this was a bit of an overreaction. All he could do was to swallow down this increasingly strong, inexplicable feeling of hurt welling up in his heart—and thus, there was something vexing about seeing Jing Qi.

He had long been like a roundworm in Helian Yi's gut. As soon as Jing Qi saw his face, he knew that he wasn’t joking; His Highness the Crown Prince was genuinely angry. He immediately shifted his gaze, while also simultaneously shifting the subject: dragging Wuxi over, he asked with a smile, “Look, Your Highness. Do you recognize him?”

Helian Yi blankly stared at him. This young man was unfamiliar. Only after scrutinizing him more carefully did he notice the slight difference between his features and those of the Central Plains’ people. He also spotted Axinlai standing behind him, and this was enough for him to know that this was the young shaman of Nanjiang. He was a bit surprised, upon looking at him, to find that the young shaman’s features were quite soft, making him look a bit younger than his actual age.

Wuxi had not expected to be brought up so suddenly, and didn’t want to talk to him beyond the basic greetings. He stood quietly by Jing Qi’s side. Upon first glance, the two seemed to be quite close. Helian Yi thought of how relaxed Jing Qi had looked before, his eyes half-closed as he randomly pointed all over, yet as soon as he’d spotted Helian Yi, his gaze started shifting in every direction, as if he was looking for a way to disappear from his sight. His heart sank even deeper, and it showed on his face.

Jing Qi was quite puzzled to see him so angry today. As he raised his head, he happened to notice a young man in plain robes following Helian Yi rather closely. He immediately seized this new escape route and asked, “Eh, the brother¹ over there doesn’t look familiar. Is he here with you, your highness?”

¹ 兄台 (xiōng tái), lit. “brother,” is a polite address for an older male of the same generation.

Just then did Helian Yi realize that he'd forgotten about the man following him and hurriedly turned to call him over, "Zishu, come here and greet the young Prince Nan'ning and the young shaman of Nanjiang." Then, to Jing Qi's party: "This is a friend from jianghu, whom I met by chance. I'm sure you could all become good friends once you get to know each other."

The smile on Jing Qi's face nearly dropped—Zishu? This man was... Zhou Zishu?!

The young man in plain robes came forward. Wuxi and Axinlai froze—the man had seemingly appeared out of thin air. Had it not been for Jing Qi pointing out his presence, they wouldn't even have noticed that someone was standing behind Helian Yi.

Wuxi also couldn't tell whether this was natural or deliberate, but he found that the young man's face was even more bland than blandness itself. Anyone who'd see him would forget about him as soon as they'd look away.

He was someone who, while clearly standing before everyone's eyes, could make himself completely overlooked. In his fit of anger, Helian Yi himself had nearly forgotten about his existence. Wuxi threw a suspicious glance at Jing Qi, wondering how he'd managed to spot him.

Zhou Zishu was even more shocked than Wuxi was. His most outstanding ability was precisely to make others turn a blind eye to him. This was the first time since he was born that someone pointed him out in public.

Who was this Zhou Zishu?

The most mysterious entity within the palms of the Great Qing royal family was called the "Window of Heaven." From aristocrats to common people, if the Son of Heaven² gave the order, the Window of Heaven could seemingly extend its tentacles to anyone in any corner of the world. The Window of Heaven had been founded by Helian Yi through a lifetime of effort, and its first ever commander was precisely Zhou Zishu.

He mastered the art of changing his appearance, and no one knew how many faces he alone possessed. Such he was: someone who seized all opportunities, a venerable and terrifying man.

In his first life, Jing Qi and this young sir Zhou had been partners in crime, and they had hit it off nearly right away. One in the light, the other in the shadows, together

² 天子 (tiān zǐ) or "son of heaven" is another way to refer to the emperor due to the belief that the emperor's right to rule was mandated by the gods. ([Source](#))

they had orchestrated the complete collapse of Helian Zhao and Helian Qi's parties. However, when Helian Yi ultimately demanded Jing Qi's death, his ten charged crimes were also Zhou Zishu's masterpieces.

It wasn't that he'd disregarded their friendship: Zhou Zishu had even taken advantage of the depths of the night to infiltrate the Nan'ning estate and warn him. Unfortunately, Jing Qi's mind was in a tight knot then and he didn't listen to a single word.

What had he said again, back then?

Something like... If there's a next life, let's drink our fill together, and make a night of it!

That day, Zhou Zishu had left with a sigh and the flutter of his sleeves. The next day in court, Prince Nan'ning's ten great crimes were put on clear display, every word and sentence crashing onto him and leaving him drenched in blood. It could only be said that from the beginning to the end, Zhou Zishu had his head on his shoulders and knew who his master was. It wouldn't be right to say that he had no heart, only that he knew the kind of world they lived in and what he ought to do.

But of course, the melancholy of past and current lives was not the point right now. What mattered was that this face of Zishu's wasn't the one he wore most often, and with the added few hundred years since, Jing Qi didn't recognize him immediately; it's simply that in his past life, he'd grown used to seeing Zhou Zishu following Helian Yi like a shadow, and his intuition had told him there was someone there.

However, based on common sense alone, his martial arts abilities were limited to embellished but impractical skill and he was just a young man wrapped in silks lounging at home all day and never going out. He wasn't supposed to have enough insight to notice Zhou Zishu.

Sure enough, Zhou Zishu evaluated him with keen eyes. "This commoner salutes you, Prince, young shaman."

Jing Qi hastily forced out a smile. "Very nice to meet you! This prince has always longed to roam jianghu, passing as a great hero, or things like that—feel free to tell us all about it, Brother Zhou!"

Helian Yi chuckled, "Simply roaming jianghu would never make you pass for a great hero. What can you do besides cheating people?"

Jing Qi frowned and spent a long time thinking hard before saying, "...Feast on food, wine, and prostitutes, and gamble?"

That earned him a slap on the forehead from Helian Yi. The hit resonated loudly.

The feeling of the hit dulling down, Helian Yi realized it had been too strong and extended his fingers to rub Jing Qi's forehead. Wuxi stood awkwardly to the side. He felt like these two had quite a good relationship and that he'd always be an outsider. He thus looked away towards the huge pleasure boat on the river.

Jing Qi quickly changed subjects to avoid Helian Yi's rather intimate gesture. "Ah, right, I haven't been out in a while. What is the Moon Lady doing over there?" he asked.

"Every year, the most talented woman in the capital is elected as the Moon Lady. Sometimes, she's a famed courtesan, sometimes a famed actress. Last year, it was Lady He Yue from the House of Mist. We don't know yet who was chosen this year," Zhou Zishu explained, smiling. "As it happens, this commoner owns a small boat moored over there. If these gentlemen aren't against it, getting a closer look would make for a poetic sight."

Jing Qi opened his mouth, "Is there wine?"

"Of course there is." Zhou Zishu had no shortcomings aside from his fondness for the contents of wine cups. As the subject came up, his gaze brightened. "But I don't know which kind the prince favors."

Jing Qi smiled, "Winter happens to be warm this year; there is no ice on the river, the lake shines in the moonlight, and there's a jade-like beauty for us to appreciate. It would all be best accompanied with aged Nu'erhong.³ Do you have any?"

Having abruptly realized that he'd found a kindred spirit among drunkards, Zhou Zishu laughed heartily and said, "A thirty-year-old one! Your Highness, Prince, young shaman, please, this way!"

In this world, old companions could feel like strangers and new acquaintances like old friends.

My good friend, I've promised you in a past life that we'd drink the night away. You can't remember that now, but I've come to fulfill that...

Wuxi stared at Jing Qi, watched how he laughed unbridled, and suddenly noticed a subtle incongruence about him.

³ 女儿红 (nǚ'ér hóng), lit. "daughter red," is a type of fermented glutinous rice wine, originating from Shaoxing, Zhejiang province. Its name refers to the local custom of preparing such wine at the time of a daughter's birth in preparation for her future dowry. ([Source](#))

From the front, he was an elegant young man, but seen from behind, his crude hemp clothes worn negligently made him seem worn down by the hurdles of life.

It felt as if he'd always been walking this road—people would come and go, him merely asking for a cup of wine to warm his stomach, as if he'd always been walking alone like this, either waiting or holding on. Others would try to reach him, but it would always feel like thousands of miles of mountains and rivers stood between them.

Wuxi didn't know where he had seen such a silhouette before. He mused for a bit, but couldn't recall.

Looking again, more closely, Prince Nan'ning was still this young aristocrat who'd taken off his refined robes to mingle with the common folk—one who never worked the land and couldn't tell crops apart, one that Wuxi himself was only following, three and a half paces⁴ behind.

Zhou Zishu came from an influential family in Jianghu and had some patrimony; his so-called "small boat" was of course... not that small. A wide variety of fine liquors and delicacies had been prepared, and the boat was moored in the most wonderful spot: extremely close to the Moon-Gazing ship where the Moon Lady was about to perform. This spot was reportedly sold for over a thousand taels⁵ of silver last year.

Only when all of their cups were filled with wine did things start moving on the Moon-Gazing ship. An old man in black robes was playing the flute, standing neither too far nor too close from the railings. He was like a monk in a meditative state, his eyes looking down and his breathing controlled. He then seemed to receive some kind of signal and he immediately brought the flute to his lips. To the side, a qin⁶ apprentice had already set up the qin stand. A young person sat down, closed their eyes, and put both hands on the instrument.

Zhou Zishu said, "The leader of the Colorful Jade troupe paid a handsome amount of gold for these two musicians. They don't come up on stage easily."

They saw the qin player open their eyes at once and lift a hand to pluck a string. The sound of the flute slowly rose in harmony. The melody brushed the surface of the water like mist and then twirled upwards. Serenity took over the crowd by the shore, and not a sound came to disturb the atmosphere.

⁴ 步 (bù), lit. "step," here translated as "pace" is an ancient measure of length that, like chi 尺, has varied over time, consisting of either 5 or 6 chi, approximately 1 to 1.7 meters. ([Source](#))

⁵ 两 (liǎng), tael is a unit of weight and currency. It has varied over time and was standardized to 50 grams in 1959, or 1.7 oz. ([Source 1](#), [2](#))

⁶ 琴 (qín), or 古琴 (gǔ qín) is a type of zither, specifically, a plucked 7-string instrument. ([Source](#))

Soon after, a bright feminine voice broke through the air, as if about to rip open the darkness of the night. A young woman in plain clothes slowly came out through the curtains, her singing rippling deeply across thirty leagues⁷ on the Moon-Gazing River and the sound of the qin chasing after it. All the bustle of the crowd came to a halt as the sound ascended, swirling up, the last notes remaining suspended in the air, diaphanous and lingering. Together with the trembling sound of the flute, it felt like a sigh in one's heart.

This was the capital—markets glimmering with jewels, households shining in beautiful silks, and an eclectic crowd of hundreds of thousands.⁸

Was this a divine scene? Where did this melody come from?

The woman swept a fluid glance across the river and the many lights floating around her all seemed to dim. She bowed elegantly with a composed smile on her face. Helian Yi felt as if he'd been violently stabbed in the heart, falling into a momentary trance as he watched her—this face, this face was familiar—could she be... an old love from a previous life?

Zhou Zishu was also deeply moved. He shook his head, then bent to drink his wine. Wuxi also seemed touched in some way; he was looking down, lost in his own thoughts. Jing Qi, on the other hand, was dumbfounded.

He could forget anyone else, but never that woman, never that face. Qingluan... Su... Qingluan...

At once, it was as if he could remember all the pain—the pain of being crushed, of having his flesh and bones cut into tiny pieces, of being parched to death, of being skinned alive...

The mist of the Moon-Gazing River took on an air of ghastly desolation, gradually wrapping around his entire body, freezing every inch of his blood and bones. A sudden cold wind blew past him—Jing Qi quivered, and came back to his senses.

After all, he was an old timer: once clear headed, Jing Qi felt a whirlwind of feelings that he couldn't describe well up in his heart. It had been so many years, the colors of all these feelings had faded, and before he could taste them properly, they had scattered away.

⁷ 里 (lǐ), here translated as "league," is an ancient measure of length. It has varied over time, consisting of either 300 or 360 步 (bù); 1 li equals approximately 300 to 600 meters. ([Source](#))

⁸ From Song dynasty poet 柳永 Liu Yong's "Looking at the Sea Tide"《望海潮·东南形胜》([Source 1](#), [2](#))

Fortunately, both Zhou Zishu and Helian Yi were watching Su Qingluan, the Moon Lady, on stage so neither of them noticed him. Wuxi, however, gently squeezed his arm and asked quietly, “What’s the matter? Why are you shaking suddenly—are you cold?”

His words caught the attention of the other two. Helian Yi, aware that he’d forgotten his manners, coughed lightly and asked, “Hm? You’re cold?”

Jing Qi smiled. “I am a bit cold, yes.”

Zhou Zishu promptly called for the boat to be pulled ashore, then brought a big cloak which he draped over Jing Qi’s shoulders, “I was careless; I forgot that you lads’ skin isn’t tough and hardened like us jianghu folks’. Does the young prince need anything?”

Jing Qi waved it off. “I’m not that delicate. I just can’t endure the wind when I’ve had wine. It’s also a bit late, so forgive me for not staying longer. Wuxi, are you staying with them, or...”

For starters, Wuxi was a fresh sprout. He also wasn’t playful for a boy his age and could spontaneously stop anything at the right time. On top of that, he didn’t know the other two very well and would have a difficult time even just talking with them. He said, “I’m coming with you.”

Helian Yi hesitated, unsure of what to say, until Jing Qi turned towards him and gave him a naughty smile, “No need to worry about me, Your Highness, the good night is bitterly short, you must cherish it, alright!”

With these words, he dragged Wuxi along and left.

These so-called bitter anguishes were all things of the past now.

Helian Yi frowned, but his attention shifted back to the year’s new Moon Lady. Some people didn’t believe in fate, but also, perhaps, some people were just inherently predestined to miss out—or they lacked this little bit of serendipity, or lacked a bit of luck. Who knew?

Wuxi followed behind Jing Qi in silence. Since they’d grown more familiar with each other, Jing Qi had always been quite engaging in conversations. It was hard to imagine that such a self-indulgent rich boy who lazily went through life and never left the house could be so knowledgeable. Wuxi usually acted as the listener, quietly committing to memory any topic of interest that he’d come across, and never thought of looking into them afterwards.

Wuxi knew, seeing his silent figure walk the road, that he was tired.

The perk of being with Wuxi was that Jing Qi never had to worry about his own manners, for Wuxi would always end up doing something even more rude. Without pretending to comply with social restrictions and conventions, it instead felt much more natural: he'd banter when he felt like bantering, daydream when he'd feel like daydreaming.

Wuxi knew that there was a lot that he himself didn't understand, so he never let his mouth run about other people's matters.

—Suddenly, Wuxi pulled Jing Qi and hauled him back. Jing Qi dizzily recollected himself and only then he noticed, planted in the ground where he was standing moments ago, an arrow glowing with a faint blue light.

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