[一世真 ENG] In Time, Once Again

by katiirabbi

Summary

When Xiao Jingyan finds himself transported back to his nineteen-year-old self after living a long life as emperor, he is determined to stop the Chiyan conspiracy from happening. But in the attempt to change the wheels of fortune, what will he lose and what will he gain? This is a story of perseverance, love, and sacrifice.

Notes

This is my attempt to translate the one of my favorite works in the NIF fandom into English, shared here with the author's permission. :)

Disclaimers:
1. 琅琊榜/Nirvana in Fire belongs to its author Hai Yan and the TV production team, the original fanfic in Mandarin Chinese belongs to the lovely 擂文
2. Absolutely no profit is being made out of this; I wish this could pay for the coffee I consume to translate it, but RL is hard. D:
3. I'm afraid even my best attempt does not do the original work justice, so please go read it in Mandarin if you can. Please comment if you think things can be improved.
4. Translator's notes will be in the form of footnotes at the end of a chapter, where I try to provide cultural and historical context for some difficult-to-translate phrases.
5. Friendly tip: if you wish to download the work, PDF format works best at preserving all the footnotes and HTML formatting. :)

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: Gen, M/M
Fandom: 琅琊榜 | Nirvana in Fire (TV)
Relationship: Lín Shū | Méi Chángsū | Sū Zhé/Xiāo Jǐngyǎn, 殊琰
Character: Lín Shū | Méi Chángsū | Sū Zhé, Xiāo Jǐngyǎn, Mēng Zhì, Fēi Liú, Mù Níhuáng
Additional Tags: Time Travel, Translation, Do-Over, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Friendship
Stats: Published: 2016-02-22 Completed: 2016-07-20 Chapters: 47/47 Words: 121188
• A translation of 一世真 by 擂文
Chapter 1

Author’s Summary:

After a peaceful death as emperor, Jingyan goes back in time as his nineteen-year-old self and manages to stop the Chiyan tragedy from happening. However, he cannot mend the gap of suspicion between his Father and Prince Qi. Caught between outside invasions and inner strife within the court, Jingyan decides to give the empire the best future possible by ensuring his brother Prince Qi’s succession to the throne.

Last life, his strategist Mei Changsu once told him that he chose to support him because he had no other choice. So in this life, it is easy to imagine given the choice between Prince Qi and Jingyan, which one Lin Shu would choose. He would definitely choose Prince Qi.

Jingyan vows to himself, as long as he lives, he would not allow Cliff Mei to be stained with blood, and he would not allow Lin Shu to become Mei Changsu. He would preserve all 70,000 lives of the Chiyan army, give the world a just and competent emperor, and let Lin Shu live a happy and carefree life. Even at the cost of his own life.

This time, you can go see the grandeur of mountains and the serenity of the streams like you’ve always wanted, experience the glory of life, even though I will not be by your side.

Everything is frozen in this harsh winter.

Despite the burning coals in the imperial chambers, an unseen chill permeates through the space.

The Imperial physicians are scurrying around in a frenzy, cold sweat on their foreheads, and no one dares to utter a word.

The Empress stands just outside the emperor’s bedchamber, dressed impeccably in her elaborate formal robes, her features look not a day past when she first became the Princess Consort, some twenty years ago. She used to feel so much love and longing for her husband, now, all that’s left are calm and serenity. She would accept whatever fate has in store for her in the future.

She knows with such certainty and calmness—likely the silent snow outside—that her son will inherit the throne. After all, even in his sickness, her husband has diligently paved the roads for them.

As a ruler and a husband, he has truly fulfilled every duty to its perfection.

In these past twenty years, he defended the kingdom against invasions and filled the Court with the most competent men; he has taught both Tingsheng and his own son personally, while fulfilling his filial duties to the Empress Dowager.

During the late autumn of last year, after the death of the Empress Dowager, it seemed that all the burdens left him. He ordered the Crown Prince to act in his stead in the Court, then fell rapidly ill. Everyone panicked, yet he was the only calm one. He settled his affairs meticulously, as if looking forward to this last day.
Even in these last hours, he quietly summoned them into his chamber and bid the most mundane goodbyes, then ushered them all out to wait-- for when he takes his last breath, and takes off the mantle of being the emperor.

The empress looks outside, as the snow falls heavily onto the paths illuminated by lanterns.

_In this stormy weather, my dear husband, can you find your way to Cliff Mei?_

Tingsheng walks into the bed chamber. The emperor turns his head with great difficulty on the bed, and smiles gently.

"I thought I couldn't wait until you came."

Tingsheng is no longer the timid child from the servant prison all those years ago, he now stands taller than his father, and years of military life has given him a hardened edge.

He kneels by the bed and says quietly, "Master Lin does not like bidding goodbyes, so he has given me this gift to pass along."

"... What beautiful plum blossoms..." whispers the emperor, his eyes soft as he gazes at the blooming flowers.

"Yes," says Tingsheng, trying to stop the quiver in his voice, "Fei Liu picked them from your old residence as Prince."

"Fei Liu, how is he?"

"He's well, there have been more people to come to challenge him in martial arts, but since he's well protected by the master of Langya Hall, no one dares to do him harm." Tingsheng steers the conversation in lighter directions, as if it was only yesterday that his father was gently reading him bedtime stories.

At this moment, his grief would only make his father uneasy before his departure. He has done more than enough, he has more than earned his rights for a respite. If he cannot be free in life, then please let him be free in the afterlife.

Jingyan feels something being pressed into his palm. He lifts his hand slowly and squints in the dim light. It is the pearl he gave to Xiaoshu.

“Don’t worry, I took it away without anyone knowing. Nobody saw.”

The emperor nods in relief, holding the pearl close to his heart, along with the love he harbored for that person. Years ago when he first found this pearl in the East Sea, he was so taken with its beauty that he fell asleep looking at it in his hands. All this time has passed, it is still so beautiful.

Xiaoshu has always been impatient, never been the one to wait. He’s been kept waiting long enough on the other side of the Lethe. He must be so anxious. It is time to go.

The emperor exhales slowly and deeply, as if expelling every last drop of energy in his body. The image of Tingsheng wavers and dims in his vision.
“Tingsheng…” he calls.

“Yes, Father, I am here.”

Jingyan smiles and says softly, “I miss Xiaoshu…”

-----------------------

In his drifting consciousness, he hears the gentle rustling of waves.

When he opens his eyes, the sight that greets him is the army tent above his head, like a lifetime ago.

His hand is clasped tightly around the pearl. That pearl he found for Xiaoshu, when he was the nineteen year-old general stationed in the East Sea.
Lin Shu and his father are marching with the Chiyan army towards Cliff Mei; they are only about one day away from their destination.

“Any word from the advance guards?” asks Lin Shu.

“No, but it should be very soon. Vice Commander, shall we rest here while we wait for their news?” asks a soldier nearby.

“Sounds reasonable. Order the army to stand by!”

“Yes, sir!”

Lin Shu jumps off his horse, shaking the dust and fallen snow from his cloak, “What blasted weather! My hands are completely frozen!”

“Vice Commander, now you understand our pain! Usually you are like a fireball--remember that last time you chased the enemy for the whole night wearing just a thin coat?!”

“Hmph, if I’m a fireball, he’s a buffalo, I always have to drag him on a leash!” Laughs Lin Shu.

As they are chatting, one of the advance guards comes dashing towards them, his expression unsettled. “Vice Commander, someone...Prince Jing…!”

“Yes, sir, I saw him from afar, although he seemed rather battered, he did look like the Prince, so I came to report, perhaps you wish to take a look, Vice Commander?”

Lin Shu walks towards the person, who’s completely surrounded by his personal guards. Through the crowd, all he sees is a face mostly covered by a cloak, but Lin Shu recognizes him right away. It really is Jingyan! His hands are clasped tightly around the horse’s reins, speckles of blood on his ashen face.

“What are you doing here?” Lin Shu questions softly.

“...Xiaoshu…” Jingyan whispers in a tight voice. Then he lunges forward to engulf Lin Shu in a tight hug.

Surprised by his sudden appearance but still happy to see his long-time friend, Lin Shu lifts his arms to embrace Jingyan back, and hears him whisper in his ears something that instantly chills his entire body: “Xie Yu has fabricated false evidence for high treason against the Chiyan army, now he is coming with the emperor’s orders to exterminate all of you. If you go to Cliff Mei, you will die.”

---------------------------

Lin Xie has been silent for a long time since hearing Prince Jing’s information. He pins the Prince with a solemn stare and asks, “Do you know what you are accusing?”

“I do,” says the Prince calmly. “Otherwise I would not have abandoned my soldiers in the East Sea and come thousands of miles to find you.”

“Do you know, Your Highness, even if you are a Prince, I cannot stop the army in its tracks based on unfounded claims?”

“I am not asking you to stop, but to delay your arrival for a couple of days. Since your food supply is still lagging behind, you have a valid reason for a slower progression.” Jingyan reasons.

“How can you prove yourself?” Lin Xie presses urgently without a pause. “If I do as Your Highness suggests, and evade this potential death, how would I know if the threat has never existed in the first place?”
“....” Jingyan closes his eyes, gathering his breath, “Then please at least send a small troop to scout out the situation on Cliff Mei, if they encounter the enemy force from Da Yu, please save some energy in the battle and wait for reinforcements. And I wish to return immediately to the capital with Xiaoshu; if Chiyan army is completely decimated, we need to go back to save my brother Prince Qi.”

“Jingyan!” Lin Shu exclaims with incredulity.

Of course, the Jingyan Lin Shu knows would never say this. The nineteen year-old, headstrong Jingyan would say without reservation, Commander General, if you insist, then I will fight to death with Xiaoshu on Cliff Mei.

But he is not that Jingyan anymore. If he is given the chance to do it all over again, he would never allow Cliff Mei to be stained with Lin Shu’s blood.

---------------------------------

Lin Xie and his army arrive at Cliff Mei one day after scheduled. Even though he does not have the same level of faith in Prince Jing as his son, he is moved nonetheless by the perseverance it took to travel from border to border for the sake of friendship.

So when Xie Yu’s army flocked to Cliff Mei, waiting to sweep up the remains of the Chiyan army after their bloody battle with Da Yu, he found the Yu force completely intact and had to fend them off with his own men. At the brink of defeat, reinforcements from the Chiyan army arrived, and promptly helped to decimate the enemy.

---------------------------------

Eunuch Gao is treading on very thin ice lately. The emperor has made his decision before sending Xie Yu to Cliff Mei. He has hardened his resolve to reinforce his hold on the throne with whatever means necessary, even if that includes sending his beloved son to the executioners. It’s been a month since he last went to visit the Noble Consort Chen or Concubine Jing. He has not spoken to Prince Qi in a private audience. He is engrossed in grief and self-pity of being betrayed by his closest adviser and son, turning his suspicious eyes onto the rest of the court for signs of discontent--perhaps under every obedient masks lays an ambitious heart, just like Lin Xie and Prince Qi.
Eunuch Gao has no idea what Xie Yu and Xia Jiang are plotting together, but he knows that no one will be able to save Prince Qi and the Chiyan army from the emperor’s wrath.

Tonight, as he carefully lays down the supper dishes in front of the emperor, a servant rushes in to report with news from the front lines.

“Read the report!” The emperor stands rapidly from his chair, eyes red.

“Complete victory, Your Majesty!” Exclaims the servant.

“Victory…? Whose victory?” The emperor screams.

“The….Chiyan army’s victory…” The servant prostrates himself in front of the emperor, trembling with fear.

According to Commander General Lin Xie’s report, the Chiyan army completely dominated the Yu forces, and as the first in line for battle, Xie Yu should be awarded high military medals. Commander Lin also admits that due to delays in food supply, they nearly missed the chance to support Xie Yu’s men, and has begged for the emperor’s forgiveness. Without evidence of treason, the emperor has no choice but to award the Chiyan army. Though doubt still lingers like a poison in his heart.

When the emperor sees that Prince Jing has returned with the Chiyan army--the son that is supposed to be far away in the East Sea--something snaps and he unleashes all of his frustration and anger on him.

In the Great Hall, Prince Jing kneels in the center without saying a word, back straight as a rod. Many nobles and royals are also in attendance, yet no one dares to even breathe too loudly.

“The Da Yu forces are a formidable foe, although I have always been in the military, I have never faced such a strong opponent and wanted a chance to test my abilities, so I went to join the Chiyan army after settling my affairs in the East Sea,” the prince calmly states.

Fuming, the emperor throws down a jade paperweight from his throne, hitting the prince in the knee. “I tire of arguing with you! Your brother Prince Qi did not educate you well, then I shall personally discipline you! Prince Jing has disobeyed military orders, he will be punished with twenty slashes! Guards, at once!”
Disappointed and angry with Jingyan for his disobedience, Prince Qi does not speak up in his favor for once. Lin Shu is worried sick but cannot divulge anything about the true reasons behind Jingyan’s actions, so he can only watch as the guards begin to administer the punishment. Every slash seems to fall on his heart. Even battle injuries never hurt as much. It is the first time that he comes face to face with court conspiracies, and realizes his own helplessness and the thin line between life and death. He wants nothing more than to protect the person in front of him, but can only stand silently as blood slowly begins to saturate Jingyan’s clothes.

Although the emperor is angry for his disobedience, he is not truly afraid of Jingyan’s potential for treason. After a good beating, most of his anger has deflated. His face white as a sheet, Jingyan has stayed completely silent throughout the entire ordeal. The usually carefree and flippant Lin Shu, on the other hand, is muffling his tears with little success.

*What a child after all*, the emperor muses, and cannot help to tease, “Look at you, crying like you are the one being punished! I know you two are close, but now you are both grown up, you should learn the meaning of responsibility! Go back and reflect on your mistakes, you are grounded until I give you permission!”

The two guards who were giving the beating grab Jingyan’s arms brusquely to lift him up without much care; since he’s not a favored prince, they did not bother being lenient in his punishment. Lin Shu seethes at the harsh treatment and almost goes to support Jingyan himself.

The emperor sighs, pointing at Lin Shu but directing his words at Prince Qi on the opposite side of the hall, “None of you ever gives me a break!” then sweeps out of the room.

Jingyan feels as if his entire body is covered with a flaming blanket of pain, yet he heaves a sigh of relief. Finally, the knife above their heads has been lowered. But now he does not even have the energy to celebrate this turn of fortunes.
In the Inner Palace, Noble Consort Chen heaves a sigh of deep displeasure at her son for not having begged the emperor to lighten Jingyan’s punishment, while Concubine Jing smiles at her indignance. “It was Jingyan’s own fault for committing such a mistake. Anyway he’s spent years in the military and a little beating wouldn’t do him serious harm. Prince Qi did well by not saying anything in his favor; His Majesty would probably have doubled the sentence had anyone dared to oppose him. Even Xiaoshu might have been implicated.”

The Noble Consort dabs away some tears and says, “But he is after all a royal prince, such brute punishments are so…and now he is grounded at his manor for three months. He has just moved out of the palace into his own place, there must be so many things he needs, like servants and daily necessities… He’s always been too polite to ask for anything. I have to go see him, someone go and prepare the carriage at once!”

“You will do no such thing! You will only berate him further, and I won’t have him endure your foul temper! Go and send someone reliable, make sure his injuries are taken care of and he eats properly.”

Prince Qi glances at Concubine Jing briefly and replies obediently, “Yes, Mother.”

So this reliable person arrives at Prince Jing’s manor promptly at nightfall, bearing a huge package of medicine and baked goods, plus a pot of freshly made chicken soup from Concubine Jing.

“How did you get in here with so many guards outside?” Jingyan asks curiously, glancing at Lin Shu, who’s busy making himself at home.
“No problem at all, I found this empty mansion next to yours and I climbed over the walls,” Lin Shu smirks at his own ingenuity, but Jingyan falls silent upon hearing his words. Afraid that he’s still upset over his punishment, Lin Shu kneels by the bed and assures him, “There are imperial guards outside your place as per the emperor’s orders, so Brother Qi cannot come to visit you, but he’s really concerned. So here I am to watch over you! I’ll be taking care of you these three months, you can’t get rid of me,” says Lin Shu happily, “I’ll have to bring my own mattress, the ones in your house are way too hard.”

----------------------

The two of them manage to finish the entire pot of chicken soup and some desserts. Jingyan doesn’t have much of an appetite, so he puts his plate down after a few bites. Now it’s Lin Shu’s turn to be silent.

“Xiaoshu,” says Jingyan.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t you have something to ask me?”

“...Jingyan, how did you know about Xie Yu’s conspiracy to frame the Chiyan army?”

“I already told you, my mother overheard it from Father.”

Lin Shu gazes at him intently, as if watching his reaction, “You were away with the military in the East Sea so you didn’t know, but your mother and another concubine were praying in the temple, and have not seen the emperor in a couple of months.”

“...Does your father know about this?” asks Jingyan.

“I heard about it when I went to visit the Noble Consort...so father and Brother Qi have no idea that you lied to them.”
“Xiaoshu, I--” Jingyan stops himself before words could tumble out of his mouth. If he tells him the truth, what would Lin Shu think of him? Would he believe him? Even he himself has trouble believing that this is not all a bizarre dream. Yet he cannot let history repeat itself. He scoffs at himself; somehow it seems that this time around he and Xiaoshu have swapped places-- he is now the person with secrets. How can he blame Xiaoshu for doubting his words when all those years ago, he has hurt that person so much with his suspicions?

----------------------------------------

“Don’t worry, I will not tell father and the others.” Lin Shu’s calm words break the silence between them.

Not trusting Jingyan has never been an option in Lin Shu’s world. Praised to be one of the most brilliant prodigies in his generation, Lin Shu trusts his ability to know a person. And Jingyan is someone he has been assessing and evaluating for nineteen years. He trusts him as he trusts himself. He knows that Jingyan’s hesitance stems not from lies, but from the inability to express himself.

“You really believe me?” asks Jingyan softly.

“Jingyan, I know that you will not lie to me,” Lin Shu says firmly, “I am asking you not out of suspicion, but out of curiosity-- what kind of signs did father and I miss, yet you picked up on them?”

Jingyan almost sighs in relief. Mei Changsu of the past life did not become the most brilliant strategist overnight, Xiaoshu has always been an extremely perceptive person. Even at this tender age, he is quick to grasp at the heart of the matter. Last time Xiaoshu spent his life to protect Jingyan’s innocence, now it’s his turn.

Xiaoshu, this time, please stay the way you are, as the brightest prodigy of the capital.

As for Mei Changsu.... Jingyan closes his eyes. Memories always have a knack of surfacing during the darkest time of night.

A man in grey robes smiles gently at him, [Your Highness, I wish to choose you.]

“It’s a friend.”
“A friend?” Lin Shu asks incredulously, “We are practically together nine hours out of ten, how do I not know this friend of yours?”

Jingyan says slowly, asking combing through the strands of memory, “He is the son of my mother’s friend, he travels through the pugilist world, so even I don’t get to see him much.”

“Hmph, such a person must have extraordinary means to know what goes on in the royal palace! How did he know anyway?”

“He has friends all over the pugilist world, and one of them found a letter in a school teacher’s home, which faked the penmanship of Chiyan army’s Captain Nie Feng, accusing Commander General Lin of treason. When he heard that Xie Yu gathered his men to leave the capital, he passed the information along to me, that’s why I came in a hurry to find you.”

Everything seems so believable now-- Jingyan lied about having heard the news from his mother because no one would trust an unknown man’s word. Lin Shu nods in understanding, “I see.”

“Xiaoshu, there’s something else.”

“You are really chatty today, can’t this wait until tomorrow?” Lin Shu yawns.

“My injuries will keep me at home for at least a month. Even after I have the permission to leave, I cannot go immediately back to the East Sea.”

“I know, your men are still there. Don’t worry, next time the emperor mentions it I will ask to go in your stead, ok?”

“Thanks,” Jingyan says, relieved.

“But then I get to keep all the pearls we get over there!” Lin Shu shoves off his shoes and tucks
himself into bed, mindful of Jingyan’s injuries. “Warm enough?”

Jingyan nods. So warm. This kind of warmth has long faded in his memory.

“Jingyan.”

“Yes?”

Lin Shu turns his head towards the other person, eyes bright, but the usual laughter in them absent. “I just suddenly realized that I came so close to death. I didn’t know that words alone had the power to kill. What do you think would have happened if your friend hadn’t found out about the conspiracy?” he fixes his eyes on Jingyan, his voice tight with fear.

“My father and I, and Captain Nie Feng, would we have died?”

“No,” Jingyan replies without any hesitation, “You will all be alright.”

-------------------

After chatting for some more time, the sedatives in Jingyan’s medicine are starting to take effect, and his replies are becoming monosyllables.

Lin Shu is also getting sleepy, but remembers to ask before sleep overtakes him, “Jingyan, what’s the name of that friend of yours?”

“Huh?”

“That smart friend, who’s the son of your mother’s acquaintance.”

There is a long silence before Lin Shu hears any reply from his bedmate. Jingyan’s voice drifts in the quiet night, so low and so reverent, as if caressing a dearly held treasure.

He knows that in this life there will never be Mei Changsu, but this name is so deeply etched into his
body and soul. This time around, Lin Shu still cannot fight alongside him.

*Then, Sir Su, are you still willing to help me again in this life?*

“...His name is Mei Changsu.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, original Mandarin here

Click on the superscript number to see detailed footnotes at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lin Shu has taken an uncanny interest in this Mei Changsu character. He always manages to mention his name in conversation in the most casual way, then proceeds to probe for more information. “So when and how did you two meet? Does he know when your birthday is?”

Jingyan is totally bewildered. “Why does it matter? I think he knows,” he replies nonchalantly, watching Lin Shu practice his sword moves from the window.

“Does he know what your favorite dessert is?”

“Yeah.”

Silent, Lin Shu chops off several branches of a plum tree with a violent swing of his sword. A new servant is about to move forward to tell him to be careful, only to be grabbed roughly by an old butler-- Shh, don’t ever say anything against Young master Lin’s wishes, he can chop off all the plum trees and our Prince will let him.

“But he has also told me something else,” Jingyan lowers his voice mysteriously, luring Lin Shu to abandon his sword and come to the window. He told Lin Shu about the murder case in the Lan Yuan mansion. [1]

“I’ll take the matter to Brother Qi,” Lin Shu exclaims, fuming.

“Xiaoshu, do you really want Brother Qi to handle this?”

Stunned momentarily, Lin Shu quickly realizes what Jingyan means-- if Prince Qi were to handle the case, he would submit all the necessary evidence to the Ministry of Justice, which no doubt would
implicate many officials in various areas of the court. Once they are removed for questioning, the vacancies cannot be filled quickly enough; blowing up the case to such proportions would no doubt anger the emperor.

“I see,” says Lin Shu after a short pause, smiling assuringly, “Don’t worry, I have my ways.”

----------------------------------------

The House of Mu is rather lively this month because Princess Nihuang has returned to the capital with her five-year-old brother Mu Qing. The young boy is such a gem, his innocence so pure that it has everyone flocks to him in affection. Even the normally recalcitrant son of Marquis Yan cannot stop teasing him.

“Mu Qing, right?”

“Who are you..?”

“I am brother Yujin, of the Yan family.”

“That’s a really long name…”

“Oh but your name is so pretty!”

“Really??” Mu Qing perks up instantly at the praise, raising his head with a bright smile.

“Mu Qing means to be admired and love by everyone!” [2]

“…Really?”

“Really really!” Yujin snatches the chance to grab Mu Qing tightly to plant several wet smoothes all over his chubby face. The young boy now knows he’s been teased rather badly, so starts protesting in the only way he knows-- he howls in tears.
The house is bustling with servants trying to get ready for a family banquet at night, so no one notices when Lin Shu sneaks in from the side door.

“Aren’t you two bored in the house? Why don’t I take you outside and we can go to the market?”

Mu Qing glances at Lin Shu hopefully, savior!!

“We can go grab some food~~”

Mu Qing’s eyes glitter with want.

“And I’ll teach you how to get past the guards to sneak out!” Lin Shu lays down the final blow.

“Yes yes, let’s go now!!” Yujin throws his arms up in support.

--------------------------------

“Your Highness, the capital patrol guards have been dispatched,” Prince Jing’s vice general Lie Zhanying reports.

“Oh, how come?”

“Marquis Yan’s son and the young prince Mu Qing somehow got lost near the abandoned Lan Yuan mansion. The patrol guards are looking for them, even Prince Yu have sent his men to help.”

“Of course Prince Yu would jump at the chance to curry a favor of the Mu family,” Jingyan scoffs with disdain.

“Vice commander Lin Shu is taking the two children around the market, so they are safe and away from the commotion,” Zhanying adds in a low voice.
“Excellent.”

Without the bloodshed of the Chiyan army, Xie Yu in this life is not a high-ranking marquis yet, so he does not have control over the capital guards. With Prince Yu’s men involved now, Xie Yu has no means to protect the officials guilty of murder. Even though unveiling the case now does not have nearly the same impact as ten years later, Jingyan cannot stand by and risk more girls dying in the scheme.

“Now Prince Yu can search Lan Yuan mansion thoroughly with the excuse of looking for young prince Mu Qing, and he would be the one submitting the case to the emperor. No one would ever think to trace it back to us,” Zhanying says happily. “Good thing we have Vice Commander Lin on our side, Your Highness will be less burdened.”

“He isn’t,” Jingyan whispers.

“Pardon?"

“...Nothing, you may go.”

------------------------------------

Things are moving swiftly. The Lan Yuan mansion is sealed off for inspection, soon several female corpses are dug out from a dried well. In his fury, His Majesty orders the Ministry of Justice an immediate and thorough investigation, and soon enough a commoner comes to the magistrate bearing a list of officials who used to frequent the mansion in secret.

While the entire capital is in an uproar over this scandal, the kids who instigated the fire are safely tucked away in Prince Jing’s manor.

“ ‘M tellin’ ya, I spoil y’all too much,” Lin Shu squeezes his words out, muffled by too many cookies in his mouth. “As soon as I got to the market, I bought an entire basket full of your favorite snacks.”

Jingyan nods in agreement; it’s truly been a long time since he has had those treats. After the Chiyan
tragedy, he avoided anything that could have reminded him of Lin Shu, including the capital itself. But after he lost Mei Changsu, he also lost the freedom to leave this very city.

“Lin Shu-gege, stop lying through your teeth, you had no idea I would come today! All those treats are just for Jingyan-gege, I don’t like anything in here!” Nihuang protests.

“How am I lying? Both Jingyan and I are here in his house, so I bet you would come too, right?”

Jingyan watches silently as Nihuang and Lin Shu have their heads together, squabbling about nonsense, a dull ache throbs in his heart.

“Oy, Lin Shu-gege, what about that pigeon egg-sized pearl you said you’d show me?”

“What? Oh right, Jingyan, where’s my pigeon egg?” Lin Shu turns accusing eyes to the other boy.

“......”

“You forgot?” he grabs the pastry Jingyan is about to eat from his hands and shoves it violently into his own mouth, “Come Nihuang, let’s go have a spar outside, let him starve!”

“...But Lin Shu-gege, you left the treats inside, how are you going to starve him?” Nihuang laughs in amusement.

“I shall forbid him to eat them!” his voice shouts from the courtyard, just as Jingyan bites into the next piece of pastry with a satisfying crunch.

--------------

That pearl is in the cabinet, the same place where it waited for its recipient for thirteen years. It rightly belongs to Xiaoshu, but for some unnamed reason, every time Jingyan takes it out to give it to him, he cannot bear to part with it. It has experienced too much through the years with him.

Sometimes when Jingyan sees it, he thinks of the past, of the people in the past.
--Those who have only existed in the past.

Chapter End Notes

1Case of the Lan Yuan mansion: Mei Changsu pretended to check out the mansion for sale, then found skeletons in a dried well, which turned out to be girls killed in an illegal prostitution ring operated by a high-ranking court official, thus he got rid of a major supporter of the Crown Prince. [return to text]

2Mu Qing's name in Mandarin is 穆青，which has the same pronunciation as 慕卿，literally meaning "admire you". [return to text]
This morning, Lin Shu receives a summons from the Grand Empress to go into the palace. Jingyan’s injuries are still healing and he is technically still grounded at his residence, so he says to the other boy, “Send my greetings to Great Granny, will you?”

Sensing that Jingyan is a bit upset over the fact he cannot go, Lin Shu soothes, “Great Granny knows that you would’ve love to come, don’t worry, I won’t eat any of the hazelnut cookies she gives me, I’ll bring them back for you!”

“You greedy thief,” Jingyan smiles, eyes still blurry with morning haze.

Lin Shu feels himself sinking into those dark, soft orbs, before he catches himself and responds, “Hey don’t be sarcastic, I always bring goodies for you!”

Before going to the Grand Empress’s place, Lin Shu and Prince Qi first go to greet the Emperor. Lin Shu mentions that he wishes to go to the East Sea to take charge of the troops stationed there.

The emperor is immensely relieved at this development. He would never voluntarily bring up the engagement between Lin Shu and Princess Nihuang. Lin Shu is the only son and successor of Lin Xie, and while Mu Qing will eventually inherit the House of Mu, a marriage between those two powerful families would no doubt pose a threat, a very real threat to his precious throne.

Although Xie Yu's claims regarding the Chiyan army’s treason proved to be unfounded, doubts still linger around like a persistent poison. If the Chiyan army, along with the Southern army controlled by the Mu family decide to join forces and threaten the capital, they would be an unparalleled military power. This engagement was arranged by the Grand Empress, as emperor he cannot easily call for an annulment, but Xie Yu’s words are like a cold blade twisting in his heart.
As a father and an uncle, he heaved a small sigh of relief when the Chiyan army returned intact.

As a ruler, however, he still harbors suspicions towards the two people in front of him.

Lin Shu’s suggestion is a perfect solution at the moment. Send him off to the East Sea for a couple of years, then to some other faraway place to strengthen the borders for a few more. By then Nihuang will have passed the ripe age for marriage, and he can marry her off to someone else with an appropriately grandiose ceremony.

Great plan, the emperor muses, while putting up the front of a concerned uncle, “Nonsense, do you even know what kind of place that is? You think this is all some childish game! Just like Jingyan! Perhaps it is time to keep him in the capital to rein in his stubborn temper. Lin Shu, have you spoken to your parents about going to the East Sea?”

Now that the emperor is speaking to him as a parent would their child, Lin Shu feels that he should be happy, but the thought of Cliff Mei, Xie Yu and Jingyan freezes the beginning of a smile on his face.

“Still upset with me for punishing Jingyan?” asks the emperor.

Lin Shu shakes his head mutely.

“Although he is older, you are more mature than him, your father has taught you well,” says the emperor, amused with himself. “I shall speak with your father regarding this matter, you will get your wish to go to the East Sea.”

As the two bid their leave, Lin Shu sees Eunuch Gao by the door with a troubled expression on his face. He slows his steps to listen.

“Your Majesty, the Empress has given some fresh hazelnut cookies to the Grand Empress, and Her Highness, knowing that those are a favorite of Prince Jing’s, has graciously summoned him into the palace.”

“No matter, let Jingyan come, just send him back home when he’s done.”
“......” The eunuch hesitates for a fraction of a second before deciding not to mention that the prince has trouble walking due to his injuries. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Outside the door, Lin Shu’s expression darkens.

------------------

When Jingyan enters the Grand Empress’s place, there is already a small crowd around her feet. He moves slowly and delicately towards her, bowing a proper greeting.

“Look at how thin you’ve gotten! Come closer to Great Granny,” beckons the Grand Empress.

Noble Consort Chen gives Prince Qi a displeased glare, her eyes welling with tears when she sees Jingyan’s pale face. Concubine Jing quietly pats her hand in assurance.

Jingyan kneels obediently by the Grand Empress, answering all of her questions with great patience. Lin Shu watches as tiredness begin to creep up Jingyan’s face, his head churning with excuses to take Jingyan away from here.

He throws a handful of candy into his mouth and turns glittering eyes to the Grand Empress, “Thanks, Great Granny! Jingyan, why aren’t you eating anything? I’ll eat them if you don’t!”

Jingyan slowly takes a bite out of the cookie in his hand, savoring the flavor that is no longer familiar to him. “No way,” he deadpans.

Everyone laughs at their antics, and the Grand Empress presses some more candy into each of their hands. “Don’t fight, be good, Great Granny has enough to give to all of you!”

A servant approaches with several bowls of steaming soup, as Concubine Jing says, “I made this red bean soup this morning, it’s a new recipe, please try some.”

The Grand Empress smiles kindly, “The children love your cooking, let them all have some.”

“I love Auntie Jing’s soups!” Princess Nihuang perks up and goes to grab a bowl, bumping into the
servant and spoiling half of the soup on her sleeve. She smiles at the quivering servant and shrugs nonchalantly, “Oops, guess I’ll have to go and change.”

As she passes Lin Shu, she whispers in his ear mischievously, “Lin Shu-gege, you owe me this time~!”

Lin Shu feels his face heating up. Everyone around laughs at the display of innocent love, no one even suspects that his blush comes from having his deepest secret guessed by a mere girl.

Jingyan smiles along with everyone else. He has perfected the art of smiling after years on the throne.

---When you cannot be angry, cannot cry, cannot even begrudge anyone for your fate, all that’s left to do is to smile.

After Nihuang’s departure, everyone begins to bid their goodbyes to the Grand Empress. Jingyan stumbles as soon as he is out of the palace doors, Lin Shu grabs his arms swiftly and scolds, “How stubborn do you have to be?! I told you not to come! Can’t believe you rode in a carriage too, bet it hurt huh?”

“No...I really did want to come...oww!!”

Lin Shu’s anger vanishes at Jingyan’s pained cry, he lets the other boy lean on him heavily on one side, walking forward slowly.

“Let me carry you on my back,” Lin Shu offers.

“What will people think?”

“You are not some girl, why do you care what they think?”

“...Still no way.”

A cough behind the reminds them that they are not alone. Prince Qi watches them with a half stern
and half amused look on his face, “Jingyan will ride in my carriage.”

“No no, I can escort him back!” Lin Shu eagerly offers, afraid that their brother Qi would scold Jingyan again.

“Right, and how will you do that on horseback?” Prince Qi throws him an exasperated look.

The two of them enter Prince Qi’s carriage, while Lin Shu insists on following behind on his horse.

Jingyan pauses inside the carriage, eyeing the seats with trepidation. The pain medication he took before he left his house has long worn off, and he has no desire to repeat the trip sitting down.

“Come here,” sighs Prince Qi, pulling Jingyan forward to lie face down on his lap as to not disturb his injuries. “Try to be steady,” he orders the driver.

“Are you upset with me for not speaking up in your favor?” asks Prince Qi.

“No, I don’t blame you, or Father...I was selfish and impudent.” Jingyan assures his brother.

*That’s putting it lightly, imagine if you were truly punished according to martial laws...* Prince Qi feels a spike of anger at the thought, which is promptly squashed by the pale face of his young brother.

"...After this time our Father would not be so willing to send you out on military missions. Perhaps it is a good time to stay with me in the capital and learn the ways of the court for a few years. After Father’s anger cools, I can talk to him about giving you army duty again."

“Let Xiaoshu go to the military. I wish to stay by Brother’s side.”

Slightly surprised at the admission, Prince Qi nods, “That would be the best, but then his marriage with Nihuang will have to be delayed again.”
“What do I have anything to do with this?” Lin Shu’s head appears through the front curtain of the carriage, his face indignant.

“What are you doing?”

“Look at how steady the carriage is, who beside me could be driving it?” Lin Shu says smugly, and eyes Jingyan’s position over Prince Qi’s laps, “Oooh, I see now why Brother Qi refused to let me come along.”

“...It’s not---” Even after so many years, Lin Shu always has the upper hand in their squabbles. Jingyan resigns himself to defeat, hiding his flaming face.

Prince Qi resists the urge to laugh and changes the topic to news of his wife’s pregnancy.

Lin Shu’s interest is immediately piqued, “I wonder if it’s a boy or a girl. If it’s a boy, I’ll teach him horseback riding!”

“What if it’s a girl?” teases Prince Qi.

“Then let Nihuang teach her. Do you have a name yet, Brother?”

“We are still thinking, and perhaps the emperor will choose a name for us, plus we don’t know the gender yet,” he smiles with contentment.

Jingyan knows. That child was a bright ray of light in the darkness after he lost almost everything. But in this life, he would grow up happy and healthy, without knowing hunger or humiliation, without the scars of servitude.

Yet he would not be called by the same name, and would not call him “Father.”

He would live a happy life, just as Xiaoshu and Brother Qi and all the others, live a long and happy life.
Chapter 6

The day before Lin Shu leaves for the East Sea, Jingyan says tentatively to him, “I will have dinner prepared, so if you can come…”

“Screw curfew, of course I’ll find a way to come!” Lin Shu interrupts. “Remember to get me good wine!”

During the day Lin Shu is spending time with his teacher Li Chong, Jingyan sits in his courtyard waiting for his friend until sunset, then well into the cold night.

It is near the end of winter, the plum blossoms are all but gone, with the last vestige of lingering fragrance in the garden.

So this is goodbye.

The emperor will no doubt delay the marriage between Lin Shu and Nihuang for as long as possible. The next time Lin Shu returns to the capital, he would not be the same Jingyan anymore. Perhaps now is a good time to say goodbye, while he is still that familiar and innocent Jingyan.

Xiaoshu...

“Jingyan?”

Jingyan turns his head and sees his best friend dressed in a full suit of armor-- he has come before his departure at sunrise.
“Sorry I am late, Father and I had a long conversation before I left. Why are you sitting outside in the cold?” Lin Shu strides towards him, his scarlet cape billowing behind him, scattering the pale moonlight.

This is the Lin Shu he knows, the brilliant Vice Commander of the Chiyan army.

Lin Shu grabs a jar of wine on the ground and guzzles the whole thing. “Ahh, you are the only one that knows me. I can’t bear to have breakfast at home and watch my mother cry. Great wine! Ok, off I go!”

He grabs Jingyan’s hand to embrace him when he notices how cold the other person is-- the kind of cold after hours of sitting in the chilly night.


As soon as they close the door, Lin Shu enfolds Jingyan’s body tightly in his own, his face against the other boy’s neck; he places Jingyan’s hands onto his own chest, while peeling off their outer layers.

Jingyan freezes in surprise, but makes no moves to stop him. He almost forgot, they used to be so intimate with each other in their youth. At the time, he didn’t think twice about it might have meant, but now he realizes that perhaps even then, their feelings for each other have long surpassed simple friendship. Yet in last life fate did not give them the luxury of time to comb through their hazy attraction.

Not in this life either.

After a long embrace, they rest their foreheads together, breaths hitching. Lin Shu watches the face inches from his own, he can see the universe reflected in those eyes. He lowers his head and caresses the other person’s forehead with his lips. He cannot pin his hand on it; after coming back from Cliff Mei, Jingyan’s gaze has gained something inexplicable: like he is looking at something or someone else when he is looking at Lin Shu.

Other times, he stands silently on the side, the perfect observer of the people and things around him, as if etching everything into his memory, as if preparing for an inevitable goodbye before an endless journey.
Lin Shu tightens his hold on the other boy. He can almost feel his heartbeat.

“Jingyan…”

“Yes?”

“When I went to visit my teacher, he gave me his treasured jade cicada. Father told me that he will soon take a few branches of the Chiyan army to go to the Western borders. He also told me not to tell Brother Qi about Cliff Mei.”

Jingyan nods in agreement. If their benevolent Brother Qi ever found out that his own Father wanted to kill him, his pure heart and filial loyalty--so rare in the royal family--would crumble into nothingness.

The emperor Lin Xie wished for, the emperor Lin Shu wants, the emperor this country needs is not one that swings the blade of suspicion upon his family without a second thought, but one that is fair, kind, and gentle.

So Brother Qi must not change. Then let him--Xiao Jingyan--let him change.

The irony is that in those thirteen years after the Chiyan army fell, he never once bowed down to fate, but now he will.

---------------------------------

“Jingyan, say, what will we be like in ten years?”

“Alive, you are alive, and so am I,” comes the quick reply.

“Of course!” Lin Shu laughs at the simple answer, not knowing that it’s Jingyan’s deepest wish. This Lin Shu has not seen the fire at Cliff Mei, so he has no idea what kind of vow Jingyan made to himself when he said those words. It is the most iron-clad vow, and the most brutal one to himself.
Those years ago, when he was still a Prince, he was willing to sacrifice his bid for the throne in order to save Wei Zheng.\footnote{Wei Zheng: lieutenant under Lin Shu, survivor of the Chiyan conspiracy who was later arrested by XuanJing bureau, Jingyan insisted on a rescue, to which Mei Changsu opposed--leading to a very heated argument in the snow. [return to text]}

Now the stakes are much higher: Lin Shu, Brother Qi and the entire Chiyan army.

*If it takes one life of Xiao Jingyan, fair trade.*

------------

“After we came back from Cliff Mei, you had the chance to return to the East Sea right away without risking punishment, but you chose to come back to face the anger of the Emperor. Jingyan, I know why you wanted me to go to the East Sea in your stead.” Lin Shu pierces his best friend with a knowing gaze, the horse reins in his hands and ready to depart, "You wanted to preserve me and the Chiyan army."

The seventeen-year-old boy continues in a slow and clear voice, as if delivering a promise, “No matter what happens in the future, I will never betray you.”

Chapter End Notes

\[1\] Wei Zheng: lieutenant under Lin Shu, survivor of the Chiyan conspiracy who was later arrested by XuanJing bureau, Jingyan insisted on a rescue, to which Mei Changsu opposed--leading to a very heated argument in the snow. [return to text]

p.s. I'm taking some liberties with military ranks and titles, I hope I'm getting the point across though. I would be mostly using "commander general" > "vice commander" > "lieutenant" > "captain" > minions. Do let me know if you guys have suggestions!
A lot has happened this year.

Lin Xie left with half of the Chiyan army to quell the unrest in the Western borders. The emperor asked several of his high-ranking captains to stay in the capital, claiming that the city needed the best protection from elite troops.

In July, words reached the capital about the declining health of Lord Mu. Different from last life, he did not die on the battlefield with the Southern Chu, but fell victim to some poisonous gas in a forest when he was fighting with local insurgents. The emperor sent Princess Nihuang back to take over duties for her father, much to the dismay of the Grand Empress. In the meantime, he has kept Mu Qing in the capital, saying that he was too young to face the unstable environment in the South.

Prince Qi has suggested more than once to recall the Chiyan men stationed in the north, but the emperor has been firm in his opposition. Words have it that father and son even had verbal arguments on several occasions.

Prince Xian’s mother, Consort Yue, has been favored by the emperor in the past months, and in August she was promoted to Noble Consort. On the other hand, the emperor seems to reduce his visits to the residences of Noble Consort Chen and Concubine Jing.

When it came to the annual selection of new officials, the emperor has broken his habit of leaving the entire process in the hands of Prince Qi, and has further taken some of the suggestions from Prince Xian. Some officials showed signs of dissent right away, and were rebuked harshly by the emperor without exception, including the much respected royal tutor Li Chong.

Stunned by the cold treatment, Master Li Chong nearly tripped as he took a step back, only to be caught by the steady hands of Prince Jing. The movement drew the emperor’s eyes to his seventh son.

“Tell me what you think, Jingyan.” he ordered.
“I have always been in the military…”

“No matter, you need to learn these things sooner or later. This is not a formal audience, you may speak your mind,” said the emperor without much patience, not expecting anything pleasant from the son who’s practically been raised by Prince Qi.

Jingyan lowered his eyes and saw the snickers from Prince Xian and Prince Yu. If he answered wrongly, it would be blamed on the royal tutor and his Brother Qi.

“In my humble opinion…” In his last life, while he was Crown Prince, he had to select new officials for the court, he insisted on a merit-based system. His strategist Mei Changsu had smiled knowingly and compiled a list of these officials according to his wishes, but then told him, ‘The emperor would not be happy with you, if he opposes, you must have a backup plan that makes him think that you’ve taken a step back while preserving your bottom-line.’

So now he presented the backup plan, leaving a few deliberate mistakes to show his inexperience.

When he finished, Prince Yu’s smirk was replaced by utter surprise, and all eyes from the officials were trained on him, as if noticing him for the first time.

The emperor nodded several times in satisfaction, while pointing out the holes in his plan, “Good thinking! But you are still young, it is inappropriate to leave such important matters in your hands. The royal tutor did a good job instructing you all these years. This time, pay attention and learn from your Brother Qi, eventually you may have your turn too.”

The first son of Prince Qi is born near the Winter Solstice.

When the news reaches his manor, Jingyan is in his rooms reading letters from Lin Shu in the East Sea, and smiles happily when he hears that it is a boy. This time he finally knows that child’s real birthday.

The emperor appears very happy as well—sending along many gifts and well wishes—yet still hasn’t chosen a name for the child.
Jingyan has been busy with reforms on transportation policies, and hasn’t found time to visit the newborn until his one-month celebration. It is a family banquet, during which many court officials have flocked to congratulate the Prince, some of them very close friends with him. Prince Qi certainly has his political supporters in court, but he also has many personal friends who admire him for his character and strength.

But their Father does not know this. Even if he knew, he would not care and would only become more suspicious.

“Jingyan, there you are!” Prince Qi waves Jingyan over happily, taking his brother directly into the family room. From their intimacy, no one would guess that these two had a heated argument in front of the emperor just a few days ago over one of the political reforms.

That is the charm of Prince Qi: he is fair and never holds a grudge.

“We have decided on a name, it just needs to be officially registered in the imperial records,” Prince Qi tells Jingyan as they are walking. “Since you are here, I have to tell you, this child is a bit...odd.”

“Odd?”

“Don’t worry yet, I mean, he has never cried,” the expression on his face softens at the mention of his son. Jingyan is reminded of the first time he shot a bird from the sky with his arrow, his Brother Qi had the same warm, proud smile on his face when he went around telling everyone, Look what my brother caught!

“Never cried?”

“Yes, ever since he was born. We were so concerned that we had the imperial physicians examine him. They said nothing was wrong, he just doesn’t cry. He sleeps through the entire night, even the nanny says she’s never handled an easier baby.”

Jingyan walks into the inner room and sees the baby in the nanny’s arms. Heart racing, he steps forward, wanting to see the child up close. Prince Qi takes him in his arms, the baby really does not make a sound, even as he fiddles with the jade pendant that was Jingyan’s gift. His bright eyes dart across the room until they come to rest on Jingyan.

“.....Can I hold him?” asks Jingyan.
“Sure,” Prince Jing hands him the baby with a small sigh. “Try to make him laugh?”

The baby bursts into tears as soon as he settles in Jingyan’s arms.

Prince Qi and the nanny are stunned into silence, even the princess comes rushing into the room, “Is that our child crying??”

Jingyan has absolutely no clue what to do. He has never taken care of a child this small. Last time his own son was this age, he was so deeply embroiled in reforming the court that he barely had time to sleep, let alone spend time with the baby. The loud cries send him into a panic, “Wh--what’s wrong, is he sick? Ting--”

The nanny tries to take the baby back to check on him, but the little hands are so tightly clasped around Jingyan’s sleeves, any attempt of prying them apart results in even louder howls.

After frantically making sure that the baby isn’t ill, Prince Qi says, relieved, “Maybe he just really likes you, Jingyan, try to calm him down!”

Jingyan is at a complete loss for what to do, so he sticks his tongue out in a half-smile, just as Lin Shu would do to him when they were young.

The baby lets out a happy giggle.

All the maids and servants are gathered around the baby to witness this rare phenomenon.

“Wow, our little prince is finally crying!”

“Yeah, right in the arms of Prince Jing, look how tightly he’s holding on!”

“Before nobody could make him cry.”
“Nobody could make him laugh either, even the Princess tried so many different ways, he just never laughed.”

“But look how happy he is in Prince Jing’s arms!”

Princess Qi eventually scatters the crowd and returns to the banquet with her husband, leaving Jingyan alone with the baby rocking in his arms.

Suddenly, the child feels a droplet land on his cheek. He lifts his innocent eyes up to the person holding him to find him silently weeping, rivulets of tears gliding down his face.

Chapter End Notes

1Prince Xian: Xiao Jingxuan, the Crown Prince in the drama. Here his title is still a prince because the Crown Prince hasn’t been named yet. [return to text]
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, original Mandarin here

A pretty lengthy chapter, the plot thickens~~~ :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One year later.

The first birthday of a child is always accompanied by a traditional ceremony of “zhuazhou”, where the child would pick from a range of objects to signify his fortunes in life. At the birthday celebration of Prince Qi’s son, the emperor himself is in attendance, and has even added several precious gifts to the pile, including some freshly baked cookies from the palace. The little prince is surrounded by things like arrow, pen, and dagger.

Jingyan watches from a distance as the beaming emperor teases the baby. Last life the emperor had no idea that this child was even alive, and this time, had the Chiyan conspiracy happened again, no doubt he would have condemned the baby to the same fate. Yet now grandfather and grandson are playing as if they were just an ordinary family.

He had planned to give the child a gift for his birthday-- a simple scented and blessed pouch, with two tiny letters sewn carefully into the inner seam. Two letters that were his name in the past life, the only link between them that would no longer mean anything now.

He never gave him the gift. In this life, Lin Shu will not become Mei Changsu, and this child would no longer be Tingsheng.

The baby crawls around the table, grabbing one object after the next and stuffing them all into the emperor’s hands--all except the cookies. The emperor is greatly amused and chuckles, rustling the little baby’s hair, “You gave grandaddy everything except the food! I get it I get it, you can relax and have a carefree life, just leave all the troublesome things to grandaddy!”

--------------------------------
The emperor left with everything the baby gave him, in such good mood that he gifted Prince Qi with many other precious items. After the royal entourage is completely gone, Jingyan takes out the other gift he prepared-- a woven vest made of the softest steel.[1]

Prince Qi eyes the gift with a frown on his face, knowing its significance and protests, “He is but a child, who would do him serious harm? This is too valuable for him, give it to Xiaoshu instead, he has been moving around so much lately fighting one unrest after another. He would need it more.”

Without even realizing it himself, Prince Qi no longer smiles in the same way in front of his brother anymore.

Jingyan lowers his gaze, expression unreadable, “It’s....the thought that counts.”

Prince Qi is about to refuse again when he sees that his child has his little fists clutched tightly around the vest, clearly liking it a great deal. His heart softens a bit. He can never refuse either of them, his son or his brother. This past year in court Jingyan and he have had their fair share of arguments, he feels more and more distanced from his brother, yet he cannot truly begrudge him.

“Your uncle has given you such a nice gift, you must remember to thank him when you grow up,” he says to his son, taking the vest into his hands.

Lord Mu has been ill for two years, but he insisted on going to battle when the Southern Chu invaded the borders. He fell to enemy swords. The twenty-year-old Princess Nihuang solemnly dons her armor over the mourning robes and goes to war. The emperor gives an imperial decree that orders the Princess to take full control over her father’s troops, as well as the House of Mu until her young brother Mu Qing reaches majority.

Jingyan feels the familiar chill of fear creep up his spine when he hears of the decree. He thought that the late Lord Mu could have avoided such an early death this time. If he made it alive until Mu Qing inherits his title, Nihuang would not have become the female military commander, then perhaps she and Xiaoshu could still be together.

Perhaps it is just a coincidence.
Or perhaps it is fate forcing everything back to its original track.

--------------------------------

“Your Highness, Consort Jing is busy brewing medicine for the Noble Consort Chen, she is not available to see you,” says a servant to Prince Jing outside the consort’s residence.

“Please tell Mother that I shall remain kneeling here if she refuses to see me.”

Two maids from Noble Consort Chen’s palace walk past Jingyan as he is kneeling on the cold tiles; they drop to a quick curtsy towards him, yet their eyes are filled with disdain as they glance back at his straight back.

“Everyone in the palace knows that Prince Qi had a huge argument with His Majesty yesterday because of Vice Commander Lin Shu’s petition to go to the South to fight in the battle against the Southern Chu. Prince Qi begged His Majesty to let Lin Shu go, but His Majesty was furious!”

“Yeah, who would have thought that Prince Jing actually disagreed with Prince Qi, and argued the case against him! After the audience yesterday, His Majesty came to the Inner Palace and promoted Concubine Jing to a Consort. That’s clearly a slap in the face for Prince Qi and the Noble Consort!”

“I heard that Prince Qi stood in his courtyard all day yesterday, and later in the night developed a high fever.”

“Our Lady the Noble Consort was so worried when she heard the news that she had no appetite for two meals. Thanks to Consort Jing who came later and persuaded her to eat something small.”

“I think Consort Jing truly cares about our Lady, but Prince Jing....how disappointing!”

“Serves him right to kneel outside, but who knows if he is just putting on a filial front…”
Four hours later, Consort Jing finally tells Jingyan to come in. She is dressed in elaborately embroidered robes befitting her new status, yet there is no warmth in her eyes.

Mother and son gaze into each other’s eyes for a long moment. She searches his for any sign of discontent, grudge, or regret. There is none. In a flash, she recognizes his persistence and understands his reasons for doing so.

Although she doesn’t fully know the details of everything, she is sure that Jingyan is still the same Jingyan, his feelings towards her, towards Prince Qi and Xiaoshu have not changed. Yet as a mother, her heart gives a painful lurch at the realization of what he is planning to do.

After a long pause, she swallows around the knot in her throat, “...You should do what you think is right. But you have to understand, while you have your reasons, I also have my difficulties in my position. If I pretend not to know anything, it would not be beneficial to you or to the things you are planning. Since the Noble Consort has always been in poor health, I will ask His Majesty for permission to go to one of the imperial mansions in the countryside, where it is quieter for her to recuperate. I may not see you for a long time.”

Jingyan’s hands tighten into fists as he tries to stop their quivering, “.....And I cannot come to visit Mother?”

Consort Jing finds herself at a loss for words. As a mother, she does not have the heart to say no, “When the time comes for us to meet again, we will,” she turns her face away as the light flickers and dies in Jingyan’s eyes.

Jingyan kneels and bows in a formal goodbye, before turning to leave.

“Jingyan…!”

“Yes, Mother?” his expression under control once again.

“You...please take care,” she searches for words and finds none, “please take care of yourself.”
News of an unfortunate development from the front lines of the South reaches the capital. The enemy used a naval strategy that decimated the Liang armies who had very minimal experience on the water. At the same time, the emperor hears that Captain Nie Duo lost half of the military supplies he was supposed to be transporting to Bianzhou, where Lin Shu is stationed.

“It’s a short journey of less than 1,000 miles from here to Bianzhou, clearly he was incompetent and lost the horses, yet he told me that they fell ill and died! Now he is hiding at Lin Shu’s place, humph, he thinks he can evade punishments?” Fumes the emperor.

“Father, perhaps...perhaps Lin Shu prevented him from coming back? Maybe we should investigate...?” Ventures Prince Xian, glancing at Jingyan’s expressionless face and adds, “Now the conflict in the South has intensified, we should be more careful...Maybe it’s best to summon Nie Duo back to the capital for questioning? But I am afraid that Lin Shu would not let him go if we do not send someone persuasive enough…”

The emperor raises an interested eyebrow, “You mean only Jingyan can do this? Jingyan, are you willing to go?”

“....”

Before Jingyan could formulate a reply, the emperor adds, “Bring my decree and take Nie Duo back with you. You may take this chance also to see Lin Shu, you two haven’t parted for this long since you were children, right?”

Jingyan meets his Father’s eyes still flaming with anger, something Mei Changsu said suddenly resonates in his mind:

“A good strategist would have a million ways to react to every eventuality. A good conspirator is the same. A conspiracy is called such because usually you only see the tip of the iceberg, when one strike fails, it would always follow with second and third strikes. Your Highness, please remember that you can never let your guard down, even after you have just evaded one strike. Please be extra careful when I am not around to advise you.”

Jingyan lowers his eyes and lifts his arms in a formal bow, saying in a firm voice, “I shall be honored to go as Your Majesty’s envoy.”
Of course, when you are not here, I am always careful.

Chapter End Notes

1 Woven vest made of steel fibers: the same gift Fei Liu gave to Tingsheng in the past life when he went with Mei Changsu for their first formal visit at Prince Jing’s manor. It’s like a bullet-proof jacket. Mei Changsu prepared the gift saying that since Tingsheng is not proficient in martial arts yet, the vest would protect him from harm. [return to text]
Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin chapter here

I'm so happy you guys are enjoying this! Your comments and support really make my day! <3
This is probably the most difficult chapter so far, tons of action and plotting and all that good stuff. A million thanks to my wonderful beta @caradhras, whose second opinion and proofreading are invaluable. :D

As always, translator's notes at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Nie Duo took the task to transport army horses to Lin Shu, he decided to take the water route along the river. Much to his trepidation, in just one night, half of the horses mysteriously disappeared, and the ships were left completely empty. He immediately sent his men to investigate, but to no avail- even pirates would have left some traces, not to mention that pirates in this area were on friendly terms with him.

As the deadline neared, Nie Duo had to travel with the rest of the horses on land. When Lin Shu heard about what happened, he urged Nie Duo to purchase whatever he could from the local vendors to replenish the loss, buying them some time to mitigate the situation. Unfortunately, the emperor received news within days.

-----------------------------

Early this morning Lin Shu receives word of Jingyan's arrival. Barely able to contain his excitement, he steps outside in fresh clothes to wait for his friend, only to be stopped by a courier’s message. His expression darkens at the contents, and he storms straight back to the tent. His lieutenant Wei Zheng shakes his head imperceptibly at the others, stopping their curious questions.

The letter bears the latest intel that Prince Jing opposed Lin Shu’s proposal to go to the South to support the Mu army, and that the Noble Consort Chen as well as Consort Jing would be leaving the palace soon for health reasons.

Lin Shu throws everything in his room onto the ground in a fit of incredulous rage. As they shatter
into innumerable pieces, he feels his heart sinking. Not being physically in the capital in the past couple of years does not mean he has been completely isolated from its happenings. Words of Jingyan’s sudden rise in the power hierarchy have reached his ears despite the distance. Although the prince was not directly in charge of the selection process for new officials, many candidates he proposed made it to various positions in every ministry. By contrast, thanks to the opportune uncovering of several scandals, quite a few staunch supporters of Prince Qi have been demoted, jailed, or executed.

Even Prince Qi has noticed Jingyan’s rising presence in the court. He is still kind to his younger brother, but there is no longer the unconditional trust that colored their previous relationship. Private interactions between the two also became more and more scarce; for Prince Qi’s birthday this year, Jingyan prepared a generous gift but did not attend the celebrations in person, claiming to be busy with patrol duties.

On political matters, Jingyan would still act as the mediator whenever Prince Qi and the emperor differ in opinion, but his approach has subtly yet irrevocably changed. He still abides by the law, but is no longer stubborn or inflexible.

For one, he disagrees with Prince Qi on his stance to eliminate the Xuanjing bureau of investigation.

Many are surprised by his sudden and aggressive emergence in the court politics, and quite a few have flocked to his camp-- although he is not backed by a powerful maternal clan, he has clearly gained the emperor’s favor. Other officials who are not supporters of Prince Qi are also beginning to see the benefit of working with Prince Jing. For example, while Prince Qi’s words are often challenged by the emperor, the same proposal coming from Prince Jing’s hand can easily get the imperial stamp of approval.

With Noble Consort Chen and Consort Jing away from the palace, Prince Xian’s mother Consort Yue has become the most favored woman in the Inner Palace. However, even with their mothers’ prominent positions, neither Prince Xian nor Prince Yu can hold a flame to Prince Jing’s rapidly rising power in the court.

All of these pieces added together are pointing at a truth that Lin Shu does not wish to admit.

As the emperor’s envoy, Prince Jing arrive at the military base at Bianzhou with an entourage behind him. Lin Shu is already outside waiting with his soldiers.
Since the prince comes bearing an imperial decree, Lin Shu must greet him with proper etiquettes as a subject.

The sound of his knees hitting the soft sand beneath their feet makes Lin Shu’s heart clench. Jingyan’s hands give a twitch around the reins.

After reading the decree, Jingyan hands the scroll to Lin Shu, “I cannot stay for long, bring Nie Duo here.”

Lin Shu’s expression shutters, “......Come with me.”

Lin Shu bids everyone to wait outside the tent and turns to face his friend, “Jingyan, listen to me…”

“Where is Nie Duo?”

“He’s been framed!”

“By whom?”

“I am still investigating!”

“Alright, continue with the investigation, but I must bring Nie Duo back to the capital,” Jingyan says without much emotion.

“Is this the emperor’s order?”

“Yes.”
“And Brother Qi? Did he also agree to this?” Lin Shu presses.

“...That’s not important.”

Jingyan glances around the tent and his eyes fall on the letter Lin Shu was reading before his arrival. He feels his throat closing up. All those years ago, Mei Changsu sacrificed everything to protect him. Now, when he is in a similar position, he wishes to do the same for the other person. He wants Lin Shu away from the machinations of the court not only because it would lessen the emperor’s suspicions, but also to preserve Lin Shu’s innocence.

Last time, Mei Changsu was willing to die as Lin Shu because he couldn’t live as him.

This time around, when Jingyan has been bestowed the gift of time, he would do whatever it takes to grant Lin Shu that wish. He would never allow him to become Mei Changsu and to be stained by those sordid and unspeakable things.

For the sake of Lin Shu, Brother Qi, Mei Changsu, and himself.

“But this whole thing is suspicious! Nie Duo was transporting supplies to me, not to the front lines of the South! If the enemies did this, they would’ve taken the whole batch, not just a part of it! There is only one explanation, whoever did this, their only aim was to frame Nie Duo!” Lin Shu rushes to explain, his face urgent, “Plus I already purchased enough to make up for the loss, I don’t know how His Majesty knew so quickly. . . .”

“I told him.”

Stunned into silence, Lin Shu takes several seconds to register Jingyan’s words.

“YOU told the emperor about Nie Duo?? Why?”

“He has already committed negligence, and I, as the overseer of all military supplies, cannot turn a blind eye to it! Even if I didn’t say anything, you think no one else would have?”

“I have already made up for what was lost!” Lin Shu retorts angrily.
“Those horses were imperial property, and this is a military matter!” Jingyan corrects him without hesitation, “I am not arresting him, just taking him back to the capital for questioning. If he is truly innocent, I will make sure justice is heard.”

“Xiao Jingyan! Don’t you dare fool me with your political wish-wash! We both know that Nie Duo would not even have the chance to speak if he is sent back to the capital! And don’t you talk to me about military matters, you think I want to be cooped up in this god-knows-where while the real battlefield is elsewhere?! Nihuang is risking her life on the Southern border, even if I cannot go, why don’t you request to go?! Even if you have cut all ties of our friendship, how can you sit idly while a mere eighteen year-old girl is fighting against foreign invasion?” Lin Shu can no longer contain his anger, the thought of Nihuang all by herself in the midst of danger and his own helplessness make all of his frustration bubble to the surface.

“What I’ve heard the most about you in the past couple of years is that you have changed,” Lin Shu takes a clear step back, out of the boundary of friends and into the territory of ruler and subject, “and they are right.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, both Lin Shu and Jingyan are taken aback. They hold each other’s gaze for a brief moment before Jingyan drops his eyes and walks out of the tent, Lin Shu’s outstretched arm behind him.

--------------------------

The emperor has sent a few men in Jingyan’s entourage to make sure that he does his job properly. They are used to this kind of tasks—surveillance in the name of protection— but this time they nearly die of exhaustion. They have traveled without stop from the capital to Lin Shu’s base, and the prince turns right around with the suspect in tow for a relentless march back to the capital. Even Lin Shu has not said a thing to stop him.

It’s nearly sunset when they finally stop at an inn for the night.

Lie Zhanying enters Jingyan’s room with a plate of dinner, saying, “If Your Highness wishes, I can go back to explain things to Vice Commander Lin Shu.”

Jingyan shakes his head, “... There are so many things you cannot explain. Tell me, are you also confused by my decisions?”
Zhanying replies firmly, “Although I am baffled by certain things, I believe that Your Highness have the same intention as always.”

Jingyan lets out a humorless laugh, “You do, but he does not.”

“I have seen what the Vice Commander has not seen. I have witnessed the sleepless nights and struggles Your Highness has gone through,” says Zhanying by way of explaining, hoping that Lin Shu would understand if he knew the truth, “May I ask, why did Your Highness tell His Majesty about Nie Duo?”

“It is not a coincidence that he lost the horses. Since someone plotted the whole thing, they would not let the incident pass peacefully. Now that the Southern border is deeply embroiled in battle, and the Western border is under constant threat from the Yu, Nie Duo’s mistake is a bait, if Lin Shu acts impulsively, His Majesty would immediately conjure up a conspiracy theory that would implicate the Chiyan army.”

It is for this very reason that he cannot join the Southern battles. The emperor’s growing trust in him is built heavily on the confidence that he does not yet control an army, if he commands a troop to support the Mu forces in the South, he would no doubt lose his precarious position in the emperor’s heart.

Another reason, which Jingyan does not share with his vice commander, is that Nihuang’s men are not adept at naval battles. This time the war with the Chu erupted almost ten years earlier than in his previous life. Her armies risk defeat if no help arrives soon, and the borders would be breached.

Last time, Chief Mei Changsu was the one to send Wei Zheng to help Nihuang. But there would be no Mei Changsu this time, and Wei Zheng is still Lin Shu’s sergeant, they cannot be easily separated.

Thankfully there is Nie Duo who is also well-versed in naval battles.

As respected captains in the Chiyan army, Nie Duo and his brother Nie Feng have long incurred the emperor’s suspicions for their military prowess. With the incident of military supply loss, the emperor would no doubt send Nie Duo away from the capital as a punishment, then Jingyan can have his chance to send him to the South to help Nihuang.

But how can he tell anyone about any of this? Especially to Lin Shu? Jingyan clenches his fists
tightly enough that his nails are digging into his palm.

He knew this day would come. Yet now it has really come, it still hurts like nothing else. These past couple of years he kept having nightmares, in which Lin Shu’s eyes are staring at him, accusing and disappointed. Now in wakefulness, those eyes are truly looking at him.

Eyes that belong to the person that he has loved from a very, very long time ago.

The same person that now looks at him like a stranger.

Chapter End Notes

1 The concept of 外戚 (lit. consort kin) was pretty hard to directly translate, so I’ll clarify here about the relationship between a mother’s clan and her son’s destiny in the Chinese royal family: taking “love” out of the equation, all marriages involving the emperor are political alliances. He would marry a woman of noble birth to ensure her family’s loyalty to the throne, basically cementing more support for himself. A prince born to such a mother would subsequently receive much better treatment from the emperor (e.g. Prince Yu) compared to one born from a low-ranking concubine (e.g. Prince Jing). Generally the more favored the mother is, the better off the son is. In a fight for the throne, a prince with a more favored mother or a mother with noble backgrounds would stand much better chance since the former means that the emperor is on his side, and the latter means his maternal family would lend their support (i.e. strategy, military power, etc).

In Jingyan’s case, his mother was a medic originally sent into the palace to take care of the ill Noble Consort Chen, she has neither noble birth nor prominent maternal family, so he is basically on his own to secure a place for himself in the court. [return to text]
“Vice Commander,” begins one of the soldiers, “Shall we try to get Captain Nie Duo back while the night is dark?”

“No,” Lin Shu vetoes immediately, “if anyone notices that he is gone, we would be the prime suspects.”

The soldier opens his mouth again, only to be forcibly shut up by Wei Zheng’s glare.

What Lin Shu has omitted in his explanation is that Nie Duo’s absence would also cause immense trouble for Jingyan, as he would probably be punished for failing his duties as envoy. As heated as their argument was earlier, Lin Shu cannot truly bring himself to do anything to endanger his friend.

“Don’t say something like that ever again,” Lin Shu interrupts impatiently, a perturbed frown on his face.

“Don’t worry, Vice Commander,” Wei Zheng reasons, “there are still ways to salvage the situation. If my information is correct, Prince Jing and his entourage would pass through the Jiangzuo region on their way back to the capital. Captain Nie Duo has several friends from a pugilist group there, perhaps we can coordinate a rescue with them. Even if he is escorted back to the capital, the captain would probably not face immediate execution, his most likely punishment would be demotion. Once His Highness Prince Qi succeeds the throne, his position can be easily restored.”

Just past midnight, a group of men with bandit headbands are intercepted by the patrol guards as they try to break into the inn where Prince Jing resides. Two of the men manage to get past the guards
into the Prince’s room, only to be faced by a fully dressed and armed Jingyan. With no way out, they immediately engage him in a fight.

One of the men has his sword inches away from Jingyan’s face, when another figure jumps directly between them and blocks the attack with a swift strike. The person unsheathes Jingyan’s sword and forces both attackers out of the open window within a few rapid movements.

He stands with his back to Jingyan, face still masked and breathing heavily.

After a brief moment of silence, Jingyan sighs exasperatedly, “Don’t always use my sword when you have your own.”

Lin Shu rips off the mask from his face with more force than necessary and bits out an order to his still masked companion, “Take those two bastards back to the base now!”

“Yes, sir,” the man bows and turns to leave, only to be stopped by Jingyan’s voice.

“Zhen Ping, wait.”

The figure freezes and turns around, his eyes surprised, “...Yes, Your Highness?”

“His Majesty has already sent another escort to take Nie Duo back to the capital. He is not here,” Jingyan says mildly.

“I beg Your Highness’ pardon, our Vice Commander was completely unaware of the rescue attempt tonight,” the man bows low.

“I know,” Jingyan glances at Lin Shu briefly, nodding.

Lin Shu realizes that Jingyan must have sent away the emperor’s eyes and ears from the room, since everyone present are his personal guards. Relieved yet somewhat annoyed that his friend had seen right through his plans, Lin Shu turns to hand the sword back to Jingyan, “You knew I would come.”
“I had hoped not,” Jingyan says softly, “but I had to prepare for every eventuality.”

“Why? You think I wouldn’t be able to take him from your hands?” Lin Shu asks pointedly, confident that he could achieve whatever he sets his mind on.

“That’s right,” replies Jingyan, raising his chin in an affirmative gesture, “why else do you think His Majesty sent me specifically?”

“You--!” Lin Shu chokes on his anger, but Jingyan continues,

“--Because you would be too considerate of my feelings to act rationally.”

“......” Now Lin Shu falls completely silent.

“That’s why I agreed to come,” explains Jingyan. “If another envoy came, there is no way you would’ve watched Nie Duo being brought back to the capital without attempting something rash.

“And I know you have your ways and tricks to mask any trace behind Nie Duo’s disappearance, His Majesty would never find concrete evidence of your involvement,” Jingyan turns his solemn expression towards Lin Shu when the other boy is about to open his mouth again. “But you have no way of stopping him from suspecting you further. In the current climate, any small mishap could bring disaster upon you and your family, just think about your Father in the Western borders and your relatives still in the capital…”

“......I understand,” Lin Shu says in a quiet voice.

“Remember, without the emperor’s explicit permission for you to come back to the capital, do not attempt to request for one,” Jingyan adds, “there is...Brother Qi to take care of everything, do not worry.”

Please go as far away from there as possible.
Jingyan sighs softly, “Do not come back.”

Lin Shu finally turns to face his friend. Just a few hours ago, his argument with Jingyan made his heart freeze into ice, as if his childhood friend who had shared so many happy memories with him was no longer the same, and was replaced by another. But now, hearing Jingyan’s carefully worded caution feels like a dull knife to his still beating heart.

“Jingyan,” he calls out. “Can’t you request to come here, or another faraway and isolated place? I will go with you,” the moon peeks out of the clouds and illuminates Lin Shu’s youthful face and determined eyes, “You belong to the battlefield. Please, if you come back as a commander, I will be your lieutenant, and we’ll never part again, just like in the old days…” Lin Shu’s voice trails off in an imploring whisper.

“........” Jingyan presses his lips together.

“Please stop doing whatever you are doing. Don’t you see why Auntie Jing left the palace? If your opponent were anybody else, with her wisdom she could have easily stayed and become a formidable force to support you. Yet she chose to leave, not only to protect the her friendship with Noble Consort Chen, but also to save a last way out for you!” Lin Shu’s voice rises with desperation. “You are not cut out to be an emperor, and when you finally realize that, it may be too late to mend the gap between you and Brother Qi! When he ascends the throne, even if he could overlook what you did, you could never have a respectable position in the military nor in the court!!”

Jingyan’s mind freezes in the middle of Lin Shu’s tirade, “You think I am not cut out to be emperor?”

“You really are serious about the throne?” Lin Shu’s face turns grave as his suspicions are confirmed, “Your personality is not suited for the throne! Putting aside the merit considerations between you and Brother Qi, that position...that position comes with too many burdens and you---”

“Lin Shu,” Jingyan cuts him off abruptly.

Those two words--an ordinary name that many people have pronounced before-- are said in such a calm yet wavering voice that sounds like it is on the brink of breaking. Lin Shu’s breath hitches with some unnamed emotion, his eyes fixed on the other person in front of him. Jingyan stands in his midnight blue robes a few feet away from him, yet he seems so far away, shrouded in an impenetrable barrier of loneliness.
In his eyes, Lin Shu sees so many inexplicable emotions swirling madly for a second, then disappearing altogether.

“Lin Shu,” says Jingyan in a hoarse voice, each word ringing in the clear night, “You are the only one in this world who cannot say that to me.”

Chapter End Notes

So....who teared up?? xP
Nie Duo is escorted back to the capital ten days later. Unlike what Wei Zheng predicted, the pugilist friends in the Jiangzuo region were not successful in their rescue attempt. Apparently they were all gathered around the river, ready to strike, when they were stopped by an unknown group of men.

The emperor sentences Nie Duo with a predictable demotion for failing in his duties, all the while placating Lin Shu with many extra army horses and supplies.

Three months later, someone with the name Yun arrives at the Southern borders with brilliant strategies to best the Chu in naval battles, ensuring a swift victory for the Mu forces. The imminent threat of invasion is quickly dissolved.

When Lieutenant Lie Zhanying brings the good news to Prince Jing, he releases an internal sigh of relief as the troubled frown that has been lingering on the prince's face finally disappears. “We have arranged for a substitute to take Nie Duo’s position where he is supposed to be. However, we still haven’t found out the identity of the people who stopped the rescue attempt in the Jiangzuo region.”

“......No matter, it isn’t critical anyway, perhaps it was just some petty pugilist conflict,” Jingyan says, kneading his forehead with one hand tiredly.

“My investigation revealed no major pugilist organization in the Jiangzuo area, there are mostly small groups of rogues. Your Highness, you have been working day and night on the appropriation of war trophies from our victory with the Southern Chu, please take some time to rest,” Zhanying ventures in a concerned voice. “The New Year is approaching, and Her Highness the Consort Jing would also be returning to the palace for the celebrations. She would be saddened to see that you have neglected your health.”

Jingyan gazes at the hand holding the pen over a thick stack of parchments and sighs, “You are right. I barely have time to hold the spear and arrow these days. Prepare the horse, I shall take her out for a ride today.”
Lin Shu opens the envelope from Nihuang to find the latest news from the front lines along with the usual greetings. There is also an unsigned letter in the same delivery, written in Nie Duo’s unmistakable scrawl, asking Lin Shu to keep his Chiyan bracelet for the foreseeable future. The captain has filled a whole page with naval battle strategies and details of how they defeated the Chu army, adding with emphasis at the end, ‘Our swift victory was only possible thanks to the ideas of Sir Mei Changsu.’

There is no mention of Jingyan anywhere in the letter, but upon reading the name Mei Changsu, Lin Shu immediately pieces everything together. Wei Zheng, who is reading over Lin Shu’s shoulder, says in a bewildered voice, “So we misunderstood Prince Jing…..”

The letter crumbled into a tight ball in his hands, Lin Shu presses his lips together and does not utter a word.

At night, Zhen Ping opens the flaps to enter the tent, only to be hit in the face by a waft of alcohol. Lin Shu is never one to overindulge in the army, but today he is totally drunk. Everybody has tried to talk him out of it, yet he just continues to down one glass after the other, eyes red and wild.

“Zhen Ping….“ his voice muffled. “Do you think I was wrong?“

“.....“

Lin Shu realizes that the other person would never gossip about an imperial prince in front of him, so he switches tactics, “You were pensive when we returned from the inn that night, did you find something odd?“

Zhen Ping startles, not realizing that his slightly off behavior was picked up by the Vice Commander. He did find it odd. That night, both he and Lin Shu were masked, and Lin Shu never addressed him directly by name, yet the Prince had so accurately identified him. Although he has been in the Chiyan army for a while, he has never had direct interactions with Prince Jing. How was it possible that the Prince recognized him with just a silhouette, instead of mistaking him for Lieutenant Wei Zheng, who is the one by Lin Shu’s side most of the time?
Without evidence, it would be meaningless to bring his suspicions to Lin Shu, but since he was asked, Zhen Ping replies instead, “When His Highness said that another envoy had already escorted Nie Duo back to the capital, I wondered why he wasn’t concerned about possible rescue attempts from Nie Duo’s pugilist friends along the river. Then it turned out that the attempt was intercepted by another group of men. Perhaps...perhaps Prince Jing had pugilist support all along...?”

Lin Shu glances at Nie Duo’s open letter on the table and murmurs, face disturbed, “Must be him.”

“Who, sir?”

“Zhen Ping, I must find this Mei Changsu person.”

“Vice Commander……”

“He is pushing Jingyan over the precipice!” Lin Shu shouts with barely restrained anger. “I don’t know how he managed to convince Jingyan to fight for the throne, but if he is as brilliant as rumored, he must know that Jingyan is not as tolerant nor mature as Brother Qi, he is not suited to be emperor! There are people who would gloat at having the kingdom at their feet, while others would find it too heavy a burden to carry. The latter would become capable rulers, but would not be happy doing so.”

He adds in a small voice, “And I cannot bear to see him unhappy.”

-------------------

Jingyan has been on bed-rest after catching a nasty cold when he went horseback riding that day. Many nobles and friends have sent gifts along with get-well wishes, even Prince Qi sent along some precious medicinal ginseng. Yet the Prince himself could not make time to come.

In this rare period of respite, Jingyan leans against the headboard with a cup of tea in hand, while the other reaches for the battered travel journal, Xiang Di Ji.[1] It came to him amongst many other books he asked for three years ago, when he was recuperating from the emperor’s punishment. Lin Shu, who barely left his residence during those months, would come and read the book with him whenever he was tired from swordplay. He would also transcribe Jingyan’s notes into the book, since the other boy’s injuries kept his hands weak.
“How come I don’t know that you’ve been to those places? You are not making all this up right?” Lin Shu had asked him, “You’d be making a fool of yourself if someone finds loopholes in your notes, and I’ll just say I had nothing to do with it!”

Jingyan replied casually, “A friend of mine likes to travel around, he’s told me a lot of stories.”

Lin Shu’s face darkened in a scowl when he realized which “friend” Jingyan was talking about, “Hmph, you certainly have an infallible memory when it comes to this friend’s tales, how come you never displayed any of this amazing talent when our teacher was beating you with his ruler for not remembering the textbook?”

“We were young at the time.”

He remembered the notes so well from this book because he was so curious about what secrets it harbored that he spent days copying all its contents over and over again. Even after he ascended the throne, he would flip through it from time to time.

He dictated word by word, watching Lin Shu’s pen move swiftly across the pages.

Lin Shu paused when he heard the words “Zhen Ying waterfalls,” and raised a hesitant eyebrow, “Can you write this part instead?”

Jingyan looked at him baffled, and the other boy explained with a laugh, “It is the same as my Mother’s maiden name, and I always reduce a few strokes when I write it, out of respect for her.”

“......” Jingyan fell into a silent daze, then smiled as if finally relieved.

“What’s wrong?” came Lin Shu’s curious question.

“Nothing, just realized something that has been bothering me for a long time.”

---------------------
Coughing softly, Jingyan flips the book to that very page, his fingers caressing the inked words.

This must have been the clue that made Mother suspicious of Xiaoshu’s identity all those years ago. If he was a bit more observant, would things have been different?

He takes another sip of the ginger tea, feeling its warmth spread across his body, and closes his eyes with the book cradled in his arms.

--------------------------

In his dream, ten years have gone by.

Lots have happened in those ten years: the Xuanjing bureau has been eliminated, Xie Yu demoted, and the Southern Chu declared defeat.

Brother Qi is already the Crown Prince, surrounded by a group of highly competent officials, including Shen Zhui in the Ministry of Revenue, Cai Quan in the Ministry of Justice.

Lin Shu is still the same Lin Shu, his features barely changed from ten years ago, or perhaps he’s gotten a little taller. There is no Jiangzuo Alliance, no secret passage between the House of Su and Prince Jing’s residence, and no more Sir Su, whose pale face always lit up in a smile when he saw Jingyan.

Five years ago, Lin Shu and Nihuang were married. The wedding between the Vice Commander of the Chiyan army and the Princess was the most extravagant spectacle the capital had seen in ages; there were flowers lining the streets and miles of marching musicians playing a symphony of happiness.

The thirteen-year-old Tingsheng is already quite proficient in archery; he caught a deer during the Spring Hunt and presented it happily to Prince Qi. Lin Shu made roasted venison for everyone.

Mother and Noble Consort Chen are chatting softly under a blossoming photinia tree, their faces soft and content.
Jingyan stands at a distance from the crowd, silently observing. A man in blue robes is next to him, his eyes peaceful and warm when he looks at Jingyan, “This time around, have you fulfilled all of your wishes?”

Jingyan nods.

“Your Highness, it’s time to go.”

-----------------------

Jingyan opens his eyes in the darkness of his room, the bright sunlight from his dream still a fresh vision.

His body aches from the fever he has had for the past few days. The ginseng from Prince Qi lies unattended on the table, the half cup of ginger tea has long gone cold, and the only illumination comes from the lanterns in the garden, their flickering light filtering through the window panes.

*Xiang Di Ji* is still loosely held in his hand, open at the same page, though the handwriting is not what he remembers from the past.

He opens his mouth, about to say that he just had a really nice dream, that everyone in the dream is really happy. Yet his lips tremble without making a sound.

Because there is no one by his side to hear the words.

Chapter End Notes

1 *Xiang Di Ji*: the travel journal Mei Changsu had in the last life. Consort Jing borrowed it and realized from the notes that he was Lin Shu. It was never stated explicitly in the drama how she figured it out, but it’s explained in the novel: Lin Shu would intentionally misspell the name of that waterfall because it’s part of his mother’s maiden name. He did it out of filial respect, because her maiden name is something so private that anyone her junior should not use it lightly. Jingyan never knew her name so he never got the mystery of the book. [return to text]
p.s. Any thoughts on who stopped those men trying to rescue Nie Duo?
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, and Mandarin chapter here

A refresher on names, as they all tend to sound similar:

Prince Jing 靖王: JingYan 景琰
Prince Qi 祁王: JingYu 景禹
Prince Yu 誉王: JingHuan 景桓
Prince Xian 献王: JingXuan 景宣

The year is drawing to a close, and the palace is bustling with preparations for the end-of-year ceremony. In the past, Prince Qi has always been the representative to stand on the altar with the emperor and empress, touching their hems in a filial gesture. However, this year he has been away in other provinces to direct efforts for disaster relief, and may not make it back in time for the ceremony.

The Minister of Rites originally planned to delay the ceremony for a few days to wait for Prince Qi’s return, but today he’s suddenly been summoned by the emperor regarding this matter. He keeps his head low as he enters the hall, and in his peripheral vision sees that both Prince Xian and Prince Yu are also present. Slightly surprised, he feels like he’s been caught amidst a dilemma.

Even if the emperor hasn’t said anything, the empress knows that he is displeased with Prince Qi’s delay. What has irked him further, though, is that the Ministry of Rites has taken Prince Qi’s participation for granted in the ceremony; no one even bothered to ask him if he had another candidate in mind. So the empress has called in her son, Prince Yu, and told him that it’s time to start planning for themselves.

When Jingyan arrives in the hall, the discussion has already grown heated between two officials. One says that as the adopted son of the empress, Prince Yu should be the one standing on the altar; the other one argues that Prince Xian is the second eldest son, and should rightly take Prince Qi’s place in his absence.

The emperor is in an exceptionally good mood today. He watches the scene in front of him unfold from his raised dais, an amused curve on his lips.
In the midst of argument, a servant comes in to report that the royal tutor Master Li Chong is asking for an audience. The emperor frowns in annoyance, knowing that the strict and proper man is a stickler for rules and would definitely speak in Prince Qi’s favor, but he cannot refuse to see him, given his respected status.

“Let him in,” he bits out reluctantly.

Unsurprisingly, Master Li immediately zeros onto the heart of the argument, quoting several classic philosophical theories to support Prince Qi’s rightful place in the ceremony as the first born son. The two officials who were at each other’s throats just moments ago are dumbfounded by his flawless logic, and cannot utter a single word of rebuttal.

Jingyan is mesmerized by Li Chong’s masterful manipulation when the latter falls into a formal kneel to the emperor.

“I beg Your Majesty’s pardon, if I may ask for permission to retire of old age. Your humble servant would like to spend the rest of his days in quietude, traveling the country with a friend and writing for leisure,” he intones, head bowed low.

This request comes at a complete surprise to the emperor, as he knows perfectly well that the old fox is asking for permission on both matters he mentioned today. After a brief pause, he nods his assent and then turns to Jingyan, “Your Brother Qi and Lin Shu are both away from the capital, you should go send off the Royal Tutor in their stead.”

He then returns his attention to the two officials and a ashen-faced Prince Yu, waving a hand, “You are all dismissed. We shall wait for Prince Qi’s return.”

-----------------------------------

Three days later, Jingyan bids goodbye to his tutor on a small hill just outside the capital gates. The carriage is already prepared with understated comfort: the windows are lined with fur and a steaming pot of tea on the small table. Li Chong knows with just one glance that Jingyan has personally arranged for its accommodations, since only his students would know his small habits like that.

“I thank Your Highness for your generosity,” he smiles, grateful.
“Master Li, I bid you farewell in place of my Brother Qi and Lin Shu. Wish you a safe journey.”

Jingyan never asked about why Li Chong would choose to retire now, and the other has not shared. They give a bow to each other, and Li Chong turns to leave.

Jingyan watches Li Chong’s figure become smaller and smaller. In the distance, there is another elderly man with flowing long beards, clearly waiting for his friend. Jingyan bows to the man he’s only seen once in the past life, that time when Mei Changsu had requested his presence with the jade cicada to lend his hand in the court debate.

The man helps Li Chong into the carriage, then turns around and bows deeply to Jingyan.

It isn’t until the carriage becomes an invisible dot on the horizon that Jingyan snaps out of his stupor and walks down the hill.

That bow just now was the proper courtesy from subject to emperor.

----------------------------------

Prince Qi’s manor.

“If it wasn’t for the Royal Tutor, His Highness would’ve been in trouble again.” Two maids have their heads together, walking with their purchases from the market.

“I heard that Prince Yu was so sure he could land the job this time, then the Royal Tutor came and turned the whole situation around. Prince Yu really made a fool of himself!”

“Still in the end no decision was reached……”

“No decision is good decision! Didn’t you see that messenger from the palace that came earlier to inquire His Highness’ possible return date?”

“Actually there is a pretty good chance that His Highness can make it back for the ceremony.”
“I also heard that Prince Jing was present during the discussion, yet he didn’t even say anything in our Prince’s favor,” one of the maids complains in a hushed voice.

“Humph, what good is he anyway?” the other one scoffs, “we should thank the gods if he is not opposing His Highness.”

“Shhh, His Highness doesn’t like us gossiping,” the earlier maid quickly shushes her companion. “This time when His Highness is out in the field doing disaster relief, Prince Jing is the one arranging for financial support in collaboration with the Ministry of Revenue. I thought he’d use this chance to hamper His Highness’ work behind his back, but actually he got everything done with surprising efficiency.”

“He’s just trying to do his job to please His Majesty. Our Prince is so gentle-hearted that he wouldn’t suspect him one way or another. I--- Who’s there?” A noise behind them draws both maids’ attention as they hastily turn around, only to release a sigh of relief when they see Prince Qi’s young son. The toddler is wrapped in layers of clothing, his small hand barely visible as he holds it out, “Cookies?”

“Of course, Your Highness!” the maids laugh in fond amusement, fishing for the package of cookies they bought for him from Yipin Bakery. The child loves their pastries, but neither the prince nor the princess allows him to eat too much, so he’d always beg the servants to smuggle him some at every chance he gets. And they all spoil him rotten, so he gets his way every time.

“We know Your Highness loves those cookies, but remember not too many at a time, okay? Just one a day please?” They say to the happy child, watching as he skips away with the goodies in hand.

When he is well away from prying eyes, the three-year-old opens the package and carefully picks out the hazelnut cookie, then tosses the rest unceremoniously onto the frozen ground. He looks up to the walls surrounding their manor, walls that are way too high for his current small stature, too high to see anything beyond them. He takes a bite from the cookie, its roasted sweetness a distant familiar taste in his mouth.

He’s never liked sweets, but it’s been too long since he last saw that person.

...There needs to be something to remember him by, however small.
In the end Prince Qi couldn’t make it to the ceremony. He and his men were already on their way back to the capital when they encountered a group of refugees from another province. Canals that hadn’t been repaired in years finally gave out and many farmlands were flooded. Apparently news of the disaster were intentionally withheld by the local official in charge of civil construction there, clearly fearing imperial punishment. Prince Qi swiftly arrested the official in question, and filed a request to the emperor for more funds.

The court is already scrambling to get through normal operations during this busy time of the year, so Jingyan takes upon himself to make all the necessary arrangements to meet Prince Qi’s needs. He and a team of officials from the Ministry of Revenue have worked endlessly for a couple of weeks, and when they finally wrap up, it’s already been decided that Prince Yu would take Prince Qi’s place at the end-of-year ceremony.

The emperor knows that he cannot scold Prince Qi for this unexpected incident and his subsequent absence, so instead he has vented his irritations on Noble Consort Chen. In the pretense of a harsh journey from the country mansion back to the capital, he has requested her not to come back for the New Year’s.

Consort Jing replies in her letter that she would also like to stay in the mansion with the Noble Consort to take care of her ill health in the bleak weather, and that she would personally tender a formal apology to His Majesty once the spring comes.

In the Inner Palace, Noble Consort Yue’s good mood from her archrivals’ absence dims significantly when she thinks of the empress’ smug face at the end-of-year ceremony.

Prince Xian glances at his mother’s sullen expression and hurries to add, “I thought Prince Yu was smart enough to accept our offer to join forces temporarily against Prince Qi and Prince Jing, but he shoved his pompous refusal in our face and snatched up the nice gig at the ceremony!”

“The empress and I are constantly at each other’s throats in the Inner Palace, she’d never agree to a deal like that anyway. Now there are about four groups of officials in the court: the first is comprised of the most senior officials who are firm supporters of Prince Qi, including Commander General Lin Xie. Although in the past couple of years Prince Jing has gotten rid of a few of them through the scandals he’s uncovered, and the Royal Tutor has retired, there is still a sizable number of them left, and we cannot underestimate their influence in the court. Now even the Imperial Guards have fallen into the hands of the Lin family!” Noble Consort Yue sighs in annoyance.
Captain Nie Feng has stayed in the capital ever since Commander General Lin Xie took half of the Chiyan army with him to the Western borders. At the beginning of this year, due to shortage in military funding, many of Nie Feng’s men have been reassigned to the capital guards instead, leaving him with a very small number of Chiyan soldiers.

Soon after, the Commander of the Imperial Guards retired due to illness. Prince Qi quickly filed a request to promote Nie Feng to take over the position. Many of Prince Qi’s supporters immediately voiced their support for the motion, some of whom upset over the unjust treatments of the Chiyan army. The emperor acquiesced under pressure.

“The second group of officials are mostly men personally picked by Prince Jing. Although they don’t have noble births, they are a highly competent team,” continues the Noble Consort Yue with her analysis.

Prince Xian nods in agreement, “Indeed. A while back Prince Qi asked for so much money for disaster relief, everyone thought it was going to take Jingyan months to get it ready, who could have guessed that he and his men got it done in just a few weeks! Now not only does Prince Qi owe him a favor, His Majesty is also praising his talent!”

“The third group consists of officials who have left Prince Qi’s camp ever since he’s been losing favor with His Majesty. They are mostly a bunch of simpering idiots that Jingyan wouldn’t want under his wing, so they’ve gone and sided with Prince Yu,” she picks at her perfectly manicured fingers in boredom.

Prince Xian sneers, “Right, Jingyan’s ego is certainly off the roof. When he was first gaining His Majesty’s attention a couple of years ago, so many people were lining up outside his door with gifts in hand, and he didn’t even let them in!”

“Although Prince Jing is no longer on the same affectionate terms with his Brother Qi, they share the same contempt for simpletons and sycophants. Those bootlickers are not the brightest, but they are not useless either; they get the easy and mediocre jobs, leaving the controversial and difficult ones to others who are too eager to prove their worth. That’s what Prince Yu had in mind when he welcomed these people into his faction, and true enough, he has carved a spot for himself in court now,” she then adds. “On political matters, Prince Yu has been learning from Jingyan, putting on a scrupulous yet firm front in court and recruiting capable officials in his free time. It’s not surprising that those who don’t like Jingyan have joined Prince Yu instead. Adding his participation in the end-of-year ceremony into the equation, he is at an unparalleled height right now.

“And the last group of officials are those who are firmly against forming factions with any Prince,”
concludes the Noble Consort.

“But I cannot get their support either,” counters Prince Xian, baffled.

“I am not telling you to get their support,” his mother sighs impatiently.

“Then who else is there?”

“The South, House of Mu.”

“Mother means...the young Lord Mu Qing?”

“No,” she shakes her head, “I once thought about getting custody of him since he is in the capital, but apparently Princess Nihuang has asked the Grand Empress to take care of him, even His Majesty cannot say otherwise.”

“Then...Mother means to say...?”

“Well, the princess is at a marriageable age, if she can marry someone from our side, that would cement her family’s support for you.”

“But...but isn’t Princess Nihuang already betrothed to that Lin Shu?”

“A betrothal means nothing if they aren’t married yet,” Noble Consort Yue grins smugly, “I shall arrange for something to happen on New Year’s Eve. If the Princess is proven to be unchaste, then the betrothal would not be valid anymore.”

“B--But,” Prince Xian is still hesitant, he stutters, “wouldn’t that be a huge affront to the Lin family? They would despise us! To lose the Lin family for the Mu, Mother, I don’t think that’s wise!”

“So? Even if we do nothing, the Lin family would never support you anyway. Commander General Lin Xie has always been in Prince Qi’s camp, and Lin Shu is the childhood best friend of Jingyan, you think you have a chance?” Noble Consort Yue pauses at her son’s suddenly pale face, then pats
his hand in a comforting gesture, “Don’t worry, as long as the Princess does not marry Lin Shu, rest assured that His Majesty would be happy. You have one thing that neither Prince Qi nor Prince Jing have-- me. Their mothers are far away from the palace, but you have me here to watch your back.”

She adds finally, “His Majesty told me that Princess Nihuang would be taking Mu Qing back to the South after the New Year’s celebrations. Once she leaves the capital, our hands are tied. So we must act fast.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin chapter here

There's quite a lengthy footnote covering some historical details, hope you guys find it useful. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is the New Year’s banquet today. Nobles and other esteemed guests are slowly trickling into the palace shortly after midday.

Ever since their first encounter in the House of Mu, Yujin has been obsessed with teasing the young Mu Qing. Now whenever the other boy sees him, he runs with all his might in the opposite direction. As Mu Qing is focused on getting away from his tormentor, he sees a small figure by a plum tree and suddenly remembers that it is the young son of Prince Qi. He squeals in delight for having found someone even younger than himself, and rushes over to make friends with the bored-looking boy. In all honesty, Tingsheng has no desire to engage in any kind of conversation with Mu Qing, yet the other boy is persistent and even offers to share cookies with him. Annoyed with the incessant yapping to his ears, Tingsheng finally caves.

They are interrupted in the middle of a game by an unfamiliar-looking maid who says to Mu Qing that the Noble Consort Yue would like to invite him to her residence to try some pastries from her Southern hometown. She chuckles when she sees powdered sugar covering the boy’s face from hastily stuffing cookies into his mouth, and takes out her handkerchief to gently wipe away the residues.

Mu Qing, who is already thrilled that his sister is coming soon to visit, practically jumps up at the mention of flavors from home. He turns around and shoves the rest of the uneaten cookies into Tingsheng’s arms, and skips away with that maid to Noble Consort Yue’s place.

No one has noticed that Tingsheng’s eyes were trained on embroidery of the maid’s handkerchief, a cold glint in his eyes.

Before the banquet, the emperor is chatting in a casual audience with his sons in the reception hall.
When Tingsheng enters the room with his nanny, everyone’s attention turns to him as the princes all come over to ruffle his hair. The boy bows a proper courtesy to each of his uncles, but then pauses abruptly when he reaches Jingyan.

Prince Yu and Prince Xian cannot even hide their amused smirk at the child’s obvious bewilderment. Prince Yu tugs Tingsheng closer with one arm affectionately, laughing, “What’s wrong? It’s your Uncle Jingyan!”

Jingyan crouches down to meet the eyes of the child who is been raised with so much love this time, and forces his face into a bittersweet smile, “Do you still remember me?”

Tingsheng shakes his head and quickly ducks behind Prince Yu. Jingyan’s outstretched hand freezes in midair.

Prince Yu suppresses a pleased grin and chastises, “Hey, do not be rude to your Uncle Jingyan.”

“It’s ok. I have not gone to visit him often, it’s no wonder he does not remember me,” Jingyan says, trying to hide the sharp disappointment coiling in his belly.

Prince Xian chimes in, “Yeah, Jingyan, you’ve been soooo busy lately that you rarely visit any of us anymore.”

Tingsheng’s lips quiver briefly and he runs towards the emperor with a distressed expression.

The emperor takes one look at the boy’s red face and picks him up easily, laughing, “Now now, who dared to upset our little Prince? Granddaddy will punish them for you!”

His eyes fall on Jingyan’s awkward expression and he instantly comes to a conclusion. His heart gives a satisfied leap at the realization that Jingyan has been estranged from Prince Qi to such an extent that even the little boy doesn’t recognize him. Yet he says with mock reprimand, “You are right, your Uncle Jingyan is always so stern and scary. Now granddaddy shall punish him!” then proceeds to give Jingyan a few slaps, causing a round of laughter from his audience.
“This way, Princess,” gestures a maid towards Noble Consort Yue’s residence, “Our Lady has recently received some baked goods from the South and has invited the young Lord Mu Qing to come and have a taste, knowing that His Highness must miss home from being in the capital for so long. My Lady has gone to the banquet so she has bid me to ask Your Highness to pick him up.”

“That’s fine. My brother is young and might have imposed on Her Highness,” Nihuang says.

“My Lady has also said that since the night is cold, we would be delighted to offer Your Highness a drink to warm up,” continues the maid.

“I am still in mourning and cannot linger for long.”

“Actually...My Lady has a favor to ask Your Highness regarding her hometown in the South. She would like to arrange for a meeting tonight.”

Nihuang hesitates for a brief moment then nods, “I see, then please lead the way.”

-----------------------------------------------

Since Princess Nihuang is still in mourning for her father, she cannot attend the banquet, and would likely return to the South immediately afterwards to take care of the aftermath of the battles against Chu. The only chance to get her would be tonight, when she is in the palace visiting her brother Mu Qing.

The maid leaves to inform her mistress after she has settled the Princess in Noble Consort Yue’s residence. When she passes through the Imperial Gardens, a small figure on the bridge catches her eye. It’s the young son of Prince Qi.

She is in a lighthearted mood: she has done her job to lure both Mu Qing and Princess Nihuang into the trap, and secured a bottle of the aphrodisiac “Qing Si Rao” for the Noble Consort. Now all there is to do is to wait until the Princess drinks the liquor and falls into the awaiting arms of the man they arranged. The maid cheers internally at the successful plot, her mind filled with happy thoughts of New Year’s celebrations with friends. So when she sees Tingsheng all by himself, dressed like an exquisite doll, she cannot resist the urge to pick him up.

“How come you are here all by yourself, Your Highness?” inquires the maid, pinching Tingsheng’s
chubby cheeks.

“I got lost and can’t find my nanny. You are a maid from the Royal Tailors right?” asks the innocent boy.

She startles in surprise; there are hundreds of maids in the palace, even the guards cannot tell them apart, how is it that a mere kid recognized her right away?

“Cookie,” Tingsheng shoves a plum cookie into the maid’s mouth. She smiles at the crumbs on the boy’s face and wipes it away with her handkerchief.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” she swallows the treat.

“Do you like me?” Tingsheng asks, his eyes glittering in the night.

“Of course! If I may be so bold as to say that I wish I had a brother as adorable as Your Highness is!” she gives him a huge smile.

“Oh? I bet all of you like me because I am Prince Qi’s son,” mumbles the boy as he twists her handkerchief between his little fingers, apparently quite taken with it, “If I was the son of a prisoner, born in the servant’s prison, you’d be walking all over me.”

“......Why do you say that, Your Highness?”

“You are one of the Hua people, right?” the boy’s casual statement sends a sharp chill down her spine. He fixes her with his bright and angelic eyes, yet something in them causes cold sweat to break out on her back in the wintry night. In front of this three-year-old who cannot even harm a fly, the maid feels like drowning in fear.

“Where did Your Highness hear that?” she inquires in an unsteady voice.

“That embroidery on your handkerchief-- it’s a pattern favored by many Hua girls. Tell me, the person who taught you the embroidery, was it Princess Xuanji or Princess Linglong?” [1]
“Wh--what? What Princess? I have never heard of those names... Your Highness must be tired, please return to the banquet,” now she is truly terrified, her voice trembling as she tries to walk away, only to have her legs give out and she grabs onto the railings for support.

No wonder she is so appalled; only someone who is intimately familiar with the Hua people would know such a detail.

Last life, eleven years after Jingyan had ascended the throne, there was a terrifying incident that shook the entire kingdom. During the Autumn Hunt, Jingyan was shot by a poisoned arrow, and the assassins turned out to be some of the Hua extremists that he mercifully pardoned years prior. The arrow was precariously close to the his heart, and the poison fatal. If Master Lin of the Langya Hall had not arrived in time to treat the injuries, Tingsheng would have lost the only family he had in the world.

After Jingyan’s close encounter with death, Tingsheng had taken upon himself to identify and expel every Hua person he could find from the capital. In the process, he read every report documenting their customs and history, including the role of Princess Xuanji in the Chiyan conspiracy. *

So when that maid took out her handkerchief to help Mu Qing earlier, Tingsheng immediately recognized the embroidery as a traditional Hua pattern. He does not know who is behind the plot to harm Princess Nihuang, but even if it isn’t the Hua people, this girl’s involvement is undeniable.

“If harm comes to Princess Nihuang in the capital, not only would Lin Shu investigate it thoroughly, that person would also feel guilty for not having protected her,” says the boy, the cold in his voice a sharp contrast to his childish and chubby appearance, “I can understand your scheming for your own benefit, but how dare you pollute his sight with such sordid and underhanded dealings!”

His voice lowers to a whisper, “The only solution is your death.”

Suddenly a group of guards led by Prince Jing are rounding the corner with torches in hand, shouting Tingsheng’s name.

“Do you know why I bothered to tell you this much?” Tingsheng smiles up to the girl who is completely frozen in shock, “’Cuz I was waiting for him! I was waiting for him to come looking for me! I’ve been away from the banquet for too long; even if His Majesty and the Empress Dowager have not noticed, he would surely worry and personally come with a search party.”
“You...you mean Prince Jing, not Prince Qi??” stutters the maid, now more than ever terrified.

“Oh yeah, pity you realized it too late,” the boy has a beatific smile on his angelic face, “the cookie you just ate was poisoned, so since you are gonna die anyway, might as well make the most of it.”

“Wh...what??”

“I mean, you are about to push me into the pond,” Tingsheng tips himself over the railing and falls into the frigid water below with a high-pitched scream of help.

With his fall, all the Imperial Guards would be on high alert, which would nicely prevent that man arranged by Noble Consort Yue from entering the palace; Princess Nihuang would be safe. The maid notices at the last moment before Tingsheng hits the water that the child still has her handkerchief tightly clasped in his hands; she wants to snatch it, but her entire body is petrified.

The splash resonates in the quiet night and all the guards are attracted to the site.

With a horrified shout of Tingsheng’s name, Jingyan tosses aside his cape and jumps into the water after the child, Commander Nie Feng’s warning a useless afterthought behind him.

Chapter End Notes

1The Hua kingdom was a smaller kingdom adjacent to the Liang that became the vassal state of the Liang kingdom a long time ago. However, during the last emperor’s reign (Jingyan’s grandfather), the Hua people fought for their independence but the uprising was mercilessly squashed by the Liang armies. Many of the Hua people acclimated themselves to the Liang culture, but a small number like Qin Banruo (Prince Yu’s strategist) still operate covertly in the hope of restoring their sovereignty one day.

* Princess Linglong（玲珑公主）: she and her sister were two princesses that were the last of the Hua royal family. Princess Linglong was a low-ranked concubine in the emperor’s court and the biological mother of Prince Yu. She died shortly after his birth. There are some clues regarding how the emperor would not have won the fight for the throne if not for her and her Hua people’s support. The emperor, however, didn’t want the public to know that his victory came with such underhanded dealings, so he exterminated her people and never gave her high status in his court. For these personal reasons, the emperor loathes any kind reminder of the Hua.
* Princess Xuanji (璇玑公主) was imprisoned in the Servant’s Prison in the palace after her kingdom fell, where she managed to form an impressive net of informants and spies mostly made up of maids. She is also the teacher of Qin Banruo. It’s implied in the drama and specified in the book that she was rescued from the palace by the kindhearted wife of Xia Jiang (Head of the Xuanjing bureau). She then became Xia Jiang’s mistress and convinced him to frame the Chiyan army despite their different motives: Xia Jiang was resentful of Prince Qi for wanting to abolish his bureau, and she wanted to weaken the Liang’s military power to boost her chances of restoring the Hua. In a nutshell, they colluded to bring about the Chiyan conspiracy. [return to text]
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin chapter [here]

You were all so impressed by Tingsheng's deviousness last chapter. ^_^ He's always protecting Jingyan in his own way~~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The pond is not deep. A team of imperial guards and other servants have jumped in after Prince Jing, and within a few moments, both Jingyan and Tingsheng are safely out of the water. In the meantime, Nie Feng has captured the maid, though her lips are tinged with purple and her eyes already dilated.

“Blast! She swallowed poison!” the commander shouts in dismay. He flips her around and tries to make her vomit, but all she coughs up is some bloody spit and then dies before they bring her to the emperor.

“How dare someone try to harm my grandson! They think that since Prince Qi and Noble Consort Chen are not here, they can get away with this?!” the seething emperor slaps the table hard in the banquet hall, everyone else kneeling before his anger, including Mu Qing and Nihuang who have just returned from Noble Consort Yue’s place.

“He is just a baby! What kind of cruel and sadistic person could shove him into the freezing waters?!” he screeches hoarsely, then points a trembling finger at the dead maid below, “dismember her body and feed it to the dogs! Find out where and whom she serves!”

Eunuch Gao enters the hall in a hurry and reports, “Your Majesty, Prince Jing and the Imperial Physician are here.”

“How is Chengting?” asks the emperor hastily. [1]

“Your Majesty, the young prince is still in a coma,” replies the physician, head bowed low, “He is too young to endure such harsh cold waters, I am afraid that……”

The emperor takes a menacing step forward, “Afraid what?”
“That he may be on bed-rest for a long time, even when he is completely cured,” the man almost bites his tongue in his hurry to finish the sentence.

“Imbeciles!”

“Thank goodness that Prince Jing saved him on time, otherwise…” the imperial physician trails off.

The emperor turns his attention to his seventh son, who has been kneeling quietly since entering the hall, his face drawn and ashen, “You’ve done well this time.”

Jingyan is covered with Nie Feng’s cape, his fingers blue with the cold as he bows, “I happened to see the nanny pacing outside the banquet hall, and she told me that the young prince had gone missing, so I enlisted the help of Commander Nie Feng with the imperial guards to search for him. When we arrived at the gardens, I heard the young prince yelling for help and saw this woman push him into the pond!” his fingers are trembling uncontrollably with lingering fear.

“Your Majesty,” ventures the physician, “the young prince was holding onto this handkerchief when we got him out of the water, perhaps it belongs to the criminal?”

The emperor squints at the handkerchief but is too far to see clearly, “Bring it closer,” he commands.

Eunuch Gao’s expression freezes immediately when the physician passes him the handkerchief. He hands it to the emperor and points at the embroidered flower with emphasis. Eyes fixed on the offending object, the emperor’s face grows more and more livid, and he rasps out in unrestrained fury, “Find everyone in the palace who uses this kind of handkerchief!!”

His sons have never seen him in such an enraged state before and can only exchange bewildered glances with each other in their shock. Prince Xian has been in a disbelieving trance ever since he saw Nihuang and Mu Qing also present in the hall, knowing that his Mother’s plot failed. Prince Yu says after a brief pause, “I would like to be of service—” only to be harshly cut off by the emperor.

“No, not you. Jingyan, I leave this matter in your hands. This is a Hua pattern, find everyone who has it! Those rebels want my grandson dead, I will kill them all!” commands the emperor.
“Yes, Your Majesty,” comes Jingyan’s only reply.

Lin Shu had wanted to come back to the capital before the New Year’s, but his request was delayed due to the mailing distance, so when he finally got the emperor’s permission to return, it was only two days before New Year’s Eve. Weighing the options, he decided to spend the New Year’s with his soldiers in the base at Bianzhou, and then take his time to return. Three days later, in a rest stop not far from the capital, he overhears the terrifying news about what happened in the palace when he was indulging in drunken revelry: Prince Qi’s son pushed into the freezing pond, and Jingyan wholly responsible for rounding up every Hua person as per the imperial decree.

This task should have gone to the Xuanjing bureau, but they are also swamped with a new case: the servants sent by the emperor to deliver royal dishes to homes of nobles and officials were all attacked on the same night, and only one out of twelve teams returned unscathed. The emperor was furious over this series of incidents both within and outside the palace, and immediately dismissed Nie Feng from his duty as Commander of the Imperial Guards. Instead, Meng Zhi, who was the Vice Commander and also one of the few men that escaped from the attackers, took his place. The Xuanjing bureau has mobilized all the personnel to find the perpetrators.

Finding all the Hua people within the kingdom is no small feat, and the emperor knows that it would be an arduous and slow process, so imagine his surprise when only two days later, Jingyan comes to him with a two-page list full of Hua spies embedded in the homes of nobles and high-ranking officials.

Shocked, the emperor inquires how Jingyan obtained the list, and Jingyan says that he found girls using similar patterns in the servant’s prison. After a brief interrogation, they revealed a hideout in the city, where this list was found. He then adds that it is all thanks to the hard work of the officials from the Ministry of Justice that they were able to extract so much information so quickly.

In reality, nothing useful came out of that interrogation; they did find the hideout but it was empty except some everyday objects; it certainly did not have the list. Mei Changsu was the one who compiled the list in the last life after years of careful surveillance, and Jingyan has merely duplicated it except for a few who are too young to be active now.

The emperor orders for a personal interrogation of those girls, who initially are skeptical of the existence of this list, but after hearing a few names, they pale alarmingly and commit suicide by
biting their tongue, their last words some repentant howl that they have failed their princess.

“Looks like this list is real, even the gods are on our side. Arrest everyone on here right away,” orders the emperor, then adds, “kill everyone who resists, and...if you find anyone of Hua royal blood, send them directly to me, not to the Ministry of Justice.”

Jingyan knows whom the emperor has in mind; when those Hua girls yelled out ‘Princess’ earlier, he saw his Father’s abruptly frozen expression.

With her still alive, his secrets are not safe.

With her still alive, his kingdom is always at risk.

“If she also resists capture?” asks Jingyan.

The emperor’s face twists into a venomous scowl, not even bothering to hide from his son, “.....Then kill her too. Remember this is your task, do not let anyone else interfere, be it the Ministry of Justice or other nobles.”

“I understand.”

“The emperor feels relieved at Jingyan’s mature response.

---------------------------

When Lin Shu finally enters the capital, he encounters Lie Zhanying who is busy sending a group of
men into the house of Chancellor Liu Cheng. Lin Shu shouts a greeting and receives a curt nod in return. The men come out shortly after with a middle-aged woman, her hands bound. By now, a rather sizable crowd has gathered to watch the guards march away with the her.

Before he goes back home, Lin Shu first goes to the palace to hand in his military report, then goes to greet the Grand Empress, who keeps him there, prattling on for quite a long time. With everything done, Lin Shu finally returns to his own home.

His mother cannot stop looking at him after being apart for so long, and her eyes tear up at the thought of the bleak conditions at Bianzhou. Lin Shu tries his hardest to take her mind off such melancholy thoughts, saying that he was always the one eating all the meat from the pot, eventually earning a teary laugh from her.

At a long yawn from Lin Shu, his mother sends him immediately to his rooms for a nap.

Back on his bed, however, sleep eludes him. He tosses and turns for another hour, then decides that he can still do the things he did in his youth, and promptly climbs over the wall towards Jingyan’s place. When Jingyan first moved in there, Lin Shu would always find a new excuse everyday to keep him company. Now he knows the route by heart.

He’s made it to Jingyan’s bedroom door without being detected, internally cheering at his own stealth, he realizes that Jingyan is not alone. A voice coming from the inside is clearly a girl’s. Lin Shu raises an eyebrow in interest when he recognizes Nihuang’s voice.

Chapter End Notes

1 Chengting (承庭): Tingsheng’s name in this life, an invention of the fic author. [return to text]
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here

Finally some slashy action!!! If you squint really hard.. xD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s the New Year’s and Nihuang is still in mourning, as per decorum she should be staying at home in peace and quiet, but she needs to go thank Jingyan for having sent Nie Duo to her rescue. So she has copied Lin Shu’s tactic of climbing over the walls.

She’s also heard that Prince Jing has changed a lot, and now they’ve met, she can see why.

“Thank you for sending Nie Duo to help me,” Nihuang says.

“I was not the one who came up with the strategies.”

“I already sent a thank-you letter to that Sir Su, but I still wanted to thank you for sending Nie Duo…”

“How is he now?”

“He went back to his assigned post after the battle, but he said that discipline is rather lax in his base, there are many others who are also paid substitutes. He thinks he might be able to come every spring and autumn to help me train the navy in the South.”

Jingyan nods in agreement, pleased that everything went according to plan, “That would be the best. The Southern Chu armies are a formidable foe, but their naval capabilities are still relatively weak.”

“Enough of this official talk, how is Prince Qi’s son?” Nihuang asks.
“I haven’t visited since...” after his injuries were declared non-critical, Tingsheng was sent back home, but for some reason he has not woken up in those three days since, despite the efforts of three imperial physicians constantly by the his side, as Jingyan’s informant reports.

“You haven’t?” Nihuang demands, a bit surprised, “what have you been doing then?”

There is a sharpness in her voice that is rather grating, yet Jingyan replies calmly, “The emperor’s orders, investigating the Hua people.”

“I know those maids were despicable, and you are within your right to arrest Hua spies, but I heard that you are now extending your search to those who are commoners just like the rest of Liang people, married with a family, working normal jobs! Don’t you think it’s too much to demand that they relocate outside the capital?” Nihuang cannot contain her self-justified ire.

“Princess, please be wary of what you say. I am under imperial decree to do this.” points out Jingyan expressionlessly.

Outside the room, Lin Shu has heard enough. He kicks the door open, “Don’t you have an obligation to oppose the decree if it’s wrong?”

Jingyan shows no surprise at Lin Shu’s sudden appearance in his room, “......She almost killed Brother Qi’s child.”

“Punishing the entire race because of one person’s crime, don’t you think that’s going too far, Jingyan? The spies had it coming, but what fault do those women have, those who have been married to Liang men and birthed their children? On my entire journey back, I’ve been hearing about how you’ve been so ‘busy,’ so you are busy expelling defenseless women and children??” Lin Shu’s voice rises with agitation.

He forces himself to calm down, knowing that he has already wronged Jingyan once regarding Nie Duo, so he forcibly puts himself into the other man’s shoes, trying to follow his logic. He understands why Jingyan didn’t speak up against Nie Feng’s dismissal, but no matter how much he thinks about it, Lin Shu cannot understand his uncompromising and almost cruel attitude towards the Hua people.

Faced with Lin Shu’s biting questions, Jingyan meets him in the eye and says coldly, “How do you
There is too much history and too many emotions in this single question. Jingyan’s mind flashes back to the poisoned arrow that pierced his chest, the manipulations suffered by Tingsheng and Consort Jing, the vicious and resentful look on Qin Banruo’s face, and that bell in the secret passage, severed by his own sword…… The Hua’s animosity towards them, towards the Chiyan army, will never die as long as a single Hua is still alive. Yet those things have not happened in this lifetime; even the most brilliant strategist could not have guessed at the truth, let alone Lin Shu. And that is why Jingyan cannot explain himself.

“You said you are doing this for Brother Qi, but if he were in the capital now, he’d be the first one to oppose!” Lin Shu yells.

Only a man with the kindest heart and purest intentions can be the ruler Lin Shu has always envisioned.

How can the Divine Talent be blind when choosing a master?

Last time you had no other choice, then this time, I will give you all the freedom in the world.

Nihuang pouts exasperatedly at both men’s icy expressions, “The three of us are all in different places now, it’s such a rare occasion to get together, yet all you two care about is squabbling each other’s heads off.”

Lin Shu cannot bear to see the girl unhappy and hurries to placate her, “I haven’t had the chance to visit you yet, when are you leaving? The South is not prosperous like the capital, I’ll bring you a carriage full of the latest fabrics and jewelry, and of course your favorite dough figures!”

Nihuang smiles, her face bittersweet. With the upheavals in her life during the past few years, she is no longer that innocent girl in their youth, and Lin Shu knows that well. In three years, Princess Nihuang has changed; only in front of Lin Shu would she laugh and smile as in the old days, to everyone else she is the determined military general, sharp edges lining her features.

All Lin Shu can do now is to guard those precious memories of their younger selves.

“I don’t wear any jewelry. Plus, it’s the New Year’s, no tailor would be working. And I certainly
cannot stay until the Lantern Festival for those dough figures,” Nihuang laughs.  

“If I ask, all the tailors will open their doors,” promises Lin Shu haughtily, “and what’s hard about dough figures, I’ll make you a whole truck full of them.”  

“Since you two seem occupied, I won’t keep you any longer,” says Jingyan. Watching their easy bantering makes him regret that he cannot do more to facilitate their marriage, yet that very thought somehow sends a jolt of queasiness into his stomach; he decides he’s seen enough of them today.  

Lin Shu misunderstands Jingyan’s intentions, “Are you still upset?”  

Jingyan says emotionlessly, “You said so yourself, that I am ‘so busy’.”  

So odd...he is well past the age of getting angry at someone’s malicious insult, and it’s been years since he felt hurt by others’ hateful prejudice. But Lin Shu has always been his exception, just like that time at the inn outside Bianzhou. Any casual comment from him is like a dull knife that slices across his frozen heart, blood would come gushing out, heavy with the weight of memories.  

He cannot even keep his expressions calm, because it hurts too much to pretend.  

He stands up to escort them to the door, only to be shoved roughly back into the chair by an annoyed Lin Shu. Jingyan raises his head to look at his friend and sees fond exasperation his his eyes.  

“Nihuang, you go back now, I’ll come find you later,” Lin Shu says.  

“Ok, then I’ll see you later,” Nihuang acquiesces easily to Lin Shu’s words, picking up her cape and stepping out.  

She reaches the back wall and is about to climb over when she pauses and decides to go back to check on them, in case they really get into a fight this time. Times have changed and they are no longer children, any word that travels back to the emperor might cause troubles.  

However, when she pushes open the door, the sight that greets her almost makes her jump-- Lin Shu has pulled down half of Jingyan’s clothes and has his face inches away from the other man’s
shoulder.

Nihuang cocks her head, amused, “What are you two doing?”

“Why are you back??” Lin Shu straightens rapidly to face her.

“I was afraid that you sent me away so you could have a fist fight with Jingyan-gege!” says the innocent Nihuang.

“Well, now you know why I sent you away?!” Lin Shu pulls out a small vial from his pocket, tosses the cork aside with a jerky motion and a herbal scent immediately perfumes the room, “I came to give him this medicated oil, which I almost forgot because of the argument.”

Eyes wide with understanding, Nihuang nods with agreement, “Good thinking, Lin Shu-gege, he might have lingering problems if the chill from the pond isn’t properly addressed in this kind of harsh weather!”

“You are the one to talk!” Lin Shu turns his attention back to Jingyan, “hurry up and strip, this needs to be massaged onto all the joints!”

“Eh...I...I’ve always been healthy and it’s been quite a few days since…” Jingyan stutters in refusal.

“Don’t argue with me! You must have forgotten to take care of yourself since you were so busy, it’s no joking matter!”

Lin Shu rubs his hands with the oil and reaches for the other man’s shirt when Jingyan panics, “Hey, Nihuang is here! Stop that!”

Nihuang slips out of the door at that, laughing, “Not there anymore!”

Chapter End Notes

1The traditional celebration for Chinese New Year lasts fifteen days, the last day is the Lantern Festival 元宵节. During this period many shops and business are closed as the
owners go home to their families. [return to text]
“Do you still remember that one time when you pushed me into the freezing river while we were playing?” asks Lin Shu.

Jingyan cocks his head and answers honestly, “What I remember is that you wanted to kick me but slipped and fell into the river yourself.”

“Yeah, that’s the one! Anyway I had always been so healthy, yet even I was sore for a long time after that.” He coughs to cover his embarrassment, then mumbles irritably, “Can’t believe you still remember it so clearly, it was so long ago!”

That earns a chuckle from Jingyan-- true, for someone who has lived through a whole lifetime, it really has been a long time since then.

“Before coming back to the capital, I made a stop at the country mansion to see my gu-gu and Auntie Jing,”[1] he puts his entire weight on kneading the oil into Jingyan’s back, which still bears the faint scars from those slashes years ago, “she gave me the medicated oil.”

“......How are they?”

“Everything is fine; she and gu-gu are living a very tranquil life there, they just miss you and Brother Qi,” says Lin Shu softly.

“Brother Qi is due to come back tomorrow.” Jingyan reaches for the emerald vial that contains the medicated oil, holding it tightly in his hand.

The movement does not escape Lin Shu’s notice, he hurries to change the topic. Glancing around the
room, he suddenly catches sight of the go game set and exclaims, “Isn’t that…?”

Jingyan eyes it briefly, “The Royal Tutor gave it to me before he retired.”

“Gave it to you??”

“Why?” Jingyan asks.

“That’s favoritism! He knew I loved it!” Lin Shu protests. The thought of the retired Tutor triggers a bout of sadness, yet he does not resent him for the choosing to leave the Court.

The truly wise ones have aspirations outside the Court, and are more free doing so.

“If you like it, I’ll give it to you,” Jingyan offers without hesitation.

“Nah, it was a gift specifically for you, how can I take it?” he caresses the wooden game board with longing, then says, “I still have a few hours before I have to return home, let’s play one game!” He says as he settles comfortably behind Jingyan, still rubbing his back with oil.

“Hey, sit on the other side,” Jingyan turns around to protest, only to be smeared faceful of oil by a laughing Lin Shu.

“My hands are covered in oil, you wouldn’t want me to spoil your precious go pieces right?” Lin Shu reasons mischievously, “I’ll tell you where I want them placed.”

Being far away from home those past years has rounded Lin Shu’s edges, he’s no longer that yapping, overbearing brat in his youth, yet somehow when he is with Jingyan, he cannot help but try to tease the other man into more squabble.

During those years, Lin Shu has always kept the capital and its people in mind, even though he’s rarely come back.

Yet Jingyan truly does not wish to see him. The Vice Commander of the Chiyan army is still his radiant self, resplendent in his silver armor, but he-- Xiao Jingyan-- he is already knee-deep in a
quagmire that threatens to swallow him whole; he can only look at his friend with his head raised, afraid to taint that purity with his muddy hands.

“Now you’ve got a nice board, we’ll see if your skills are any better,” says Lin Shu, “I’ll tell you where to go.”

Lin Shu has comfortably plastered himself on Jingyan’s back, reaching over the other man’s shoulders to point at the board. “We should make a bet, whoever loses will accept whatever punishment the winner doles out,” knowing that Jingyan’s skills are no match for his, Lin Shu is just taking advantage of the situation with childish glee, his hot breath raising little hairs on Jingyan’s neck.

Jingyan picks up one of the black pieces and puts it on the game board after a brief hesitation, conceding, “Alright.”

“Strategizing is like the game of go.”

In his memory, the blue-robed man softly smiled as he swirled the tea around in its cup, a lingering fragrance of plum blossoms around them. He continued slowly, “When you are playing against a strategist, do not think about what he is planning, instead, focus on what he thinks you are planning. At the end of the day, what a strategist does is to lure you into his trap. As long as you can be one step ahead of him in the trap, you win.”

“So what I need to do now is to think about what Sir Su believes will be my next move,” replied Jingyan. He was never keen on the game nor was he very skilled, since Lin Shu never had the patience to practice with him. Later, when he took in Tingsheng, he would occasionally spend the evening teaching the game to the child, only then did he slowly pick up the practice and derived some enjoyment from it.

Jingyan was never a match for Mei Changsu when they played, yet the other man had infinite patience to wait for his every move. Sometimes, Jingyan would contemplate on a move for fifteen minutes. Though the time it took to think of the next step was long, he was always steadfast with his decision. As he lifted his finger from the board, however, the laughing eyes of the man in front of him revealed that Mei Changsu saw right through his game plan. Much to Jingyan’s annoyance, the other man would always try to cover his chuckles with coughs, saying that his throat was itching, oh no, he wasn’t laughing at Jingyan’s moves at all. Of course Jingyan always lost despite his painfully long deliberations.
“Why is that?” he had asked Mei Changsu.

“To those who do not know Your Highness well, your lack of a scheming mind is your sharpest sword. Please remember to sheath it well in front of those people,” his strategist replied with a light smile on his lips. “As for why I always win, it’s only because I know Your Highness a little bit better than you believe.”

After an intense two-hour match, Lin Shu stares at his remaining pieces scattered across the board, disbelieving, “I lost.”

Jingyan lowers his eyes. Mei Changsu said that his lack of scheming was his sharpest sword against those who do not know him. Yet today he has used that sword to defeat Lin Shu.

“The one who taught Nie Duo how to fight those naval battles was also Mei Changsu, right?” Lin Shu asks, more of a statement than a question. He uses “also”, meaning that he’s assumed that Mei Changsu taught Jingyan the way of the go.

“Actually I thought of a way to defeat the Chu navy that’s very similar to Mei Changsu’s idea,” the usually proud Vice Commander admits, his face despondent. “But I have to say, his strategy is much more detailed than mine and more tailored specifically for the Chu. He’s better than me in strategy,” he pauses, “he’s also better than me in go.”

“You just lack experience, that’s all,” Jingyan says by way of cheering him up. Last time, the battle against the Chu happened many years later compared to this life, it was enough time for the person in front of him to accumulate years of wisdom.

Lin Shu frowns at the comment, “Isn’t he around our age? What experience does he have?”

“He...is a bit older than us, and has gone into the pugilist world on his own from a much younger age, so he’s much more experienced.”

Lin Shu pins his friend with his eyes, “You are always talking about this Mei Changsu, is he in the capital now?”
“No.”

“No.”

“Humph, figures. Otherwise he wouldn’t have left you all by yourself, swamped with so many things,” Lin Shu looks at the darkening sky, it’s about time to go home. He gets up when he catches sight of a very familiar book on the table.

Three years ago when he last saw it, it was still very new. Now, however, it’s showing signs of wear-- there are quite a few obvious crinkles on the pages, as if its owner fell asleep and didn’t have time to close it. ‘How can a book like this be that interesting?’ Lin Shu mutters internally. After circling the room in agitation, he finally picks it up and flips through its pages. The first half is filled with his own handwriting, the second half, however, is Jingyan’s. Those locations all sound like remote places he’s sure Jingyan has never been to; he must have copied from memory everything that Mei Changsu told him. Through the handwritten words, Lin Shu can almost see Jingyan’s diligent figure hunched over the book.

‘If he truly wishes to see those places, why did he refuse my offer to be stationed in a faraway place and travel with me?’ Lin Shu cannot help but wonder.

He pauses in his scanning when abruptly he comes across a familiar passage. The book mentions an unnamed mountain in Jixian town, where the handwritten notes add that although the topography is harsh, a climb is worth the trek because one can see the extraordinary sight of a full rainbow dipping into the rivers below.

There is no mistake in the annotations, Lin Shu is shocked because he has been to that exact mountain and has seen the exact scenery. This mountain was no tourist spot, years ago he and his troops got lost on their way and wandered into it by mistake. Lin Shu is sure that he has never mentioned it to Jingyan, so this note must have come from Mei Changsu. How is it possible that this Mei Changsu person also happened to pass by this mountain on a day just after the rain and has seen the same phenomenon of rainbow in the valley? Lin Shu opens his mouth to question Jingyan, when the door is pushed open and Lie Zhanying rushes in.

“I…..I saw footprints coming from the outer walls so I thought…” the poor man stutters but releases a sigh of relief when he sees it’s just Lin Shu inside, and Jingyan is also safely tucked into the chair.

Lin Shu didn’t even think about footprints in the snow, “Sorry, I should’ve considered that.”

“Vice Commander!” Zhanying calls after Lin Shu when the latter is about to step out of the room
without a cape, “Your cape!”

Jingyan realizes with a start that during the massage, Lin Shu grabbed the nearest cape to cover his legs, afraid that he’d be cold. It turned out to be Lin Shu’s own cape, now its fur collar is stained with the oil.

“I’m not cold, you should keep it,” Lin Shu smiles and waves at him, running into the snow in his thin robes.

Chapter End Notes

1Lin Shu calls Consort Jing 靜姨 (jing yi) “Auntie Jing” as a respectful term for an older female of his mother’s generation. He calls Noble Consort Chen 姑姑 (gu gu, “aunt”) because she is actually his aunt, being the sister of his father Lin Xie. [return to text]
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original [here](#)

A very dense and action-packed chapter here! There are some portions that were very challenging to translate... So a huge shout-out to my awesome beta caradhras, who has held my hand and given me wonderful suggestions when I was stuck. We went through so many versions of this one sentence and I realized that my Chinese is shit xD I took quite some liberties with metaphors and idioms, since my aim has always been creating an interpretation that is closest to the Mandarin original in spirit and style instead of a literal translation.

Hope you guys enjoy this very plotty chapter! :)

The herbal scent of the medicated oil still lingers in the room. Jingyan has one cape draped around his shoulders, and another one-- Lin Shu’s-- covering his legs, Zhanying secretly thinks that His Highness looks like a wrapped up hamster. He suppresses the urge to laugh and says instead, “The imperial physicians did say that Your Highness should be using the medicated oil everyday, I apologize for our oversight and for having troubled the Vice Commander to do it personally.”

Although he is apologizing, there is a teasing element in his voice, but Jingyan does not seem to notice-- his eyes are fixed on the game of go and his face has lost the soft edge when Lin Shu was here.

Zhanying is not completely oblivious to the changes. Ever since the Prince took the order to investigate the Hua people, he’s done far more than mere investigation. If it were the old Prince Jing, he would not have expelled every Hua person from the capital, he’d have at least spared the married women and children. In just few days, many Hua people have been rounded up and grouped into five cohorts for exile, yet Prince Jing is still sending out search parties around the city, as if looking for someone in particular.

When he is standing by the Prince’s side, sometimes Zhanying can almost feel the animosity, the hatred materializing like a serpent coiling around the man. The prince himself is like a bow, drawn and taut, its arrow aiming straight for the enemies. Zhanying had thought that the arrival of Lin Shu would loosen the Prince up, but now it looks like it was in vain.

“Your Highness……”
Jingyan is startled out of his trance by Zhanying’s voice, the go piece he’s been fiddling in his hand slips past his lax fingers and lands on the go board with a sharp click! What’s left of the game is now irrevocably shuffled, that offending piece nowhere to be found. Jingyan stares at the disorganized board and suddenly a revelation hits him, like a man who has finally looked up from the dark night and seen the bright moon above. So he has been circling around in his self-constructed maze this whole time. Since he has arrested all the Hua spies from noble homes, Jingyan was sure that Princess Xuanji would leave Xia Jiang’s place in case someone ratted her out under duress. Thus, he’s been concentrating his efforts on finding her new hideout in the city, yet now it seems more likely that she’s taken advantage of all the chaos to escape.

“Zhanying, have there been any Hua people leaving the capital lately?”

Since he is not personally responsible for the matter, Zhanying summons one of his subordinates. The man replies, “Your Highness, since it is still New Year’s, most of the exile groups are detained within the capital, set to depart after the fifteenth. There has only been one group that left, since they needed to cross the river before it thaws. They left just after midday today.”

“Anyone suspicious in that group?” queries Jingyan.

“Suspicious…? I don’t think so,” the man thinks hard for a moment, then says, “Yes! I ran into Vice Commander Lin Shu today and as we traded greetings, the group of Hua people passed by, the Vice Commander commented that a woman seemed odd.”

“What kind of woman?”

“She was dressed just like the others, and her fingers bore the signs of menial labor, honestly nothing out of place at first glance. Yet the Vice Commander said that she was only carrying light items like clothing, judging by the shape and size of her bag. Also, the exile group was rather large and people walked in disarray, but she seemed to always have the same people flanking her.”

“That would be her,” declares Jingyan as he grabs his sword and cape, “Gather the men and follow me, we have to catch her.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

-------------------------------------
The sun is setting, its rays painting the city walls a blood red, blinding and cold. Today is particularly frigid, the howling winds are like knives cutting into the skin of the guards on the parapet, who desperately try to retract their necks into their coats. There are only a couple of people hurriedly crossing the streets at this late hour, their collars tucked up tightly to ward off the cold. The guards are about to close the gates when a sudden group of soldiers rush towards the exit on their horses. Leading the group is Prince Jing, dressed in white robes and black cape, the men behind him grave and alert; they surge through the still open gates with a trail of dust behind them.

“Princess, please get into the carriage. You escaped at a rest stop, tonight there will be a woman to take your place, please be assured that no one would notice your absence when they do the headcount.”

The ordinary-looking woman nods in satisfaction. Their group was mostly composed of middle-aged women, so the security was quite lax. She’s taken extra measures to disguise her facial features, so she’s confident that traitors would not immediately recognize her. Her only option now is to go towards the South and hide in one of her safe houses until things calm down. The howling wind outside the carriage sounds like the death cry of ravens, she lifts the curtain to have one last look at the capital. It is a city she hates with all of her being. She has spent her entire life trying to destroy it, yet there it is, still standing.

Suddenly she sees a horseman advancing rapidly towards them from the darkening horizon.

“Hurry, go faster!!” She commands the driver, horrified. The darkness of the night should not have impaired her hearing, she should’ve still heard approaching sound of a horse mixed with the wind. Yet that person abandoned the major road in favor of the side streets where the surface is covered in thick dried grass, the galloping sound of the hooves completely masked. She did not notice him until it is too late.

Even the fastest carriage cannot beat the speed of a seasoned war horse. Princess Xuanji orders the driver to stop and alights the carriage. Since he has come alone, there must be something he wishes to say to her away from prying eyes. The person stops the horse directly in front of her, so close that she can feel the animal's hot breath on her face.

The princess raises her head to look at the person on the horse, his face half obscured by the darkness yet his eyes shining, “I had wondered which friend came to send me off, I did not expect you, Prince Jing.” She secretly sighs in relief; Xiao Jingyan does not have any strong reason to kill her. There is only one person who wishes all the Hua people dead, and that person would never divulge the secrets of how he gained the throne, not even to his own son. In this world, the most outwardly strong people usually have the most fatal weaknesses. An excess of everything amounts to nothing.
Even if he finally won the throne using every means possible, his reign would not last.

So confident in her brilliance that she believes herself to be safe from harm; as long as Xiao Jingyan still desires something in life, she can negotiate with him.

Her greeting is still lingering in the air when she hears the sharp rustle of a sword being drawn, its blade glistening in the cold moonlight. She makes no move to evade the menacing object. She is sure that the Prince merely wants to threaten her, that his sword would surely stop before it reaches her chest. She has always had the world on a game board and everyone is a chess piece, including Xia Jiang, and at the moment, herself. She may be forced into a quandary as the manipulator of the game, but she still has many uses as a chess piece. If his aim is the throne, he must need a trump card in the dark. Years ago, when her kingdom faced utter annihilation, she could still calmly make the most rational choice to save the most valuable chess piece. No predicament now could match the pain of losing her country.

So self-assured in her analysis that she hasn’t even bothered to look at the prince in front of her-- she believes that she understands his schemes and ambitions.

Her mind still swirling with possible bargaining options when the sword arrives at her chest with the same alarming force as before. She realizes with belated horror that Xiao Jingyan wanted her dead from the very beginning.

She moves to evade the strike but is too slow. The sword pierces her flesh with a barely audible sound, and in the blink of an eye, the frozen grass below is splattered with crimson, warm blood.

The most powerful victory is only achieved through the most relentless sacrifices.

Princess Xuanji knows this, but Xiao Jingyan understand it even more intimately. He had seen with his own eyes how that one person returned to the capital after his rebirth to restore justice to 70,000 Chiyan men, even at the cost of his own life.

Many things are possible, as long as one lives.

As long as he lives.
“It’s a pity that I do not bargain with the devil,” says Jingyan in a cold voice.

“You……” She looks up at him with difficulty. People say that many things suddenly become more lucid at the brink of death, yet she finds no revelation in those dark eyes.

“Whatever you may wish to offer me, I cannot spare your life, nor send you to the Xuanjing bureau. I will not lie to you, and you won’t believe me anyway, so let’s not waste each other’s time,” continues Jingyan, “you deserve death. Though this is a belated strike, I have not wronged you.”

Life is rapidly bleeding out of her from the wound, and she realizes with despair that even now Prince Jing remains alert, watching her for signs that she’s left clues for her people. It is at this moment that all her hope has been extinguished. She’s been playing the game of chess all of her life, yet now it ends in an utterly unexpected match, so unexpected that she doesn’t even know which step went wrong.

One misstep and she loses the entire game.

“You...hate me...why?” she croaks out.

*Because of Prince Qi, because of the Chiyan army, and because of Lin Shu.*

Yet Jingyan says nothing. When he decided confront her alone tonight, he wanted to end things here. But he has no inclination to divulge anything to her. Those years ago on Cliff Mei, Commander General Lin Xie and his 70,000 men had also asked their murderers “why,” and got no answer except death.

He would condemn her to the same fate.
In her last moments, she sees a white figure on a horse standing on a nearby hill. For the sake of her people, if she can manage to muddy the water a bit more in the capital with her death, then……

Lin Shu feels cold creep up his spine when he sees the dying woman turn her head in his direction. Her features are obscured in the fading light of dusk, but he knows with certainty that she is looking at him. The horror he feels is not due to those wide, unblinking eyes of a dead woman, but for the hand still holding the sword that pierced her body. The hand that belongs to Jingyan. He watches his friend, sword stained with blood, his lonely silhouette a singular shadow on the vast frozen plains.

Lin Shu feels chilled to his bones.
Chapter 18

After sending Nihuang off on the seventh of January, Lin Shu goes to the emperor with a request to return to his base. The emperor, however, has his own agenda of keeping Lin Shu in the capital. The main incentive for sending him away to the East Sea all those years ago was to delay his marriage with Nihuang, and now with her in mourning, marriage would be off-limits for at least another three years. So there is no pressing reason for sending Lin Shu away. Rather, with him in the capital, he can mold Lin Shu to be his loyal servant; otherwise, he’d even be content if Lin Shu could ally himself with Jingyan or Jingxuan.

“The Grand Empress and your Mother have both asked me not to send you away this time. With your Father also stationed far away, don’t you think you should bear the responsibility of taking care of your Mother and your household? Or perhaps you’d like to move into your own place?” proposes the emperor kindly, knowing that given Lin Shu’s status, he needs to be married in order to move out, and he certainly cannot marry Nihuang anytime soon. In his eyes, Lin Shu is still a guileless child, easily tempted by the slightest reward.

Lin Shu has yet to speak when Prince Yu chimes in, “This is a matter to celebrate; please allow me to choose a good place for your new residence, Xiaoshu!”

The emperor waves a dismissive hand at his son, “Don’t you worry about this, the Grand Empress would want to personally arrange for it. Lin Shu, would you prefer to be closer to Prince Qi’s place, or Jingyan’s?”

Lin Shu takes a step forward and kneels, “Your Majesty, I would still like to hone my skills outside the capital.”

The emperor raises a bewildered eyebrow, yet there is no surprise in his voice, “Why?”

“Many of our troops suffer from lax discipline, and we are constantly threatened by formidable enemies from all around the borders. I do not believe that this is a good time to be idle in the capital,” with that Lin Shu hands a report to the emperor. “This is the newest weapon developed by Da Yu, they’ve been waiting for the perfect chance to strike.”
The emperor looks at the sketch on the paper with apprehension— even the walls of the capital may not be able to withstand this kind of destructive weapon. He asks Lin Shu where the intelligence came from and seems satisfied with his detailed reply.

“If that’s the case, instead of going back to Bianzhou, you will go to the Northern borders. I shall have the Ministry of Revenue arrange for appropriate funds to strengthen the defenses there,” he orders.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“I’ll just have to bear the blame again for you from the Grand Empress and your Mother, they would not be happy that I let you go,” chuckles the emperor, shaking his head at Lin Shu, “I will have your new manor arranged as a reward when you come back.”

--------------------------------------------

Lin Shu is merely a few steps out of the hall when he hears Prince Yu call his name from behind. Commander Meng Zhi happens to walk towards them and notices Lin Shu’s annoyed frown with his back to the Prince.

Lin Shu has a possessive streak a mile long; he does not like others touching his things, nor does he allow people to call him ‘Xiaoshu’ lightly. Excluding his pals in the army, Prince Jing is the only one of their age who has that privilege.

Prince Yu jogs a few steps to catch up to Lin Shu, he laughs, “As expected of someone from the army, you certainly walk fast.”

Lin Shu pauses and pretends to just have noticed the other man’s presence, he gives a bow and asks, “Anything I can do for you, Your Highness?”

“Can’t I just be friendly?” Prince Yu pats him on the shoulder in a good-natured way, “It’s been a long time since I’ve last seen you. You are not leaving before the fifteenth right? How about come to my place for tea, and we can catch up?”
Before Lin Shu can even formulate a reply, he continues, “I’ve just gotten my hands on a few treatises written by Master Li Chong a year ago, you weren’t in the capital then so you’ve probably not read them yet. I’ll show them to you when you come.”

“Really? What is it?” at the mention of Li Chong’s work, Lin Shu’s interest is immediately piqued.

“There are two full volumes! Master Li is the most erudite scholar in the capital, it has to be more than a mere booklet!” Prince Yu’s smile widens, “I think that His Majesty intends for you to remain here; with your Father absent, we need competent military generals like you in the capital.”

“Commander Meng Zhi is highly skilled as well,” Lin Shu says, causing the man mentioned to stutter out humbled thank-yous.

“Of course he is,” Prince Yu hurries to agree. “However, I remember that two years ago, Commander Meng had the opportunity to be transferred into the Imperial Guards, but for some reason Jingyan kept delaying his transfer request, causing him to serve in various other corps for more than a year. If Jingyan had not opposed, Mister Meng would have been the Commander long ago, and perhaps the murder on New Year’s Eve would not have happened either.”

Meng Zhi glances at Lin Shu’s rapidly darkening expression and rushes to explain, “I was not sufficiently experienced nor respected at the time, Prince Jing was looking out for me.”

“You are being too humble, Commander. This brother of mine is truly quite fastidious sometimes, even when it came to Xiaoshu,” Prince Yu turns to face the other man. “For instance, when you asked to join the battles in the South against the Chu, he opposed your request with all his might, probably thinking that there would be no one else to manage the troops in the capital, and His Majesty conceded. Then, whenever someone even mentioned to transfer you back to the capital, he was also the loudest dissident……”

Meng Zhi feels his ire bubble to the surface as he listens to Prince Yu’s disparaging comments. Lin Shu, on the other hand, seems utterly absorbed by the narrative, nodding at all the appropriate points, and before they part ways, he even makes arrangements to visit Prince Yu the next day.

As soon as he returns home, Prince Yu summons his men to make accommodations for Lin Shu’s upcoming visit.
“Why does Your Highness bother to treat Lin Shu with such consideration?” asks one of his advisors. “After all, he is close with both Prince Qi and Prince Jing…….”

“Actually, the one closer to Prince Qi is Lin Xie, Lin Shu has always been friends with Jingyan when they were young.”

“Then if he is in Prince Jing’s camp, why does Your Highness wish to keep him in the capital?” the advisor is baffled.

“Oh, he is not in Jingyan’s camp,” the Prince replies with certainty. According to his sources, Lin Shu has not once visited Jingyan since he came back for New Year’s. All he’s done is to take Princess Nihuang shopping at some tailor shops that only opened at his behest. He has a large friend circle in the capital, most of whom wealthy nobility, so it only took them a couple of days to buy enough clothing to last Nihuang the next few years. Lin Shu’s mother, along with the Grand Empress, have also prepared several carriages full of fabrics and food for the young Mu Qing.

“Although he is smart, Lin Shu is still just an unsophisticated kid. He cares the most about loyalty and friendship, and loathes the most those scheming men of the court. After hearing my much embellished version of Jingyan’s ‘impressive’ accomplishments in the past few years, he’d never want to befriend him again, never mind supporting him politically,” Prince Yu pauses, “as for Prince Qi, he’s not changed that blunt mouth of his one bit in the past few years; it’s only a matter of time when His Majesty stops tolerating him. At that point, Lin Shu would be ripe for the taking, and I want him to choose me.”

“Then I shall go search for more of Master Li Chong’s manuscripts,” bows the advisor.

The prince nods, “It would be a shame if we cannot recruit someone like him, who knows the way of the military and also controls his own troops. But we must convince him with our sincerity, not with financial incentives. Those manuscripts are a gift of goodwill, and with time I will make him see my genuine intentions,” he sighs with mocking disappointment. “Oh Jingyan, you’ve preserved the capital at the cost of Lin Shu and the Chiyan army, what a colossal mistake that was!”

Outside the palace gates, once Prince Yu is out of earshot, an agitated Meng Zhi drags Lin Shu to a corner and whispers urgently, “Don’t listen to what Prince Yu was saying, Prince Jing definitely didn’t do anything to hinder my promotion. On the matter of Nie Feng, he’s also been---”
“I trust Jingyan,” Lin Shu cuts him off, “but there are so many things I don’t know about, and he won’t tell me.”

“You trust him?” Meng Zhi wipes away the nervous sweat from his forehead. “Then why did you ask Prince Yu about him? What good could have come out of that mouth?”

Lin Shu smiles, a forlorn expression settling onto his usually bright face, “I asked him because Jingyan wouldn’t tell me what exactly he’s done in those past years. My Father knows no more than I do, and Mother does not care about such things, so in the entire city no one can answer my questions as well as Prince Yu, why wouldn’t I ask him?”

“But you are not thinking of joining Prince Yu, right?” Meng Zhi asks a bit nervously.

“Nope. I find him disgusting,” Lin Shu winks at him mischievously, “That’s why I can’t leave my Master Li’s manuscripts in his hands, I have to get them back.”

“Xiaoshu...I heard from Prince Yu just now that you might be moving out…”

“That’s His Majesty’s idea. He merely wants to diffuse our power and influence,” he casually points out the emperor’s true intentions, “I told him I wanted to go back to the military.”

“You are not staying in the capital?”

“To do what?”

“To help Prince Jing, of course!” Meng Zhi replies without a pause, convinced that there is no other answer. To his surprise, Lin Shu shakes his head.

“It is my intention to leave the capital. Jingyan has also told me that if I stay here in the middle of all the power struggles, one misstep could endanger my entire family,” he continues in a lower voice, “plus, right now Jingyan doesn’t need my help, and I wouldn’t……”
Lin Shu leaves the capital just after the fifteenth. Meng Zhi, Xia Dong and Nie Feng, plus the younger Jingrui and Yujin have all gone to send him off. He has not invited anyone else, so Jingyan does not go.

When the snow begins to melt, Jingyan is summoned by the emperor again, this time regarding the murder case of the envoys on New Year’s Eve.

“I know you’ve been working hard lately, but Xia Jiang has taken ill, Xia Chun and Xia Qiu have been injured by some unknown pugilist men, and Meng Zhi has always been in the military, I cannot expect him to conduct an investigation. So only you can take on the duty to find the culprits.”

Jingyan knows that Tianquan Manor was behind the case. Last time they only attacked one team of envoys to test the waters; this time around, Xie Yu was probably determined to seize the position as Commander of the Imperial Guards, so the assassins had ruthlessly attempted to kill everyone. He must have been furious to find out that Meng Zhi escaped and then went on to become the Commander. Before Xie Yu accomplishes his goal, he would utilize every means possible to thwart the investigation efforts. And this time, without the pugilist support and protection from the Jiangzuo Alliance, Jingyan’s involvement in the case would surely come with danger.

The emperor, however, does not seem to realize anything amiss with his order, as he continues to flip through the reports in front of him. After a long pause, he asks casually, “One more thing, I heard that you went out of the city with a group of men a few days ago?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I received information that someone had escaped from a Hua group, so I chased after them.”

“Did you catch them? Who was it?” the emperor leans forward on his desk, his voice barely a whisper.

“.......It was the concubine of a merchant, she had escaped with the help of her servants.”
“Are you certain?” presses the emperor.

“I brought two Hua to identify her and they said they didn’t recognize her, so we are sure that she wasn’t royalty.”

The emperor nods absently; as long as the knife is still hanging above his head, he would never find peace. He asks again, “Then what happened to her?”

“Dead,” replies Jingyan emotionlessly.

“Dead...I see. You’ve done well,” he then adds with a milder tone, “bring enough people with you on the investigation. Be careful.”

The reality is often different from what one expects. A mere fortnight into the investigation, Jingyan and his men have been ambushed twice. Tonight he’s been attacked on his way home. When he is busy engaging the assassins, a masked figure jumps into the fight from a tree. Everyone seems to freeze, not because of his sudden appearance, but because of his small stature. His face masked, he looks no more than eight or nine.

For such a small body, his skills are astonishing. One by one the assassins are cut down within the blink of an eye.

“Your Highness! Are you alright?” Meng Zhi rushes towards them, having been alerted by the commotion. He catches sight of the boy and exclaims in disbelief, “Fei Liu?!”

Chapter End Notes

1Tianquan Manor (天泉山庄): The well-respected pugilist group that’s been Xie Yu’s ally ever since Xiao Jingrui was born as the son of both families. They have done a lot of Xie Yu’s dirty work, including the assassination of a group of envoys on New Year’s Eve, which caused the infuriated emperor to punish Commander Meng Zhi in canon. [return to text]
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Fei Liu”

Those two words shake Jingyan’s entire being. His hand gives a violent twitch and almost drops the sword, he jerks himself to face Meng Zhi who shouted the name.

The Commander startles at Jingyan’s intense stare, his mind freezing for a long second before he exclaims, ecstatic with his realization, “Your Highness, you...you know him too!”

While the two are engaged in their brief exchange, Fei Liu has his feet firmly planted on the only assassin still left on the ground. With a desperate glint in his eyes, the man swallows the poison in his mouth, at the same moment flings a dart using all his remaining strength at Jingyan. Fei Liu reaches out to block it, only to be bested by Meng Zhi, “It’s poisoned,” he declares, turning the dart in his hands, “Looks like Xie Yu went all out for this Commander position this time.”

He then glances around to make sure that they are surrounded by Jingyan’s trusted men, then says, “I shall stop by to visit Your Highness later today,” turning to the still masked Fei Liu, he asks, “Are you coming too?”

Fei Liu shakes his head without saying a word and leaps nimbly onto a nearby tree. Meng Zhi reaches out to grab him, yet much to his astonishment, misses the boy completely. The small figure disappears from their sight within seconds. His movements seem even more swift and unpredictable than in the past life, a distinct shadow of Young Master Lin in him.

Jingyan smiles; looks like Lin Chen found him and has treated him very well.

------------------------------------------

It’s well into the night when Meng Zhi climbs over the walls of Prince Jing’s manor and creeps to the inner chambers. In the room, Jingyan’s attention is fixed on the dart in his hand. His eyes half-closed
in fatigue and his figure slightly hunched over, he almost resembles Mei Changsu of yesteryear under the flickering candlelight.

Meng Zhi’s heart gives a painful lurch at the sight as he takes an involuntary step forward, “Your Highness did not have to take on the investigation……”

“If I didn’t take it, it would have gone to Brother Qi. How could he have guarded against those underhanded schemes and assassinations? Xia Jiang did not even have to pretend to be sick, given enough time, he can hope that Xie Yu would get rid of Brother Qi for him,” Jingyan sighs.

Meng Zhi takes a careful look at the person in front of him. When was it that Xiao Jingyan was also unguarded against such manipulations? But in the last life as emperor, he came to understand and then wield the power of machinations, for Lin Shu and Prince Qi, for their kingdom and the Chiyan army.

“If you insist on shouldering those responsibilities, why not ask Xiaoshu to help you instead of pushing him away from the capital?”

Jingyan replies calmly, as if the matter holds no importance to him, “Lin Shu is the only son of Commander General Lin Xie, it is quite obvious whom he would choose, given the choice between Brother Qi and myself. It was for the same reason that I opposed your joining the Imperial Guards two years ago.”

“……” Silent, Meng Zhi’s gaze falls on the red bow on the wall, the bow that Lin Shu had gifted Jingyan. To Meng Zhi, Prince Jing is his sire, Lin Shu is a good friend, and Prince Qi is the person they all admire and respect. He knows to read between the lines and immediately senses the bitter sadness in those emotionless words, “At that time, I still haven’t fully regained my memory.”

“Well, since you remember Fei Liu now, you should be able to understand what I am trying to do. I will not lie to you,” says Jingyan, “I have no intention of becoming the emperor. I would never do anything to harm Xiaoshu or Brother Qi, nor become an opportunistic manipulator like Prince Yu. These past few years, I have endorsed only competent men and eliminated those who truly deserve it. Meng Zhi, I do not expect you to help me, I would be content if you do not become an obstacle in my path.”

“You know….Xiaoshu told me the same thing back then.”
His eyes following the dancing flame of the candles for a long silent moment, Jingyan says, “‘I chose you because I had no other choice’ is what he told me. With Brother Qi alive, Xiaoshu would never choose me, be it for personal reasons or political ones.”

“But the road you’ve chosen for yourself this time, Your Highness, is no less dangerous than the one Xiaoshu walked in the past, plus you have no one by your side to help you…….When everything ends, even if Prince Qi could spare you out of brotherly compassion, what would happen to the years of friendship between you and Xiaoshu? Would you really be strangers then?” Meng Zhi beseeches earnestly.

At the last words, Jingyan’s impassive facade finally cracks, but only for a split second.

Meng Zhi knows more than anyone that within that body resides a soul that has lived a long life at the most lonely summit on earth. He had the world at his feet, yet he had nothing at all. Now he wishes to preserve everything he had lost, at the cost of himself. The most cruel part is perhaps that he must destroy with his very own hands the Xiao Jingyan that lives in the hearts of Prince Qi and Lin Shu-- the Jingyan that has never changed. Last time, Mei Changsu had no other choice; this time, Jingyan doesn’t either.

“What I have done in these past years are things that the Xiao Jingyan of yesteryear would never have done and would never have deigned to do. With what I am about to do in the future, neither Brother Qi nor Xiaoshu would never treat me the same way again,” Jingyan says by way of explanation, “As for what you said earlier, Meng Zhi, do you really think that I need a strategist now?”

For twenty years after Lin Shu’s death, he was the pillar that held the kingdom together. He had seen his fair share of conspiracies and faced numerous assassinations, and he had settled them one by one.

“You can accomplish more than you think, as long as you are willing to be ruthless to yourself,” he says.

“Your Highness, but I heard from Xiaoshu that there is a strategist who was helping you…?” Meng Zhi asks, unconvinced.

“Did he tell you that person’s name?” Jingyan swirls the tea in the cup, by now accustomed to its taste though he does not like it, “You would have seen him if you come visit me often, so if Xiaoshu asks, remember to say that you’ve met him.”
“So who is it?”

“So who is it?”

“Mei Changsu,” Jingyan smiles.

Meng Zhi clenches his fist abruptly in silent astonishment. Those three short syllables sound like they are weighed down by the entire world. There is probably no other person than him who knows the profound anguish behind those words, yet even he cannot begin to understand more than a sliver of it.

With a heavy heart, he kneels formally and says, “Please allow me to follow you, Your Highness.”

Jingyan turns slowly from his position to face the other man, looking at him directly in the eye, “Do you know what would happen if you follow me?”

“I do.”

“This time I am not biding my time in the shadows; I am fighting aggressively in the open with the other princes in the court. You will likely be implicated if you choose to help me.”

“I know.”

“There will be no one who thanks you for your efforts. Not Xiaoshu, not Brother Qi, and certainly not the Liang people.”

Meng Zhi has his head bowed in respectful submission, his voice steely with resolve, “I know, Your Highness.”

“Then...you may do as you wish.”

When Meng Zhi opens the doors to leave, he hears a faint sound from above and he flips onto the roof to investigate. A few seconds and quite some rustling later, he jumps back down with a
protesting Fei Liu in his arms. Fei Liu catches sight of Prince Jing in the room and suddenly remembers that he is supposed to be protecting the man “without him knowing,” so he turns swiftly to escape. This time Meng Zhi reacts in time and snatches the boy back to him before he could disappear. He happily rubs his stubby beard against the boy’s face.

Fei Liu struggles with all his might, but Commander Meng Zhi’s strength is not to be underestimated; his face red from the efforts, Fei Liu continues to squirm in vain.

The boy’s antics bring a rare, soft smile onto Jingyan’s face, he asks, “You are here to protect me?”

Fei Liu stops kicking the man holding him and nods.

“Who sent you?”

The boy shakes his head.

“He told you not to tell?” Jingyan guesses.

“Yeah!”

“Then I’m thinking it was the Young Master Lin Chen, right?” Jingyan asks, amused, handing the boy a pastry from a nearby table.

“Eh…….” Fei Liu’s childish face contorts with confusion, Lin Chen didn’t say if it was ok to reveal his identity. He turns the pastry in his hand and takes a small bite only after sniffing it carefully to check for signs of it being tampered, “He said not to say.”

Meng Zhi muffles his laugh from behind the two, rather impressed by the way Prince Jing has wheedled information out of the boy. He teases, “So what’s your name? Let me guess, it’s Fei Liu!”

The boy’s mouth is full of pastries and his words barely coherent, “‘S not.”

“It’s not?” Both men are utterly surprised by the admission. Meng Zhi takes Fei Liu’s face in his
hands to scrutinize it, wiping away the crumbs around his lips, “You are our Fei Liu alright, unless you changed your name?”

Jingyan asks with the same patient smile, handing the boy another hazelnut cookie, “Then what is your name?”

Batting his long eyelashes rather coyishly, he pronounces clearly this time, “My name is Pretty-boy.”

Meng Zhi chokes on his tea abruptly.

Later in the evening, Jingyan is at a loss for what to do with the boy who has been standing guard by his bed, eyes barely blinking. Fei Liu used to do the same to Xiaoshu whenever he was ill.

“I don’t need you to constantly guard me like this,” Jingyan sighs.

Totally unaffected, Fei Liu throws another slice of clementine into his mouth, “Need to pay special attention at night.”

“Who said that?”

“Lin Chen-gege.”

“Then...do you know Mei Changsu?” Asks Jingyan tentatively after a long moment of deliberation, not daring to hope that someone else might know that name in this life.

Fei Liu thinks for a second, then nods.

Jingyan’s breath hitches, his next question trembling with urgent emotion, “You remember him?”
"Lin Chen-gege’s friend, not here."

"You mean…Lin Chen told you that Mei Changsu was his friend but does not exist in this world," Jingyan clarifies in a whisper.

Fei Liu nods excitedly, obviously happy that this adult understands him perfectly. Yet the boy does not understand why the other person’s expression suddenly crumbles, so anguished that even he could almost taste the despair.

Within seven days, all of Tianquan Manor’s top swordsmen have been gravely injured, including the Master Zhuo Dingfeng himself. Yet no one saw their attackers.

"No one would be shameless enough to admit that they lost to a ten-year-old!" Meng Zhi brags to Prince Jing. He was worried about Fei Liu so he trailed the boy the whole way, and came back completely impressed.

"Zhuo Dingfeng is skilled enough to make it up the Langya List of martial arts experts, how could Fei Liu have defeated him at his young age?" questions Jingyan, skeptical.

"Of course he wasn’t the only one to injure Zhuo, there were several other highly skilled men on his side. Though it was obvious that Fei Liu had specifically practiced the counter moves for Zhuo’s swordsmanship, his every strike was aimed at the man’s weakest points," says Mengzhi, ruffling the boy’s hair affectionately. "As proud as Zhuo is, he would not challenge Your Highness and your men again after having lost in such a spectacular fashion. We will not fear further harassments from them…but Your Highness has also missed the chance to use Tianquan Manor as a bait. Last time it took Xiaoshu years to construct that trap to finally eliminate Xie Yu, Your Highness……?"

Jingyan shakes his head and replies, “Without the Chiyan case, Xie Yu’s power and influence are much less formidable than in the last life, there is no need to put too much effort into him.”

Meng Zhi releases a sigh of relief, “Xiaoshu has always felt guilty for what he had to do to Jingrui….Now if Your Highness could…I’m glad, I’m glad.” He realizes mid-sentence that he doesn’t quite know what he wanted to say, but the other man doesn’t seem to mind.

“The crimes Xie Yu committed still left their marks. Even if I do not prosecute him, someone else
will,” Jingyan turns to Fei Liu and hands a letter to him, “Please give this to Lin Chen. If Gong Yu wishes to come, I will not object.” [1]

Chapter End Notes

1Gong Yu: the musician girl from the Jiangzuo Alliance who was one of Mei Changsu’s informants in the capital. She lost her father to Xie Yu’s machinations and with Mei Changsu’s plan, she revealed Xie Yu’s crimes to everyone during Jingrui’s birthday banquet. [return to text]
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

Apparently today was Mei Changsu/Lin Shu’s birthday! The former isn't technically alive in this fic, so I guess today’s update is a special dedication to Xiaoshu ;3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three years later.

The now six-year-old Tingsheng is beginning to learn archery and horseback riding. Prince Qi watches fondly as his son shoots every wooden arrow precisely into the bullseye; it seems like only yesterday when he was watching the young Jingyan and Lin Shu perform the same exercises. And now, Lin Shu has been stationed at the Northern borders for the past three years, and Jingyan...though they see each other frequently, there is no longer any material for conversation.

Nihuang is past her mourning period, and the Grand Empress has brought up her marriage with Lin Shu again to the emperor. Lin Shu’s mother has also urged him on numerous occasions. Yet the two people involved seem utterly disinterested-- one of them working in the North, and the other one defending the South. Prince Qi remembers that when Lin Shu first received news of his betrothal years ago, he insisted on arranging for an appropriate match for Jingyan as well. They would get married on the same day and parade the city together. Then, whenever Prince Qi teased the two boys about marriage, Jingyan would become really quiet and storm off.

Tingsheng lowers the bow and exhales deeply. It’s been six years since he last wielded a bow, his skills have truly become rusty. He’s done the exercise ten times today, and his Mother hurries over to wipe sweat from his face, gushing with compliments. Not hearing any word from Prince Qi, Tingsheng turns around and finds the man staring at him with a distant expression.

They are probably both thinking about the same person.

He used to wield a steel bow with ease and was always the one to present the largest bounty to his Father during the Spring and Autumn Hunts.

“I made that little wooden bow you are using when I was your age,” Prince Qi finally says. “You are doing very well. Your Uncle Jingyan also learned archery in this very place.”
His Mother’s face darkens at the mention of Jingyan. Last winter, a team of ambassadors from the Southern Chu came to the capital and exposed the true identity of Xiao Jingrui. Although it was not widely known, it was still a scandal that involved foreign dignitaries and was a serious affront to the royal family. The emperor himself did not pass down any punishment, but the Xie and Zhuo families have completely severed ties, and Princess Li Yang moved into her own manor with the children. Since then, the house of Xie and Tianquan Manor have rapidly lost their influence in the capital and the pugilist world.

Princess Qi has heard from one of her maids that the girl who accused Xie Yu of hiring assassins used to frequent Prince Jing’s residence.

“It’s thundering,” Tingsheng says.

“Yes,” Prince Qi smiles hopefully at the low thrum of distant thunder, “we should have plenty of rain this year, let’s hope it bring a bountiful harvest.”

“You are going to inspect the local farmlands?” asks Tingsheng.

“Indeed. His Majesty has taken ill, so the duty falls to me. I am not going far, only for two or three days. The Grand Empress is also feeling under the weather, remember not to go bother her these few days.” Prince Qi smiles contently at his son who nods obediently and returns to his archery practice. It is hard not to love the child, he really is perfect-- he is always vivacious without being troublesome, obedient yet not timid. Everyone from the emperor and the nobles to the servants dotes on him incessantly. Especially after the pond incident three years ago, they are still haunted by the fear of losing him, and have poured more and more affection into him. For one whole year afterwards, Tingsheng received the medicated oil massage several times a day, and as a result, does not have any lingering problems from the fall. Jingyan, however, would often suffer from painful joints during the colder months.

Yet even with this kind of undivided attention, Tingsheng has grown into the most respectful and humble child of his generation, without any of the arrogant ego found in many other noble boys.

-------------------------------

The family’s peace and quiet are disrupted when a guard hurries towards them with an ashen-faced maid.
"Your Highness, the young Prince’s nanny cut herself with something when she was organizing his things. She’s fainted and won’t wake up! Looks...looks like she was poisoned!" The maid prostrates herself on the ground and stutters.

The warmth on Princess Qi’s face vanishes upon hearing those words, and she demands in a harsh voice, “Which object cut her?”

“It...it was the steel-woven vest of the young Prince.”

_Thump!_

The arrow that Tingsheng was aiming at the bullseye suddenly veers off course and embeds itself into the crimson pillar on the side.

---------------------------

Jingyan receives a message today from Prince Qi’s manor, saying that the Princess Qi would like to invite him for a visit. When he enters the house and realizes that Prince Qi is still away and Tingsheng is studying in his room, doubt begins to form in his mind.

He finds the Princess in the side hall, surrounded by a few of her maids playing string instruments and chatting casually about flowers. She smiles when she sees him and bids him to sit down at a nearby table. Nothing seems out of the ordinary.

“Jingyan, Chengting has started learning the art of archery these days, and he is using that same wooden bow your Brother Qi made for you. He always holds you very close to his heart, and has kept that bow for all those years,” says the princess warmly, “our manor used to be so lively with you and Xiaoshu here. But these past few years, Xiaoshu is far away, even you do not come often anymore.”

She casually glances up at him to gauge his reaction and continues, “Thankfully we still have Chengting here to keep us company, otherwise it would be so lonely!”

“Chengting is a smart and polite child, everyone likes him a lot,” Jingyan agrees.
“Yes. Three years ago when he fell into the pond, it was you who jumped in to save him despite the freezing waters. I hear that you still have knee problems. Your Brother Qi has always felt guilty for it.”

“Brother Qi has sent me many precious herbs and remedies already. It is nothing serious, in fact with a bit more time it will be cured completely,” Jingyan says calmly.

“That’s good to hear, otherwise your Brother Qi would always be worried when it snows,” the princess pushes a plate of hazelnut cookies towards Jingyan and urges him, “Try some, I made them myself.”

The movement of her arm catches the corner of a box on the table, causing it to tip over and spill its contents on the ground. Jingyan notices that the maids don’t seem inclined to pick it up, so he crouches down to grab it, only to see the steel-woven vest he gave to Tingsheng years ago. His hand falters.

“I remember that you gave Chengting a vest like this for his first birthday. I cannot be sure if this is the same one, why don’t you open it to see?” asks the princess.

Slightly baffled by her request but decides to do it anyway, Jingyan shakes the garment open then gasps in surprise. When his hand passes by the collar, something sharp nicks him and blood wells from the small wound. Startled, Jingyan brings the vest closer to inspect it, and much to his consternation, finds a thin blade hidden in the collar. His heart stops as he realizes its implications. The blood stain on his finger seems to extend all the way to his heart, weaving a crimson net of pain around the still beating organ. Jingyan suppresses a bitter smile; so this is why Princess Qi invited him today. Judging by her accusatory attitude, she most likely already has a conclusion in mind; whatever he says now would be deemed as guilty excuses. Jingyan forces himself to quell the rising nausea and focus on the matter at hand, he must find out who is trying to harm Tingsheng. “This is the vest I gave him,” he admits quietly.

The Princess covers her mouth in feigned surprise, “Really? Then why is there a sharp blade on the collar?”

“I inspected it thoroughly before giving it to him, the blade was most definitely not there. May I ask where it is stored and who usually takes care of it?”

A maid answers, “It is stored along with the other clothing of the young prince. Due to His Highness’ young age, he has never worn it.”
“Then how did you find out about the blade?”

“The nanny cut herself on it when she was organizing the items.”

“And where is she now?” Jingyan presses.

“Your Highness does not know?” The maid throws the question back at him.

“How would I know?” Jingyan replies with a scoff, his voice not raised but a steely quality has entered it. The maid takes a step back in submission, her lips trembling. The Princess answers instead, “She was poisoned and is still in a coma.”

So the blade was poisoned, yet he is still fine despite being cut just like the nanny. It would mean that they had the blade changed with the sole intention of testing him. Jingyan’s hand hangs limply by his side, the blood dripping onto the ground silently.

“I see. Princess, so you called me here to convict me today,” Jingyan says softly, as if to himself.

“Jingyan, I wanted to trust you, but I was so afraid---”

“If you believe me to be guilty, then please feel free to submit the vest and the witnesses to either the Ministry of Justice or the Xuanjing Bureau for investigation,” Jingyan stands and bows a goodbye. “That is all. Please excuse me.”

“Your Highness!” The same maid who answered earlier calls after him, “May I be so bold as to ask, when the young prince fell into the pond that time, was Your Highness the only person present besides the maid who died of poison?”

Jingyan stops dead in his tracks. Not because of what the maid just said-- it really doesn’t matter whether it was her own curiosity or a question the Princess wanted her to ask-- but because he suddenly sees Tingsheng’s figure behind a pillar.
The child who would always rush towards him with a huge smile on his face whenever Jingyan visited him in the Servants Prison, the one who would always beg him to help him practice swords or play a game of go, the one who was the last person by his side on his deathbed, the one who called him “Father,” and the one he is willing to protect with all of his life...

That child would hate him now.

Suddenly, Jingyan feels as if he is drowning in an endless expanse of freezing waters, and for the first time regrets his choices in this life.

_Brother Qi, Xiaoshu, Mother.......and now Tingsheng...they are all gone._

After Jingyan has left, Tingsheng walks out from his hiding spot. He ignores the chaos in the hall, his Mother’s soft cries and the maids scrambling to comfort her. He crouches down in front of the dark crimson spot by the table, staring at it with unblinking eyes.

Prince Qi has been worried about the situation at home during his entire trip. As soon as the inspection was over, he left a few trusted men to take care of the aftermath and hurried back to the capital.

The first person he sees when he enters the manor is a puffy-eyed Tingsheng.

His heart gives a sudden lurch, he hasn’t seen the child cry since his infant years. Lifting his son into his arms, Prince Qi inquires about what happened, and the child answers with barely restrained misery, “F-father, I really like that woven vest, please do not let Mother send it to the Xuanjing Bureau!”

“What did you say?” Prince Qi is shocked. He had to leave for the inspections right after the nanny was poisoned, so he left a brief but firm order to investigate it within the household and not to publicize it. How would his son know about it and what is this about the Xuanjing Bureau?

“What happened?” He turns to the maids who were about to go find the Princess and demands in an icy tone. “Tell me!”
Never having seen the usually good-natured Prince so enraged before, the maids fall onto their knees and hurry to explain, “This afternoon the Princess invited Prince Jing for tea, and brought out th--the vest, and asked the prince about it.”

“Then what of the Xuanjing Bureau?”

“Prince Jing said it himself. He said that if Your Highness truly suspects him, then please let the Xuanjing Bureau investigate…….” Her voice trails off in apprehension.

“Do you not remember who saved my son three years ago when he fell into the pond on New Year’s Eve??” Prince Qi bites out the harsh question to a roomful of trembling servants, their heads bowed low and no one dares to make a sound.

Then Tingsheng says quietly, sniffing, “That maid...she asked Uncle Jingyan today that when I fell into the pond, was he the only person there besides the poisoned maid?” The child pronounces each word with precision, his dark eyes trained on the pale face of the kneeling maid.

Princess Qi arrives at the scene at that moment. As a smart woman, she had her own suspicions, but a mother’s instinct did not allow her to overlook any possible threat to her son. The testimonies of the nanny and the maids, plus what she has heard of Jingyan in the past few years, made it difficult not to suspect him. She knows perfectly well that her husband would not allow her to interrogate Jingyan the way she did. Before conducting any investigation, he had already dismissed the possibility of Jingyan’s involvement. He’s forbidden anyone to report the incident to the Ministry of Justice and any attempt to question Prince Jing’s staff. He has been always like this, unable to tolerate any derogatory comments towards Jingyan.

Yet how many times has Jingyan betrayed his brother’s unconditional support and trust in these past years?

The only way to eliminate her suspicions was to ask him herself. However, the moment that Jingyan picked up the vest with no hesitation and cut his finger on the blade, her doubts were mostly extinguished. She had crafted her every question carefully to make sure that no word sounded overly accusatory. Except she did not anticipate what the maid said at the end.

There are so many things still left to be explained, yet she cannot formulate anything before her husband climbs onto his horse with their son in his arms.
Before he leaves, he turns to her and reiterates the same thing he has told her numerous times before, which seems like she will never truly understand, “Jingyan is my brother.”

Chapter End Notes

p.s. Just realized that this was probably the worst celebratory chapter for Lin Shu's birthday... For one, he wasn't even in it~ xD And his beloved Jingyan just turned into a huge bag of angst. Well...HAPPY BIRTHDAY ANYWAY!!
Prince Qi and his son arrive at Prince Jing’s manor and are led into the halls by Zhanying. Prince Qi inquires about how Jingyan has been recently and patiently listens to Zhanying’s detailed replies. The normally obedient child seems rather agitated as he struggles out of Prince Qi’s hold and sprints into the inner rooms.

Jingyan has just finished verifying the list of arrested Hua people against Mei Changsu’s original roster, and a sudden realization hits him. All the Hua spies they have named were active only after the Chiyan conspiracy. If there was anyone undercover in Prince Qi’s home before then, they would have gone undetected. With Princess Xuanji dead, and there is no Qin Banruo nor her Hongxiu Court yet, those two spies in Prince Qi’s residence must be scrambling to commit something rash.

Jingyan silently berates himself for not having noticed it earlier, and writes a brief order for one of his subordinates to investigate. The man bows in acceptance, then hands Jingyan a letter from Nihuang in the South.

‘I have received word of recent attacks from Da Yu on our borders, and that Lin Shu-gege received various injuries. He told me it was nothing serious, yet I cannot help but worry. There are a thousand miles between the North and the South, months would go by before my letter reaches him again. The capital is where the Divine Ruler resides, thus the center of all information channels. I beg you to pass me the latest news on his health. -Gratefully, Nihuang.’

He didn’t even know that Xiaoshu was injured in the battles against the Yu. There are too many things left unsaid in those simple words of “received various injuries.” What Nihuang does not know is that the last time he and Xiaoshu exchanged correspondence was six months ago, and it was a sad pretense of a letter. When they were younger, every time they parted, Lin Shu would write a thick stack of letters to Jingyan and the other boy would send his reply back on the same day. Wei Zheng often teased Lin Shu that he wrote more letters to Jingyan than Nie Feng wrote to his wife.

Jingyan writes Lin Shu’s name on the envelope, then falls silent when he opens a parchment to write
the letter, his hand suspended in midair. In the past life, after Lin Shu died at age nineteen on Cliff Mei, Jingyan spent years in the desolate borders on a self-imposed exile. Whenever he woke up to the howling winds outside the tent, he would be plagued by images of the burning fire on Cliff Mei, and then the scene would change, his mind conjuring up illusions of a world without the Chiyan conspiracy, with Xiaoshu still alive and healthy. He would dream about what would become of him and Xiaoshu, what they would look like, where they would go and what kind of beautiful scenery they would see together.

He dreamt of so many wonderful things.

Yet in this life, he has nothing left to say with the twenty-five-year-old Lin Shu.

---------------------------------------

Tingsheng watches from the door as Jingyan stares at the empty letter in front of him, his silhouette barely discernible in the low light of a single lamp. He looks like a plum tree at the end of its years, its leaves all but gone and the only thing keeping it upright is its fiery strength. With a shout of “Uncle Jingyan!” Tingsheng sprints into the man’s arms.

Startled out of his trance, Jingyan holds onto the warm figure almost instinctively. He realizes belatedly that his entire body is freezing.

“Jingyan!” Prince Qi enters the room and almost thinks the other man was crying, but upon closer inspection, there is no moisture in those eyes, just dim weariness.

“Brother Qi,” Jingyan stands up to greet him, voice flat, “You are visiting at such a late hour, must be because of the woven vest?”

Prince Qi’s apology is unceremoniously cut off by Jingyan’s polite but distant inquiry. He lowers the arm that had reached out to grab his brother.

“Uncle Jingyan’s hand is injured!” Tingsheng exclaims, then proceeds to pull out a clean handkerchief to wrap around Jingyan’s finger.

In his childish clumsiness, the wound that had only been hastily treated earlier reopens, and blood wells up again. Prince Qi steps forward to take the task from his son’s hands and tries to rebandage the wound. Unfortunately, the father is no less clumsy than his son; Jingyan lifts his hand experimentally and the handkerchief comes undone immediately.
Eyeing the blood on the handkerchief, Prince Qi frowns deeply, “Jingyan, what happened today will not happen again.”

Jingyan nods in calm understanding, there is not a trace of resentment from being wronged in his voice when he says, “It was merely a misunderstanding.”

Tingsheng holds Jingyan’s injured hand to his small face to inspect it carefully and declares with childish puzzlement, “There is a lot of blood.”

Jingyan tugs the child into a close embrace and soothes gently, “Your Uncle Jingyan has seen worse on the battlefield. This little wound doesn’t hurt at all, it’ll be all healed by tomorrow.”

The child looks up at him and says innocently, “But the nanny didn’t bleed this much.”

What seems to be a spontaneous comment sets both men on guard, they look at each other in contemplative surprise. If the blade was covered in fatal poison and placed at such an accessible place on the collar, how was it possible that the nanny received an even shallower cut than Jingyan?

“Chengting, where do you usually keep the vest?” Asks Prince Qi.

“In the same place as all the other treasures Granddaddy gave me,” says the child honestly.

“Those treasures are mostly small trinkets and precious gems. If the vest was not kept with all the other clothes, how did it get pulled out on the same day when they were organizing?” Prince Qi taps his finger pensively, a frown on his face. “The nanny has been with us for years, and her injury seemed so severe this time, apparently the physicians barely managed to save her life, so nobody thought to suspect her.”

“A conspiracy like this would definitely have had more than one key player,” says Jingyan, thinking back to the incident that nearly destroyed his relationship with Mei Changsu. Karma seems to have an interesting way of coming back: now his position is reversed as the one being wronged, yet he has no right to resent anyone. But he needs to know the truth because it concerns his Brother Qi and Tingsheng, “That maid dressed in red who was by the Princess’ side, was she hired around the same time as the nanny?”
Prince Qi falls silent at the question, his mind whirling. He is not oblivious to those schemes although he refuses to participate in them; it only takes him a brief moment to come to the conclusion, “Their goal was never Chengting, it was you.”

“If Brother has not forbidden your people from reporting the incident, I would find myself in the Xuanjing Bureau right now,” admits Jingyan quietly.

“They are...Hua people,” concludes Prince Qi in a wavering voice. They have always had their differences when it comes to the Hua. Prince Qi is firmly against Jingyan’s policy of relentless expulsion, and has begged the emperor on numerous occasions to let the innocent Hua families to return to the capital, and exile only the convicted spies. This, of course, incurred the emperor’s shocked rage, berating him ‘The Hua were trying to kill your son, even Jingyan would not spare them, how could you speak in their favor?!’ Prince Qi was not heartless enough to remain unaffected by the attack on his son, he just has always upheld the belief that one man’s crime should not implicate his whole family, let alone an entire race.

Only now has he truly witnessed what kind of underhanded machinations the Hua are capable of. The usually mild-tempered prince tightens his fist when he considers the consequences Jingyan would have faced if the conspiracy had come to fruition. “Jingyan, I will not let your suffering be in vain. Trust me,” he promises as he stands to leave.

Tingsheng is about to follow suit when he sees the empty letter on the table, its blank space telling a tale of loneliness. He changes his mind and begs, “I want to stay here with Uncle Jingyan…….”

Jingyan thinks about the chaos that would surely ensue when Prince Qi returns home. Whatever he decides to do with those Hua spies, it would not be a suitable scene for children’s eyes. He agrees, “I shall send Chengting back tomorrow morning.”

“Alright. Then I…” Prince Qi grasps for words but realizes that he cannot find any-- Jingyan has grown into a dependable and resilient adult, he is no longer the boy who needs hugs from his brother to comfort him. “I shall take my leave.”

---------------------------------------

At the same time, Prince Yu is entertaining a young woman in red robes at his manor. She is the very person that has evaded Jingyan’s rigorous search this whole time: Qin Banruo. Ever since the expulsion of most Hua spies from the city, she was forced to be on the run constantly, moving from one hideout to the next with never-ending fear of arrest. When her fellow sister Jun Niang also disappeared without a trace, Qin Banruo finally opened the pouch given to her by Princess Xuanji.[1]
Two years ago, she arrived at Prince Yu’s doorstep with an enormous secret and an offer of alliance.

“Those two women were both trusted disciples of the Princess, they are completely loyal to her. She cultivated them with the sole intention of using them to eliminate Prince Qi one day, so they answer to no one but her. In fact, many other Hua do not know of their existence. They’ve been deeply undercover in Prince Qi’s home and have had minimal contact with the outside. It took them two years to even find out of the Princess’ passing. I have pulled many strings to contact them since I came back from the capital and only succeeded recently. The older woman immediately wanted to follow the Princess in the afterlife, so I suggested that we might as well take advantage of her death to further our agendas, and she agreed.“

”Though I hear she is not dead,” comments the prince.

“It was probably a survival instinct, she must have subconsciously avoided the sharpest part of the blade when she picked up the vest. Fear not, she would not live for long. Prince Qi would not spare anyone who dares to frame his brother,” Banruo’s lips quirk up in a sinister smile. “The younger girl is still willing to do my bidding. She only added a few casual comments here and there during this incident, I don’t believe Prince Qi would suspect her.”

Prince Yu shakes his head in mild disappointment, chuckling. “Their plot this time was far too simple. They were relying on the case being blown out of proportion once it is handled by the Xuanjing Bureau, and Xia Jiang would be able to dig up further accusations to convict Jingyan. They completely underestimated how much Prince Qi would try to cover for Jingyan; even if they gather a mountain of evidence, Prince Qi would never let a word of it escape his manor.”

“That’s why they tried to find a breakthrough in Princess Qi instead, to make her suspicious of Prince Jing. By mentioning the accident three years ago on New Year’s Eve, they were implicating that Prince Jing had orchestrated the whole thing, thus planting the seeds of doubt in the Princess’ heart,” adds Qin Banruo.

“Jingyan managed to uncover the hideout of my Aunt Xuanji, how did he miss those two women?”

Banruo’s eyes gleam with cold malice at the mention of Jingyan’s name, “With his impatient personality, if he knew of their existence, he would have exterminated them right away. The only explanation for how they managed to remain untouched is that he did not know of them.”

Prince Yu nods in impressed satisfaction and says, “This plot of yours is quite clever. Have you made sure that our things have been placed accordingly?”
“The older Hua woman’s death would surely lure Xiao Jingyan into a false sense of security, thinking that he has eliminated one more spy. He would never guess that we have another strike waiting around the corner,” she says smugly.

At that moment, an informant comes in to report, “A carriage has just exited Prince Qi’s manor with those two women in it.”

Banruo startles slightly, “Two?”

“...Both dead. I took a cursory look and they seemed poisoned,” answers the man.

Prince Yu frowns, “The younger one as well? Are we at a dead end then?”

“No matter. Our things are all in place, technically both women are useless to us now anyway,” Banruo takes a sip at her wine, savoring its warmth, “It is barely spring and the cold still lingers, Your Highness, please have more wine to keep warm.”

After Prince Qi leaves the room, a troubled frown begins to form on Jingyan’s face. Having spent decades with the man in the past life, Tingsheng understands his concern immediately. He, on the other hand, is not worried about the fate of those two Hua spies; even if Prince Qi were still merciful enough to spare them, his Mother would never let them leave the capital alive.

“Chengting,” calls Jingyan.

“......Yes?” it takes Tingsheng a few moments to register the name since he is so unaccustomed to it, especially from Jingyan.

“You’ve begun to learn how to read and write, correct?”

“Yes.”
“Come here,” Jingyan bids him closer to sit on his lap, the map of the Liang Kingdom open on the table as he patiently teaches the child to read the name of each province, just like many years ago. With every region, he explains in great detail its agriculture, economy and military forces, even venturing into interesting local folklore and anecdotes.

Jingyan knows perfectly well that a child this young cannot possibly absorb all of this, yet he cannot help himself. Because in this life, they are fated to take divergent paths, and there may not be another time in which they can sit peacefully like this, father and son, under the flickering lamp with the most mundane things in mind. So he cannot help himself but pour everything he knows into Tingsheng now, all in one night.

In this life, Tingsheng has a loving mother, a royal status, and the care and affection of everyone around him. He must be so much happier than when he was an insignificant servant rescued by Prince Jing.

’Now he has everything, I’m glad,’ Jingyan muses, happy for the boy from the bottom of his heart.

There are still so many things left to say, but all he manages in the end is an earnest plea, “I would never harm you...you must remember that.”

“I know,” replies Tingsheng immediately.

Of course he knows; Jingyan has been the same ever since they met in the servant prison, all those years ago. Tingsheng knows that this time around, his innocence is one of the things Jingyan is trying so hard to preserve. After all, Jingyan had always felt guilty towards him, for having left him to fend for himself in the servant prison, where he was forced to learn constant wariness in order to survive at a tender age, and later after the Chiyan case was overturned and their name cleared, for not being able to restore his royal title that was rightfully his.

So this time, Jingyan has given him back everything: his birthright as Prince Qi’s first born, adoring attention from everyone, and only the best of everything.

Tingsheng is well aware that Jingyan wants him to be free from those dark memories of hatred and humiliation, to never become that cautious child always reading between the lines, and to absolutely take for granted everyone’s unconditional affection. If it doesn’t cross his bottom line, he is happy to play the role of the guileless child and never get involved with political schemings of the court. He would live the life his Father wants him to live.
--But his bottom line is Jingyan.

At his young age, there is very little he can do for his Father. He is willing to wait until he is a bit older to tell Jingyan about his identity. At least that was the plan until he saw the lonely figure of Jingyan tonight. He detects something amiss when Jingyan begins telling him about everything he knows with such resignation and urgency that it seems like he was bidding him goodbye.

Not only is the content too sophisticated for a mere child, there is also a calm acceptance in his voice: he is reciting each incident with excruciating detail, yet his mind seems elsewhere. He even reveals the strategies to deal with a drought that wouldn’t come for another few years, utterly unaware that it has not happened yet.

Towards the end, he is speaking for the sake of speaking.

He is bidding his goodbye. He is convinced that Tingsheng and he would part ways, just like Lin Shu did with him. So he must say everything that needs to be said tonight, as if making the most out of this last vestige of their relationship as father and son. Because there will be no other chance.

Tingsheng abruptly closes his fingers around the map, its corner tearing from the force.

“My fault, you are too young to remember all these,” Jingyan is cut off mid-sentence, startled from his trance, and folds the map calmly, “The hour is late, I will have the servants prepare a room for you.”

Pausing before the door, he turns around and adds hesitantly, “That woven vest...please remember to wear it when you join the Spring and Autumn Hunts in the future.”

When there is no response, Jingyan remembers that given the poison incident so fresh in his mind, the child would probably rather throw the vest away than touching it again, “You don’t have to if you don’t like it,” he concedes with a joyless smile.

Tingsheng then replies firmly, “It is a gift from Father, I would rather die than throwing it away.”

There is a puzzled expression on Jingyan’s face, as if disbelieving his own ears; he falters, “Wh--
what did you just call me?”

The child kneels in a proper courtesy that a progeny would give their parent, and lifts his head to look Jingyan straight in the eye, his voice resolute, “Prince Qi is my sire, but I only have one Father, in this life and in the past.” [2]

Silence stretches for a very long moment, long enough for the tea on the table to lose its steam completely, when Jingyan finally snaps out of his stupor and asks in a halting voice, “...Is that you, Tingsheng?”

“Yes, Father, it is me.”

Chapter End Notes

p.s. Nihuang’s letter to Jingyan in Chinese is intentionally super archaic, I can’t even pretend to mimic the style in English...I tried. XD

1 Princess Xuanji gave Qin Banruo the pouch that contains the birth secrets of Prince Yu (that he is the son of her sister), leaving her one last powerful ally if all else fails. In canon, Qin Banruo opens the pouch when Xia Jiang has already been detained in prison. [return to text]

2 In popular works of fiction about the ancient periods, children would address their fathers in a way that reflects their appropriate titles. In the Chinese imperial family (or at least how the media has popularized it to be), a prince would call the emperor 父皇 (lit. Father-Emperor); the son of a prince like Tingsheng would call Prince Qi 父王 (lit. Father-Lord); Lin Shu calls his father 父帅 (lit. Father-Commander). Non-nobles would use 父亲 (Father) as the most common term.

Throughout this fic, Tingsheng has been calling Prince Qi “Father Lord,” as it is proper. However, in this chapter he has specifically used 父亲 “Father” to address Jingyan, which is the way he has called Jingyan in his past life. So literally in the Chinese original Tingsheng is saying, "I always call Prince Qi 'Father-Lord.' There is only one person I would call 'Father,' in this life and in the past.” [return to text]
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

Thanks to everyone who gave me feedback on the translation last chapter! Your opinions really matter to me and your inputs always make me so happy! :) So from now on there will be a proper footnotes section where I shall attempt to explain some of the nuances in the Chinese language that don't translate across, as well as some cultural bits to deepen your understanding of the period, background, etc. Though of course you don't have to read it, I won't quiz you on it. ;P

For today, please read until the very end because there is a lovely (read: angsty) surprise waiting for you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This night, father and son rest in the same bed, chatting well into the wee morning hours. Jingyan remembers that last time when Tingsheng came to live with him, he was already eleven, and was far more mature than other children of his age. He has learned not to burden anyone with anything and rarely sought parental attention, so Jingyan had very few chances to care for him, except once.

That time, Tingsheng had taken ill with a fever, and Jingyan kept him company all night, softly telling him stories. He didn’t know many fairytales or folklores to entertain children, so he told Tingsheng about all the happy and carefree moments he shared with Lin Shu.

Tingsheng grew up hearing so many stories about this Lin Shu that he wasn’t too surprised when he later discovered that he was the same person as Mei Changsu. There was probably only one person who could make his Father smile like that.

When Mei Changsu died on the Northern borders, Xiao Jingyan’s fate was also sealed: for the next twenty years, he was living for the sole purpose of repaying for the debt he never owed in the first place.

That is why, Tingsheng knows exactly what Jingyan is planning to do now and the consequences of doing so. According to Jingyan, Meng Zhi and Lin Chen also have memories from the past life, but like Tingsheng, they cannot do much to help Jingyan. Meng Zhi is the Commander of the Imperial Guards, he has very little say in court politics, and his position would make any private interaction come under close scrutiny. He is also too honest to be involved in their machinations.
As for Lin Chen, although he helped them to eliminate Xie Yu this time, his reasons stem more from the fact Xie Yu had harmed Mei Changsu in the past, than from a genuine desire to help Jingyan with his cause.

“Father, you have very few men at your disposal, if the Langya Hall could send someone useful…” Tingsheng suggests.

Jingyan smiles benevolently, “Lin Chen is not my friend, he is the friend of Sir Mei of Jiangzuo. In the past life, Mei Changsu went to battle in my stead, and in this life, I will make sure that Mei Changsu never exists in this world. Lin Chen must not be happy, but he cannot even blame me for it. Besides, this time I am fighting for the supreme power, it is too dangerous a path to involve the Langya Hall.”

True, Lin Chen never set foot again in the capital for twenty years, except that one time when he came to treat Father’s injuries from the poisoned arrow. The night when Father passed, he stood waiting just outside the capital gates and gave Tingsheng a branch of blossoming plum flowers.

His face was indiscernible in the swirling snow, he merely said, “I dislike bidding goodbyes, give this flower to him for me.”

Tingsheng had only seen the man a handful of times, mostly when he visited Mei Changsu’s house for lessons when he was younger. The Lin Chen of his memories was incredibly talented and shamelessly proud, he was always the fire that warmed the room wherever he went.

This was the only time that Tingsheng had heard him speak in such a soft and tranquil tone.

The incident of the woven vest is resolved within days. Princess Qi has sent away the two women that very night, though words have it that the horse lost its footing in the dark, and the entire carriage tumbled off the cliff. Prince Qi has visited Prince Jing again with some handmade hazelnut cookies from the Princess. Jingyan takes a few pieces, assuring his brother with a smile that he wouldn’t begrudge them at all.

Three days later, news of victory reaches the capital from the frontlines in the North.
Lin Shu had received intel that a group of Yu soldiers was parading as bandits to harass the locals in a small town on the border, so he took a squad of three hundred men to mitigate the situation. They had dried grass bundled on their horse hooves to silence their approach, the team circumvented three sentry towers of the enemy and ambushed the Yu forces across the river. This battle continued from moonrise to dawn, and concluded with the bloody defeat of 2,000 Yu soldiers.

When news reaches the capital, everyone is marveling at Lin Shu’s feat of overpowering an enemy ten times larger than his troops.

A fortnight later, Lin Shu returns to the capital with his men, carrying the severed head of the Yu general as a trophy of their victory. This also happens to be the day before Lin Shu’s birthday, and many people have been invited to the Lin Manor to celebrate, including many of Lin Shu’s friends, as well as Jingyan. The halls are illuminated by a myriad of lanterns, their soft light casting a merry golden hue onto the gathered crowd.

Jingrui and Yujin are also in attendance. After the incident with Xie Yu, Jingrui has matured greatly; the young man now carries himself with a distinctly somber poise. Yujing is his usual chattering self, though his impulsive nature is nicely tempered by a perceptiveness beyond his years. He has attached himself firmly to Jingrui, still concerned for his moody friend.

Xia Dong has come with her husband Nie Feng, and within a few brief exchanges begin to drink to each other’s demise with Lin Shu.

Many other guests have trickled in, most of whom either long-time friends with Lin Xie or followers of Prince Qi. When they spot Jingyan, their attitude is understandably respectful yet rather distant.

Jingyan doesn’t mind it much. The only reason he came here today was to see Lin Shu; although he’s heard that Lin Shu returned to the capital on his horse, which means his injuries must not be serious, yet he cannot help but worry. Now, seeing his friend for the first time in three years, drinking and laughing cheerfully with Xia Dong, Jingyan is finally relieved.

He remembers the short missive he received regarding the Northern battles, imagining Lin Shu rushing through the snowy night on horseback, his long spear a powerful and tenacious force piercing through the enemy formations, a proud laugh on his youthful countenance.
Jingyan thinks to himself that he has made this vivacious and magnificent Lin Shu of today. It is all worth it.

Yujin inches closer to a tipsy Lin Shu and whispers, “Hey, Lin Shu-gege, give me whichever present you don’t want!”

Lin Shu points randomly at the pile of presents, “That one.”

Yujin picks up the package happily, but hurries to put it back after only a glance. Jingrui’s sister Xie Qi whispers curiously, “Yujin-gege, what’s wrong with that one?”

“That present comes from Prince Jing’s manor,” says Yujin carefully.[1]

“Prince Jing...so?” Queries the girl, still confused.

“Lin Shu-gege hates it when other people touches his things, especially ones from Prince Jing. Once I barely touched the spear ornament given to him by Prince Jing, he almost hung me from his front door! If I dare so much as to take this present now, he’d kill me for sure!” Yujin says with a shudder.

The House of Mu has also sent along many gifts, including rare types of tea Lin Shu likes, and various trinkets. There is nothing precious in value, but they all come packaged thoughtfully in a large box.

Lin Shu’s mother smiles contently at the gifts, and a few perceptive guests take this chance to bring up the marriage with Princess Nihuang. She chuckles good-naturedly and says, “I don’t know about other matters, but I will not let him leave the capital again now he is back. It’s so lively here, and you’d be surrounded by all your friends.”

Lin Shu smiles quietly in response, lifting his eyes to scan for Jingyan, only to find no one there. He opens his mouth to ask when a thunder rumbles in the distance. Little droplets of rain begin to fall from the sky, and the guests are all moving into the rooms. Yujin tries to mollify the pouting young Xie Qi who is upset over her new dress that got wet in the rain, saying, “You know spring showers are as precious as gold, just think about all the gold that rained on your dress!”

Jingrui eyes the pouring rain outside with a worried frown on his face, “Everything in moderation is fine, the showers this year seem a bit too much.”
Today was supposed to be a day of rest, yet Jingyan receives an summons early morning for an audience in the palace. When he enters the hall, he notes without any surprise that the Ministers of Revenue, Works, and Defense are all present, as well as Lin Shu. [2]

“We have had incessant snow and rain since the Spring Equinox this year,” the emperor leafs through the stack of reports on his desk without lifting an eye at the people gathered before him. “There have been reports of flood from various regions. I presume that is why you have come today.”

“The South has seen a few incidents of river flooding, but it is nothing serious yet,” answers the Minister of Revenue. “Though Vice Commander Lin Shu has mentioned that the embankment along the Qishui river was largely corroded when he was on his way back to the capital.”

“Lin Shu, is that true?” asks the emperor.

Lin Shu takes a step forward at the mention of his name and says, “Yes, Your Majesty, the embankment was in terrible condition. As soon as the ice melts, the river water itself would easily overflow, let alone a serious flood.”

The emperor frowns in concern; there has been a precedent of flooding in the Qishui region, albeit many years ago.

The Minister of Works adds, “I have already sent a group of men to inspect the situation. As reported, the river embankment is heavily eroded, and directly downstream are thousands of acres of farmland, and many farmers families. Once the weather warms, the overflowing river may pose a threat to the farms, and come summer, the livelihood of those families may be at stake due to the heavy flooding. The problem is that the resident troops there are few in number, and they are already overwhelmed with the onerous workload during this farming season.” [3]

“Then tell me about your solution,” commands the emperor.

At that, the three ministers kneel in unison, requesting to take half of the capital troops to repair the damaged embankments. They would be able to finish the reconstruction before summer arrives,
otherwise the lives of people in those regions would be at serious risk. It seems as if the three of them have orchestrated their speech, listing every painstaking detail from how to organize the troops to the allocation of funds.

The emperor appears to be listening attentively, though he hasn’t said a word. At the end, he suddenly asks, “Jingyan, what do you think?”

“I beg to differ,” comes his reply.

Lin Shu snaps his head around to stare at Jingyan in shocked surprise.

“The capital troops are our most elite men charged with the serious responsibility of defending the city. If we allow this elite branch to be led elsewhere, the capital would be left vulnerable to any sinister ploys from the less noble-minded men,” Jingyan explains.

The emperor is greatly pleased, nodding and praising Jingyan for his rationality. Lin Shu, on the other hand, cannot help but argue his point. In his memory, Jingyan has never been adept at debating; whenever he disagreed with someone, he would become red-faced with frustration and storm off to brood alone. So Lin Shu would always tell Jingyan, ‘Leave it to me to win the argument, I know what you are thinking anyway.’

Then who is this person in front of him, logical and eloquent to a fault, defending his case without giving Lin Shu a chance to retort? As articulate and well-read as Lin Shu is, he still lacks impenetrable composure that only time can bestow. What chills him to the bone is that no matter the cause, the sovereign should never treat anyone’s life as trivial. Yet the Jingyan before him now is willing to put tens of thousands of lives at risk only for the sake of ingratiating himself to the emperor!

This is not the Jingyan he knows.

His indignation rapidly surging, Lin Shu shouts without a second thought, “And are you just going to sit here in this indestructible capital with the blood of tens of thousands of people on your hands?!”

Jingyan knows perfectly well that the emperor would never let the troops leave the capital; the ministers and Lin Shu could kneel here in supplication until they expire, and still not a single soldier would be dispatched. He also remembers that in this particular year, although there was an alarming amount of rain in the springtime, summer came with a sudden drought, and there was no serious
flooding. They could wait until autumn to repair the embankment in the Qishui region, and would not need the help of extra troops since the autumn and winter months are long.

Yet there is nothing he could say to Lin Shu.

“Lin Shu,” the emperor who has been watching the entire altercation suddenly says in a cold voice, “What you just said, was that how you speak to a Prince of the first rank?” [4]

Lin Shu is stunned back to his senses. Jingyan is stunned as well. The three ministers watch from their positions as Lin Shu’s temper rapidly cools, as the flame in his eyes dim into nothingness.

He kneels to the emperor and bows, “I beg for Your Majesty’s forgiveness.”

The emperor waves him up, only to see Lin Shu turn around to face Jingyan, falling to his knees once again. An uncontrollable shudder runs through Jingyan, staring unseeingly at the man in front of him, images flashing before his eyes, of that stormy snow day, of the severed bell in that secret passage. Of a pale-faced Mei Changsu kneeling before him.

‘Your Highness…’

He hears Lin Shu say, “I have offended Your Highness with my rash words earlier, please forgive me for my impudence.”

Jingyan stares at Lin Shu’s bowed head, listens to those quiet words, his entire body frozen with desperate sorrow. His lips tremble, yet no words come out.

The emperor then says sternly, “This matter cannot be delayed. Minister of Revenue, prepare a report with an estimate of the necessary funds. Minister of works, I charge you to devise a plan to shorten the construction period.” The Minister of Defense opens his mouth to say something, only to swallow it forcibly at the emperor’s forbidding glare.

Eyeing the stiff atmosphere between Lin Shu and Jingyan, the emperor heaves a deep sigh. Although he is pleased that Jingyan has sided with him against the other ministers, it was never his intention to strain his relationship with Lin Shu.
“The Grand Empress is feeling under the weather today, go visit her before you leave the palace,” he orders, waving them out.

The Grand Empress has just finished drinking her medicine. She smiles contently when she sees Lin Shu and Jingyan enter the room, calling them closer, “You two are still the same as before, inseparable even for a moment!”

The two men exchange a brief look. They used to be so inseparable, yet now they have been separated for three whole years.

“Xiaoshu...you’ve lost weight!” Exclaims the Grand Empress in dismay.

“Great Granny…”

“Jingyan, Jingyan is even worse! What happened to you two?” The Grand Empress caresses their cheeks softly, her eyes sad, “Come, have some pastries,” then proceeds to hand each of them a hazelnut cookie.

Lin Shu looks up in surprise, staring at the Grand Empress with a sorrowful realization and the maids by their side lower their heads quietly. The Grand Empress has finally reached an age when she cannot overcome the disease of time, now she is beginning to confuse her beloved grandchildren.

When Lin Shu hesitates, she pats his hand affectionately and asks, “Xiaoshu, why are you not eating yours? Isn’t hazelnut cookie your favorite?”

Lin Shu cannot bear to refuse her kindness, so he suppresses his sorrow and lifts the cookie to his mouth. Jingyan snatches it from his hand, turning to the Grand Empress with a laugh, “Great Granny, it’s my favorite too!”

“Jingyan is still the same bully as before, always taking advantage of Xiaoshu and eating his cookies,” she slaps Jingyan’s shoulders with mock reprimand, “Fine fine, Great Granny has enough cookies for both of you. Jingyan...are you married yet?”

“No.”
“Then is there someone you like?”

Jingyan pauses for a brief moment, then nods ever so softly.

“Well you have to hurry up then...tell me, does this person like you back?” asks the wizened great-grandmother with a warm smile.

Jingyan lowers his head and answers with the same smile, “He used to.” [5]

Chapter End Notes

BONUS: On LOFTER, the original site where the Chinese fic was hosted, a very talented artist SemiMage drew an accompanying fanart for this chapter. Click ME to discover its angsty beauty!

“And does this person like you back?”
“He used to.”

p.s. I'm going away for an early weekend, so sadly no updates for the next three days. Please check back on Sunday/Monday depending on your time zone! :)

--------FOOTNOTES--------

1 In the old times, communications and presents would bear the insignia of the household instead of a single person. Jingyan’s gift coming from “Prince Jing’s manor” means that it carries the goodwill of his entire household, which also confers respect towards Lin Shu and his family. His “household” is the entity that speaks for his will, and outgoing communication with its insignia comes with the implicit understanding that Jingyan, as the head of his house, has given permission to the contents. [return to text]

2 See here for more information on the political structure of Ancient China and the duties of each ministry. [return to text]

3 屯田军 (tun tian jun): resident troops; a specific type of military structure where the soldiers’ primary responsibility is to develop and maintain the agriculture of the region where they are stationed, producing sustenance not only for the local communities but also for military use during wartime. Thus, the government can maximize the utility of those troops during both peaceful and warring periods. [return to text]

4 In canon there are two main ranks of prince, 亲王 (first rank) and 郡王 (second rank). I’m borrowing the “rank” translation first used by the English subs at Viki. As I understand it, the emperor’s son would be given the title 郡王 when he reaches adulthood. As he becomes more accomplished, he would be awarded the title 亲王, like
Prince Yu. Jingyan was 靖郡王 (full title, shortened as 靖王) for an abnormally long time in canon. Given his military achievements he should have been promoted to 亲王 much sooner. But it was a way through which the emperor showed his antipathy towards him. It seems that in this fic he was given the title 亲王 some time ago since the emperor is so pleased with him.

5 Chinese pronouns of 他, 她, 它, meaning “he, she, it” all have the exact same pronunciation "ta". So when the Grand Empress is asking Jingyan about his love interest, I’m sure she refers to a girl (though the author uses the male pronoun which is technically acceptable for both genders in an unknown scenario), but he answers with the male 他, quite cleverly telling the reader that he means Lin Shu, but the Grand Empress is none the wiser.
Today, Prince Yu comes home from the Court in an extraordinarily good mood. Banruo takes his outer cape which is slightly damp from the rain and hangs it to dry near the brazier, an expectant smile on her face. Too eager to wait for her question, Prince Yu offers cheerfully, “As I predicted, Prince Jing and Prince Qi would clash with each other sooner or later, even without us interfering! I was right!”

“Your Highness means that they were arguing over the issue of the Qishui embankment?” Asks Banruo.

“Today, Prince Qi requested once again to take some of the capital troops to repair the embankments, backed by a dozen officials from all three ministries involved. He insisted that restoration must be completed within the month to avoid a major disaster. Of course he didn’t get his way even after a heated debate with Prince Jing, and received a severe tongue-lashing from His Majesty. You should have seen Prince Qi’s face at the end of the session-- he was white with anger!” says Prince Yu, unable to suppress his mirth at this turn of events.

“That’s odd,” Banruo replies, her mind barely pausing at the lives at stake in Qishui, “Prince Jing has supervised water and utility projects on more than one occasion before, how could he not know the dangers of a compromised embankment?”

“He knows for sure; he is against it only because he knows that His Majesty would never allow the capital troops to be moved,” Prince Yu takes a sip of his warm tea and continues, “the farmlands downstream of the Qishui river are the major producer of crops for the capital. The farmers are still diligently working despite the threat of a flood for the sole purpose of supplying us with food for the next year.”

He scoffs, “Jingyan, on the other hand, insisted that ‘Judging by the weather now, we should have a dry summer.’ I even asked the palace astrologists and they confirmed that we are in the year of the water and we will surely have plenty of rain. I don’t even know how Jingyan was so convinced. Well, we shall see how he justifies himself when the river floods in the summer.”

“Prince Jing is taking the emperor’s side on this matter. He would receive a few harsh reprimands at
most, surely nothing serious,” Banruo muses.

“That’s why Prince Qi was so indignant today, saying quite clearly that ‘Whether you are the royalty or a high-ranking official, your privileged position above hundreds of thousands of people obligates you to safeguard their lives, in whatever scenario with whatever means necessary! No one can accurately predict whether we will have a wet or dry summer, how could you gamble with this many lives?’”

Banruo concedes, “Prince Jing was practically raised by Prince Qi, now they differ so much in opinion, Prince Qi must be understandably upset and disappointed.”

“I hear that last night Prince Qi called Jingyan to his manor and chastised him, yet today Jingyan still spoke his mind, not a sign of backing down,” adds Prince Yu.

“I never knew that Prince Jing was so well-versed in the art of argument, I’d like to witness it for myself someday.”

“Eloquence only gets you so far. Those uptight and righteous officials can only be won over by true virtues. With this incident, some of Jingyan’s supporters are already displeased with him. It seemed that only Shen Zhui was still composed, many others in the Ministries of Works and Justice were quite upset.”

“Then this might be a chance for Your Highness to entice a few into our fold. Perhaps we will even discover Prince Jing’s secret. We used to have Hua spies in every noble’s manor, with the exception of Prince Jing. He moved into his manor rather late, and all the servants were hand-picked by Consort Jing. Now his place is like an impenetrable iron fortress, we have no way of getting any information on him,” Banruo suggests.

“We should have used this opportunity to cut down Prince Jing,” says Prince Yu, rubbing his hands together with mild regret, “I don’t understand it, Xia Jiang’s beloved mistress was killed by Prince Jing, why was he so bent on eliminating Prince Qi instead?”

Banruo sighs softly, her voice gaining a cold quality as she says, “Why else? Prince Qi is loudly calling for the abolition of the Xuanjing Bureau, while Prince Jing opposes his proposal. In the end, Xia Jiang values power and position over my Princess’ life.”

“Anyway, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Let’s use Xia Jiang’s hand to rid ourselves of Prince
Qi first. Jingxuan is not a threat, his mother the Noble Consort Yue could be potentially troublesome... As for Jingyan, if I can have Lin Shu’s support, then I can send a dagger to his heart by Lin Shu’s hand,” Prince Yu contemplates his plans with gleeful confidence.

“The Spring Hunt begins in ten days. Perhaps Your Highness could have a talk with Lin Shu, while he is still in the capital.”

-----------------------------------

Lin Shu has not seen Jingyan since that day with the Grand Empress. He knows that everyone changes, just as the leaves brown and flowers wither with time, yet he cannot understand how someone could have changed so irrevocably. He could understand forming factions in Court and contending for the supreme power, but he cannot imagine how Jingyan could have used the lives of tens of thousands of innocent people as a bargaining chip only to gratify the emperor. It goes far beyond what is right or wrong.

Many officials have gone to Prince Qi’s manor to complain about Prince Jing, their relentless accusations all directed at Jingyan. If this was before, Brother Qi would have rebuked them and defended Jingyan, but this time, he stays completely silent, a storm gathering on his face.

Lin Shu is also beyond frustrated; he wishes they could resolve this with a fist fight, just like when they were younger. He wishes to beat Jingyan into a pulp, lock him up in a place without Mei Changsu and force him to learn the morals of being a man.

Yet when he fell to his knees in front of Jingyan that one time, an ocean of separation has already formed between them. For the past few days, Lin Shu finds himself staring at his hands in deep thought. It feels as if it was yesterday that he thought those hands could wield an arrow and a spear, becoming a formidable force against enemy invasions and the umbrella that shields his loved ones from harm. And now? He can only watch as Jingyan walks further and further along this wrong path, a path with a dead end, and he does not even have the right to reach out a hand to stop him.

His eyes following the figure on a horse not too far from him, Lin Shu realizes suddenly that Jingyan has lost so much weight in these past three years.

If it is so torturous a path to walk on, why does he insist on keep going?

Lin Shu is almost sure that Jingyan’s changes are all due to Mei Changsu. When they were younger,
his Jingyan was never the perceptive one-- a trait that often annoyed the emperor-- and would certainly never base his argument on an excuse as absurd as the weather predictions. The one who analyzes the emperor’s thought process to him and the one who feeds him those warped logic must be Mei Changsu.

A thought suddenly occurs to Lin Shu-- something that he has pushed to the back of his mind since he has been so frustrated with the embankment issue-- that day in front of the Grand Empress, Jingyan had mentioned that there was someone who used to like him.

--------------------------------

It is Tingsheng’s first time to go to the Spring Hunt. He rides in the same carriage as the emperor, who still adores this grandson of his, despite the recent disagreements he has had with Prince Qi.

Tingsheng has obediently kept the emperor company, chatting and peeling oranges for him. Sensing that the emperor is becoming fatigued, he pleads with childish innocence, “Granddaddy, I want to go horseback riding!”

“Horseback riding? No, you are too young,” he refuses with a stern expression, which immediately thaws into an amused smile when he sees the disappointment on Tingsheng’s chubby face. “Fine fine, but your Father isn’t here, who will you ride with?” Prince Qi took off after participating in the ceremonies for the Spring Hunt that morning, and went to inspect the embankment situation at Qishui. Tingsheng is left by himself, so the emperor took the lonely child into his own carriage. His annoyance rising at the thought, the emperor says, “What a heartless Father you have, abandoning you here all by yourself.”

“I like Uncle Jingyan’s horse.”

The emperor looks in Jingyan’s direction and nods in appreciation of the dark ebony horse. He teases the child good-naturedly, “Not afraid of your Uncle Jingyan anymore?”

The boy shakes his head.

The emperor remembers that Jingyan had saved Tingsheng three years ago, and nods in understanding, “You may go once we get to the hunting grounds. Right now the roads are uneven, we wouldn’t want an accident to happen.”
The emperor has no idea that the child in front of him was once a distinguished general whose sheer strength and devious strategies made their enemies quiver at his name. He practically lived on horseback, and riding was as easy as walking to him.

He is only anxious to finally meet his Father again after those long days of separation.

--------------------------------

It is already afternoon when they arrive at the foot of Jiu-An Mountain. Once the campsite is settled, all the younger men head to the forest with their bows and arrows for a brief sport. Before they left the capital, the emperor, whose mind is still clouded with doubt regarding Prince Qi, ordered Commander Meng Zhi to remain in the capital to control the troops. No one could dispatch a single soldier without the emperor’s written decree. Instead, Jingyan is charge of leading the protection guards for the Spring Hunt. The emperor has commanded him to patrol the perimeters with the guards.

When he steps out of his tent, Jingyan sees Jingrui, Yujin and Lin Shu in a commotion of sorts. Lin Shu seems to be in a foul mood, apparently irked by something Yujin said, so he is currently chasing a frantic Yujin all around the grounds. The younger boy yells desperately, “Jingrui, help me!! Don’t come any closer, Lin Shu-gege, otherwise I’ll climb onto a tree!”

Jingrui laughs at his friend’s antics, then immediately straightens when he catches sight of Jingyan, dipping his head in a polite greeting towards the prince. Jingyan pauses in his steps towards them and turns in the other direction with his guards.

The hunting grounds are vast. Jingyan and his ten men have split into two teams, and by the time they finish making the rounds, the sun has already set, the bonfires too far away to provide any illumination. They make their way slowly along the perimeter of the forest, making use of the trees to orient themselves.

Zhanying says casually, “Normally during the Spring Hunt, Your Highness and Vice Commander Lin Shu would always fight for the first place.” He realizes belatedly that Lin Shu has not returned to the capital in six years, and “normally” seems like a distant memory.

Jingyan falls into a long silence at those words.

At that moment, a small group of horsemen is advancing towards them, apparently sent from the
camp to look for them. Zhanying recognizes them as Prince Qi’s pugilist friends, who have been his followers for the past few years. Since Prince Qi is not in the Hunt, they are probably here to protect Tingsheng.

“Your Highness,” one of the men trots closer on his horse.

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be protecting the young prince?” Asks Jingyan.

“Actually we are here for Your Highness--” the man’s face twists in a malicious snarl, pulling a wide sword from his sheath and rapidly plunging it at Jingyan.

His movement so sudden and swift, and there is but a short gap between the two horses, Jingyan can only watch as the sharp blade pierces his chest. The sound of metal parting flesh is particularly grating in the dark silence.

Jingyan looks down at the rapidly expanding pool of crimson on his chest. Zhanying’s panicked voice reaches his ears as if obstructed by a layer of fuzzy consciousness. He has died once before, he knows perfectly well those moments as death steadily advances upon him.

He is not afraid of death.

He knows that those three assassins were not sent by Prince Qi. No matter what happens, his brother would never harm him. He needs to let someone know...if the emperor believes that he was assassinated by Prince Qi’s men, then Brother Qi and Xiaoshu would…

“I forbid you to tell anyone...Brother Qi...His Majesty...no one,” he wheezes out each word with difficulty, clutching onto Zhanying’s hand desperately, “Do not tell Lin Shu…”
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here

The aftermath you've all been waiting for! ;P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a half-hearted hunt around the perimeters of the forest, in which they caught a couple of hares, Lin Shu trots back to the camp with Yujin and others. He had hoped that some fresh air would diffuse his foul mood, but every inch of grass on this mountain reminds him of his days spent with Jingyan here, riding horses and discovering hidden paths, no secret nor resentment between them. His mind was so far away that he shot three arrows in succession straight into trees, causing the poor Yujin to suppress his laughter furiously, his face red from the effort.

When they return to the camp, the lights in the imperial tent have already been doused, its occupants asleep.

Wei Zheng finds Lin Shu and says, “Vice Commander, the young Prince Qi came looking for you several times.”

“Where is he now?”

“His Majesty took him back to the imperial tent to sleep. I think he just wanted to ask you to teach him horseback riding.”

Lin Shu nods in understanding and enters his own tent, asking as an afterthought, “What did he say to you?”

“He said that His Majesty wanted Prince Jing to teach him how to ride, but Prince Jing is not back yet. He also said that his three guards never came back after they went to hunt for some hares…”

Lin Shu’s heart lurches, his hand pausing at undoing the cape clasp, “Jingyan is not back yet?”
Wei Zheng glances at the expanding darkness outside and replies, “Yes. He should have been back already from the patrol duty.”

“...Get me Zhen Ping.”

Zhen Ping enters the tent shortly and reports, “Vice Commander, I checked the tent of Prince Qi’s three guards, it was empty except for the bows and arrows.”

Wei Zheng exchanges an alarmed glance with Li Gang, who also happens to be present.

Lin Shu orders without a second of hesitation, “Keep it quiet. Zhen Ping, take fifteen men with me. Split into groups of three, search along the sentry stations. Alert me with signal of the Chiyu division.”

“Yes, sir!”

When they failed to deliver a fatal strike to Jingyan, the three assassins move to kill his entire group. Unfortunately, their skills are no match for the desperate defense put up by Jingyan’s guards, and they make a hurried escape at the next available chance.

Zhanying keeps his hand pressed firmly against Jingyan’s wound, which has already been hastily covered with a layer of powdered medicine, yet warm blood continues to seep out from between Zhanying’s fingers, Jingyan’s face rapidly losing color. He is lucky that the sword did not impale him completely, thanks to the armor he is wearing, but the assassin’s sword was of a bizarre pugilist variety, making the incision ghastly long and wide.

“I’m going to get Vice Commander Lin Shu!” panics one of the guards.

“What good will Lin Shu do?!” Zhanying stops him with a hoarse shout.

“Then what should we do? His Highness cannot be moved now, we’d be waiting here for...for…”
Zhanying clenches his teeth and decides, “Get the imperial physicians! I will take full responsibility for disobeying His Highness’ orders later!”

“...Don’t you dare...!” Jingyan rasps out with his remaining strength, Zhanying’s words barely registering in his foggy consciousness. He wants to grab Zhanying’s arm to stop him but cannot even lift his own.

A chuckle sounds from behind them in the forest, as a man dressed in pale blue robes strides towards them unhurriedly, his arms folded lightly in their sleeves.

All three guards takes a step forward to shield Jingyan behind them, demanding, “Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter who I am, only if your Prince knows who I am.”

“That’s absurd! Who are you? Why would His Highness know you?” The guards have unsheathed their swords, when Jingyan’s feeble voice whispers.

“Lin Chen...?”

“See? Told you he knows me,” the man takes off his hat and crouches down to face Jingyan with a teasing smile, “It’s been a long time, Xiao Jingyan, how did you manage to get yourself so beat up?”

Lin Shu and his two companions gallop along the perimeters of the forest in a frantic search, and before long he hears the telltale whistle of the Chiyu signal coming from the southeast. They swiftly turn around towards the sound.

Li Gang’s group has found the three assassins, who are bound and kneeling on the ground, their weapons confiscated. When Lin Shu arrives, Li Gang hands him one of the swords from the assassins, face grim as he says, “Vice Commander, there is...blood on the blade.”

Lin Shu’s hand gives a sudden twitch around the hilt. The leader of the three assassins recognizes Lin Shu as a frequent visitor to Prince Qi’s manor, and believes him to be the prince’s close
confidant. He opens his mouth to beg for mercy, only to be cut off by Lin Shu’s cold demand, his voice firm and unwavering, “Where is Prince Jing?”

The three assassins heave an internal sigh of relief, the leader shouts with renewed courage, “Prince Jing is a selfish ingrate! He has relentlessly hindered our Lord’s proposal to abolish the Xuanjing Bureau, and now has gone too far!”

The one who stabbed Prince Jing adds indignantly, “Our hometowns are all the Qishui region, repairing the embankment is a top priority! Yet Prince Jing is firmly against it! The three of us were thinking that if we kill him, the reconstruction will happen…”

‘Kill him’, two words that are the worst scenario imaginable of everyone gathered there.

Zhen Ping watches as Lin Shu’s eyes darken with uncontrollable rage and his lips tremble violently without forming a word. Zhen Ping sees the barely restrained turmoil and hurries to demand sharply, “Where is Prince Jing now?”

The three assassins had already prepared themselves for death; they could not bare to watch their hometown be submerged in flood, but when they were at their wit’s end, someone came to them and provided them with one last chance for a desperate gamble. [2]

Once they kill Prince Jing, no one else would oppose the reconstruction of the embankments. It would be for the greater good. With so many lives are at stake, Prince Qi would surely understand their reasons. They also believed that he would spare them out of consideration of their loyal services and genuine motivations. As for Lin Shu, he is so closely aligned with Prince Qi that he would also spare them.

Now, however, when he hears Zhen Ping’s voice laced with obvious concern, the leader raises his surprised eyes and looks at Lin Shu. The latter’s eyes are flaming red, yet those icy orbs hold no warmth in them.

In just a brief peek, the assassin feels his knees go weak with trepidation. Lin Shu has the tip of his sword pointed at the man’s neck in an blink of an eye.

“What did you just say?”
“I...I stabbed Prince Jing.”

“Where is Jingyan now?”

“The...the forest.”

“Which direction?”

“In the direction of the hunting palace...about twenty miles away,” stammers the assassin. Before he finishes the last word, he feels a sharp coldness slice through his neck, and his eyes fall onto Lin Shu’s silvery sword, glinting with crimson blood. Then he feels warmth, the kind of warmth so unfamiliar and scalding that it rapidly seeps through his entire body. The man looks down and sees his indigo-colored robes bathing in a deep black.

The remaining two assassins watch horrified as their companion’s neck is so swiftly severed, they scramble to plead, “We...we didn’t do anything!” “We’ll surrender ourselves to Prince Jing!”

Lin Shu stalks towards them, sword in hand, and without a moment of pause, swings the blade again. His men from the Chiyu division stand by the side as the two heads roll unceremoniously onto the dirty ground; no one utters a word.

Zhen Ping thought Lin Shu was frantic with worry, but hears his frighteningly calm voice say, “Li Gang, come with me. The rest of you stay here to dispose of them. Zhen Ping, you go back to the camp. If anyone asks, we are out hunting in the forest. Have Wei Zheng bring the best medicine to meet us.”

Li Gang is about to speak when Zhen Ping tugs his arm to stop him. He knows what the other man wants to ask. Lin Shu’s plan so far is all built on the assumption that Prince Jing is still alive.

If Prince Jing is already dead, how would this all end? Lin Shu just killed those three men, how would he manage to acquit himself?

Yet Zhen Ping dares not to verbalize any of these questions, because he does not know what would become of Lin Shu if Xiao Jingyan dies.
About twenty miles from the hunting palace, there is a dilapidated hut that used to belong to the patrol soldiers. Lin Shu and Jingyan used to take shelter there when they went hunting at night.

Lin Shu is racing in its direction, Li Gang a few paces behind him. The horses are sweating profusely from exertion, their heavy sneezes forming huffs of moist air in the chilly night. Within an hour, they see a flickering light in the near distance.

Lin Shu reins in the horse and jumps off in a hurry, his legs unsteady as he trips slightly. A guard outside the hut startles at the noise, shouting, “Who’s there?” Seeing Lin Shu’s face does nothing to assuage his apprehension; those three assassins were definitely Prince Qi’s men, who knows what kind of intentions Lin Shu might be harboring towards Prince Jing, after six years of separation?

The guard keeps his hand on the hilt of his sword, as Lin Shu impatiently throws down his own and rushes into the hut.

A coppery, nauseating smell hits Lin Shu straight in the face.

A roomful of people turn their heads at his entrance, but he has eyes only for the person on the bed. Jingyan’s face is white as a sheet, an alarming shadow of red clearly visible even through the layers and layers of bandages around his chest. The chest is still rising and falling softly.

Lin Shu stands like a statue, his eyes fixed on Jingyan with a burning intensity. After an indeterminable moment, his finger gives a twitch and his entire body come back to its senses. Lin Shu opens his mouth to suck in huge gulps of air, his breaths hitching with what seem like desperate sobs.

Chapter End Notes

1Chiyu division: a branch of the Chiyan army that is under the direct command of Lin Shu. They have developed a unique system of communication only known to Chiyu members. [return to text]

2Here the original idiom is 釜底抽薪, which literally means pulling the firewood from underneath the cauldron (to stop it from boiling), i.e. taking a drastic measure to completely eradicate the problem. [return to text]
In case you are wondering, green/cyan/indigo are complementary colors to red, if combined, they make dark grey or black. [return to text]
Lin Chen is sitting by the bed, his pale blue robes stained purple in larges patches. He has his eyes fixed on Lin Shu ever since he stepped in, yet the other man sees no one else but Jingyan. Lin Chen heaves a soft sigh and gives up his spot to him.

Lin Shu approaches the bed rather slowly. Jingyan’s eyes are tightly closed, his breathing barely perceptible. Lin Shu watches him almost obsessively, his fingers digging into the side of the bed where the bloodstains are still fresh and wet. He lifts his trembling fingers to wipe off the crimson liquid on his armor and dimly registers that his hand is as cold as the steel vest.

He has never been so afraid. Not when he first went to battle and the enemy’s sword narrowly missed his chest. Not when he came so close to death himself on Cliff Mei.

Lin Shu hears himself chant repeatedly, “Jingyan, fear not, you won’t die.”

Perhaps his voice has reached the unconscious person on the bed, Jingyan struggles and finally opens his eyes. Lin Shu sees his own distressed face reflected in them.

“Xiaoshu……”

In his blurry awareness, Jingyan remembers the time when Mei Changsu was dangerously ill, and he was tightly holding those frail hands, just like the person in front of him now. Those words Mei Changsu had uttered in his feverish state, words that Jingyan did not hear clearly the first time, suddenly become more and more distinct a lifetime later in his drifting consciousness.

‘Jingyan, fear not…’

But as long as he lives, as long as he still has things he cares about and things he does not want to lose, he cannot truly be unafraid.
So you have come. As long as you are here, I would never be left with no recourse, and I would never be alone on this journey.

Jingyan parts his bloodless lips bit by bit, calling softly, “Sir...Su…”

His call is not answered.

Deep fatigue and incessant pain are tugging at him from two opposite directions, keeping him from sleeping but also from waking.

He closes his eyes tiredly and continues quietly, “Sir Su...Great Granny is ill. If only Mother were here, Great Granny would have been fine...it’s all because of me…”

After a long silence, he hears a low voice reply hoarsely, “It’s not your fault, Jingyan, Great Granny will be fine.”

Jingyan shakes his head minutely. He cannot confide those words to anyone but Mei Changsu.

“It will be fine. Jingyan, you will also be fine,” the voice continues, cold fingers dabbing some water onto his parched lips, “I am here.”

His eyes still closed, Jingyan coughs weakly, and then rasps out each word with reluctant conviction, “Xiaoshu is not here.”

Lin Shu has been sitting like a statue by Jingyan’s bedside this entire night. When the light of dawn begins to pierce the darkness outside and droplets of frost climb up the windows, Wei Zheng enters the hut and reminds him, “Vice Commander, we have to leave.”

Lin Shu makes no move to indicate that he has heard him, his head still turned towards the bed.
“Vice Commander…!” Li Gang also urges, taking a step forward.

“He’s not going to die,” the blue-robed man says casually, leaning against the door frame, “Though he lost a lot of blood, the armor protected him from the worst of the strike. He’s not going to die now if he didn’t die last night.”

At that, Lin Shu finally turns his head to face the man, “Who are you?”

“I’m Mei Changsu,” Lin Chen answers after pinning Lin Shu with a long stare, then adds nonchalantly, “…’s friend.”

“Thank you for saving Jingyan. I need to go back to the camp now, please take good care of him,” Lin Shu bows rather formally to Lin Chen. “One more thing, do you have any drug that could make people have diarrhea or fever?”

“I’m a physician,” Lin Chen smiles mysteriously, adding in a devilish voice, “of course I’ve got tons of drugs to hurt and maim. What do you want to do with them? Knock out all of Prince Qi’s men?”

“I’ve killed everyone who was involved in the assassination,” Lin Shu says emotionlessly, “and I won’t spare anyone else with similar motivations.”

Zhanying, who has been observing on the side, jumps up in a fury and accuses, “You killed them without even questioning!? You were so eager to destroy the evidence for Prince Qi, have you even considered His Highness’ feelings?”

“It was not Brother Qi’s doing. Keeping those men alive would not have brought Jingyan justice anyway, only fanning the flame for whomever orchestrated this whole thing.”

Lin Shu glances at Zhanying, who says bluntly, “His Highness said that since he is in charge of the security around the hunting grounds, it would be within his responsibility to prevent something like this assassination from happening, so he would not report the incident to His Majesty.” He gives a small sneer and continues, “Vice Commander, please feel free to inform Prince Qi so that he may rest assured.”

The lingering smile disappears on Lin Chen’s face and he asks, “Then what are you planning to do with the drugs?”
“If we want to hide the fact that Jingyan has been injured, we need to make all the others sick to avoid suspicion.”

Lin Chen nods and fishes out a vial from his satchel, tossing it to Lin Shu, “Wrap this powder in a pouch and place it under a rock in the upstream of the river near the hunting grounds. The soldiers would be fine from drinking the water, but the more vulnerable nobles will have the diarrhea of their lives until the end of the Hunt.”

“Thank you,” Lin Shu tucks away the vial in his coat. “Please take care of Jingyan.”

Lin Chen raises an eyebrow, “You said that already.”

“Then please take a message to Mei Changsu,” Lin Shu stops in his tracks, his eyes unreadable. “Since he has dragged Jingyan onto this path, he should at least keep him safe.”

“Sure thing,” Lin Chen cocks his head in thought, then admits, “actually, come to think about it, when he was around, Prince Jing was perfectly fine.”

Just a few hours after Lin Shu left, Zhanying receives word that half of people in the camp have taken ill. Everyone from the emperor to the servants have been afflicted with a terrible diarrhea, so severe that they cannot even return to the capital. The imperial physicians are scratching their heads to find the cause, but in the end have to conclude that the excessive rain this season has washed too much mud into the river, which has caused abdominal pain. Their only recourse now is to have some medicine to alleviate the discomfort, but without any other source of clean water, they have to let the symptoms disappear on their own before going back to the capital.

“In the chaos no one would spare the energy to think about His Highness. One of the imperial physicians asked about him, and the Vice Commander said that His Highness went back to his tent last night and also fell ill, he has been resting ever since. The tent is securely guarded by our men,” reports the messenger.

Zhanying nods and asks, “Those three assassins were Prince Qi’s men, what if the young Prince looks for them? Is he also ill?”
“He has a low fever, and has not asked about them. Vice Commander said that if he does ask, we shall say that they received orders to go join Prince Qi in the Qishui region.”

It is three days later when Jingyan finally wakes up.

Lin Chen has changed into a clean set of white robes, he leans casually against the window, humming some unnamed melody with his fan tapping rhythmically against his leg.

“Awake?” He looks down at Jingyan. “I put some stimulant and pain-killer in your medicine, so you should have enough energy to ride in a carriage in a few days’ time. You need a long period of rest when you get back. Making palliative tonics is not my forte, so just take whatever herbs that seem expensive and useful.”

“...Why did you come?”

“You said that you’d let me borrow Xiang Di Ji, I’m in desperate need of a travel guide to take Fei Liu on excursions.”

A mere book would not behoove the Young Master of the Langya Hall to pick it up himself. The only reason he came was to see Lin Shu’s injuries from the Northern battles. He and Jingyan both cannot help but worry when it comes to the North, no matter how slight the injury might be.

“How is Xiaoshu’s health?” Asks Jingyan.

Rather annoyed at having his reasons spelled out, Lin Chen glares daggers at Jingyan, yet the other man has no intention of teasing him, his eyes only full of earnest concern for Lin Shu. Lin Chen swallows a curse and sighs in surrender, “You are so absolutely dull.”

“...What happened to those assassins?”

“All dead,” Lin Chen replies, “Lin Shu killed all three of them.”
Jingyan closes his eyes for a long, silent moment.

“He was rather relentless, though I don’t think there would’ve been a better way to deal with them than what he did,” says Lin Chen.

“......”

“Do you still think that the Lin Shu of today shouldn’t have killed them?” Lin Chen asks with his eyebrows raised, “As long as he is involved in the Court, you cannot expect him to never dirty his hands.”

Fingering the porcelain jade pendant from his fan, Lin Chen sighs softly, “Besides, you were not the only reason for which he did it.”

Jingyan agrees calmly, “For the sake of Brother Qi, even if he didn’t kill them, I would have.”

“Though your Lieutenant Zhanying was very upset with him, thinking that he was covering for Prince Qi and ignoring your predicament.”

"Brother Qi would never kill me, someone else wanted to plant discord between us,” Jingyan then says, frowning deeply, as if making the most difficult decision, "but if he comes again, I will not see him.”

Lin Chen hears the underlying meaning and probes, “Are you really going to use this incident to break ties with Lin Shu? You know that soon your reputation will be in tatters and your name detested by all, that’s why you are so eager to alienate yourself from him now, saving him from being sullied by your sordid dealings?”

“......”

“Have you thought about the consequences of those sacrifices you are making? The way I see it, just have him help you, after everything is settled, even if you can’t stay in the capital, the two of you can just go travel the world together.”
Jingyan shakes his head, “Although he has always longed for the pugilist life, the way of the nobles still suits him more. Being the Chief of the Jiangzuo Alliance at the time was little more than a strategic move, not truly his heart’s desire. Plus, he still has his family…” [2]

“Basically you don’t want him to become even a little bit like Changsu,” Lin Chen cuts him off, “Xiao Jingyan, you know that Mei Changsu did not materialize out of thin air, and those devious strategies were not sent to him in a vision by the gods?”

He lowers his head and caresses the jade pendant in the shape of an intricately carved plum blossom, “Inside Mei Changsu reside the spirit and soul of Lin Shu.”

“...That doesn’t sound like something the Young Master of the Langya Hall would say.”

“Do you think the reason I’m telling you all this is for your sake?” Lin Chen pushes himself from the window, advancing towards Jingyan with a somber look, punctuating his next words sharply, “Changsu asked me at the end to look after you in his absence. And I’ve kept this promise for my entire life. I thought twenty years were enough.”

When the clock dials back, everyone is alive, yet there is still no Mei Changsu.

The Young Master Lin has always been a proud man, never willing to suffer any loss in a bet. But for this promise with Mei Changsu, he has suffered a lifetime.

Jingyan tells him, “Twenty years are enough.”

“Doesn’t count when you say it.” Lin Chen pauses on his way out, turning his head slightly to say, “I made this promise with Mei Changsu, it has nothing to do with you.”

Chapter End Notes

--------Today's footnotes are all Chinese 101 ^_^ ------------------

1Here the Chinese original is “你知道将来自己要身败名裂万劫不复，便要在此时和他撇清关系，让他独善其身”, if you are somewhat familiar with the Chinese
language, you’ll know that it uses a lot of four-word idioms. xD
1. 身败名裂: lit. position/social standing destroyed and reputation ruined, used to
describe utter defeat as a consequence of (usually) a bad deed.
2. 万劫不复: lit. Cannot be recovered even after ten thousand cycles of reincarnations
(lifetimes).
3. 独善其身: originally means that one should focus on improving oneself if one
cannot become a politician in the court. The modern meaning is preserving oneself with
no regard for others. [return to text]

2 Family: the term Jingyan uses here is 高堂, lit. high room, which is a very antique
way of referring to one’s parents. It comes from the fact that in ancient times, the head of
the household and his wife reside in a room in the center of the manor, its base and
ceiling are a little bit elevated than the rest of the rooms. Hence people would use the
term “high room” to refer to their parents in conversation with others out of respect for
them. [return to text]
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

You've found your Easter egg today! :P A lot of things are happening in this chapter, including some crucial details setting up for a huge event very soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lin Chen does not linger long on Jiu-An mountain and takes his leave soon afterwards. “There are too many important things happening in the world for me to be absent,” he says. Now that there is no Jiangzuo Alliance to act as peacemaker in that vast region, he is bound to worry a lot more.

“I’ll leave you a pretty boy to keep you company while you recuperate; Lin Shu would probably wring my neck if I leave Gong Yu here, so Pretty Boy it is!” He winks at Jingyan. Unlike in the past life, when Jingyan’s safety was ensured in the capital by the quasi-omnipotent Chief Mei of the Jiangzuo Alliance, this time there is no martial arts expert to protect him from harm.

Jingyan gives a curt nod to the other man, indicating his tacit understanding of the things unsaid behind Lin Chen’s flippant words.

“I’m off!”

“Take care.”

On his way out, Lin Chen brushes against the young Prince Qi, who has just gotten off his horse and is making his way into the hut rather hurriedly. When Lin Chen passes by, the young Prince stops in his tracks and bows a deep, formal courtesy towards the other man’s retreating figure, his downcast eyes brimming with more than a lifetime of gratitude.\[1\]

After bidding goodbye to Lin Chen, Jingyan hears the sound of an approaching horse again. Thinking that it is Zhanying, he opens his mouth to greet him but is abruptly overcome by a violent coughing fit. Every cough tugs painfully at his fresh wound; Jingyan feels as if Death’s executioner
is dragging a dull blade across his chest repeatedly; even his fingers are spasming uncontrollably, too shaky to pick up the cup of water on the table to quell the coughs.

Then, a cup of warm tea touches his lips, the hand holding it tilts it carefully for Jingyan to sip slowly. After his coughs have subsided, the person helps him to drain the entire cup. Jingyan swallows the tea and catches his breath, forcing himself to open his eyes and sees Tingsheng by his side with the cup in hand.

He is as calm and collected as ever, as if the sight of Jingyan just now has done absolutely nothing to disturb his composure. There is no anger nor resentment, no sadness nor pity. In Jingyan’s memory, he has never seen Tingsheng shed a single tear; not when they first met in the Servant’s Prison, where the young child struggled for survival amidst relentless torment, not when he was overwhelmed by malicious judgment when Jingyan first adopted him. Even later, in the face of great emotional ups and downs, of the deaths of people around him or his own, it seemed that Tingsheng never lost his unwavering self-control.

Even in the past life when Jingyan was on his deathbed, Tingsheng was kneeling by him quietly, chatting about the most inconsequential things.

“You came.”

“Fei Liu-gege escorted me here,” Tingsheng settles himself on the edge of the bed, pouring Jingyan another cup of warm tea and proceeds to update him on the situation in the camp. “The morning after you were injured, three guards disguised themselves as the assassins and left the camp on their horses. I said that they went to Qishui as per Prince Qi’s orders, nobody questioned further. As for other matters...Lin Shu has everything under control, though it’s far too early to let our guards down, so he’s completely tied up and cannot make time to come here. Tomorrow Meng Zhi will arrive with the imperial guards, and they will escort the emperor and the nobles back to the capital.”

Jingyan nods, “I see.”

“Father,” calls the five-year-old child, his eyes fixed on Jingyan’s face.

Jingyan meets his eyes. In his feverish dreams, he saw Mei Changsu. The man was still dressed in his usual white robes, a fur cape draped around his shoulders; he was leaning lightly against the brazier with his eyes half-closed, a gentle smile on his face as he listened to Jingyan’s every word. Perhaps only in dreams would Jingyan see him, who was telling him kindly, 'Great Granny’s illness is not your fault, Jingyan, everything will be fine.'
When he woke up, Jingyan thought the dream was a manifestation of those long years of deep guilt, bottled up and unable to be liberated. Or perhaps it was because in this time around, everyone is leading a happier life: Tingsheng is by Brother Qi’s side, Mother is keeping Noble Consort Chen company, and Lin Shu is still that brilliant, talented Vice Commander dominating the battle fields with the Chiyan army.

So the only one who would keep Xiao Jingyan company is Mei Changsu.

“Uncle, you miss Sir Su, right?” Tingsheng asks, reaching out a hand to grasp Jingyan’s, which is freezing to the touch despite the heavy blankets, “You can talk to me about him.”

Jingyan is silent for a very long moment, then he nods imperceptibly.

---------------------------------

Since Jingyan is still weak from the injury, Tingsheng does most of the talking, recounting stories of the past slowly. He peels away the hard, spiky outer layers of memories of those difficult times and leaves behind just the soft fruit inside, radiating with warmth and bliss.

After Tingsheng had reached adulthood, he would still visit the palace on a regular basis to engage his Father in a game of go and light conversation. It was during those times that he learned a lot about Mei Changsu and about Lin Shu. Tingsheng himself had very little contact with Mei Changsu, except those rare occasions on which he visited the House of Su when Jingyan was already the Crown Prince.

It was then he started having doubts about Mei Changsu’s true identity. He had always had a vague sense of skepticism; the first time when he met Mei Changsu was also the first time Jingyan had met him. Ever since then, each word Mei Changsu had uttered would be laced with an unconscious defense in Jingyan’s favor. The man himself probably had no clue he was doing it, just like he was always rubbing his fingers together in deep thought subconsciously. Whenever Jingyan’s name came up in conversation, his expression would soften ever so slightly with a tenderness that a mere strategist would never harbor for his Lord.

Mei Changsu had said that Prince Jing was not someone who would easily admit defeat. No matter what happens, no matter how onerous or painful the burden might be, he would march straight ahead. That’s why he needs a person to watch his back and clear obstacles in his path.
At the time, Tingsheng did not understand why Sir Su’s eyes filled with sorrow when he said this. In Mei Changsu’s mind, Xiao Jingyan should not have had to worry about any of this. Wherever he was and whichever path he might be walking on, Lin Shu would be there, walking alongside him at the same pace, not letting him falter or anyone else to harm him.

Alas, even the omniscient Mei Changsu would never have foreseen that now, while Lin Shu is indeed here, Xiao Jingyan is still very much alone.

“That’s when I realized that Father liked hazelnut cookies,” Tingsheng says with a smile, “Sir Su would always have two plates of pastries, one by his side for himself, the other untouched on a nearby table that Father always used.”

The conversation continues to flow like this for the rest of the night, father and son cocooned in a rare moment of happy reminiscence.

The sharp edge of the pain from the wound seems to have been dulled by the memories, Jingyan glances at the first light of dawn outside and bids to Tingsheng, “You should go back.”

Standing to leave but pausing abruptly, Tingsheng turns back around and starts to explain, “Father, the assassination was most definitely not the idea of Prince Qi—”

“I know,” Jingyan replies, raising his arm slowly to pat Tingsheng’s hand gently, just like how any father would soothe his child, “Don’t worry...there will not be a day when you are caught between me and Brother Qi. I have never seen you cry in the past, and I hope to keep it that way.”

Tingsheng nods silently. His father’s expression does not waver when he says those words, yet in his mind, he is most likely thinking that if such a day were to come, he would be the one left behind.

He does not know that if such a day were to truly come, Xiao Tingsheng would not hesitate one bit. He also does not know that in the past life, when he passed away, Tingsheng had wept for the entire night kneeling by his bed, hands frozen into fists around Jingyan’s robes.

-----------------------------------------------
Another day with pouring rain. A group of Prince Qi’s personal guards have just finished unloading bags of sand for the construction, and are gathered around the manor’s entrance, chatting about the imminent threat of flood. Many of these men’s families live in the farms just outside the capital, thus the embankment issue at Qishui is an especially sensitive topic.

The emperor has not completely recovered from the Hunting trip, so he has bid Prince Qi to supervise the reconstruction project at Qishui, which is the reason for which a dozen or so officials from the Ministry of Works have congregated in the manor today. The entire team is working nonstop to shorten the duration of the project, rushing to have the embankments repaired before the start of summer.

In the midst of their frenzied calculations, the guards’ conversation drifts into the room, finally pushing one of the officials over the edge. He slams down the stack of papers and erupts, “We are here slaving away to find a solution, yet they are bemoaning their fate already at the sight of some showers! We all pray to the heavens to for one fewer raindrop, but what good is that?! The reality is that if His Majesty agrees to dispatch even one third of the capital guards to help, we wouldn’t have a problem at all! It’s barely past spring and it’s already pouring like mad! Some places of the embankment are already at the breaking point! Whoever said that the river would not flood, we should relocate his manor to Qishui and see what he says then!”

The indignant words are like a spark thrown into a haystack, instantly igniting the already volatile atmosphere.

Another person chimes in, saying, “This time even Prince Xian is holding himself neutral, not to mention that Prince Yu has privately helped quite a bit. The only one firmly in the opposition is Prince Jing. Shen Zhui in the Ministry of Works has also remained silent. Without those two, His Majesty would surely not have any reason to resist our proposal.”

“Yes, Prince Jing has certainly made his opinion known in every single matter of the Court.”

“Humph, the only time we wouldn’t hear from him is either because he is struck by lightning or is on his deathbed.”

Suddenly, the door bangs open, accompanied by a distant rumbling of thunder. The sound startles everyone in the room to pause in their discussion, turning their heads unanimously towards the door.

Lin Shu stands in the open doorway, his eyes blazing with a frightening flame of a hardened warrior. His gaze sweeps across the room as he strides inside. The Vice Commander of the Chiyan army has no weapon in hand, nor is he dressed in anything but plain, casual robes befitting his youthful status,
yet he is radiating with oppressive power, an aura that instantly transforms the crowded room into a battlefield.

It feels as if he is advancing on them with sword in hand, ready to take a life.

Everyone in the room are civil servants who have spent their lives with only pens and books, no one has ever witnessed the horrors of war. They are all awed into silence, some shivering slightly in trepidation.

Prince Qi follows Lin Shu into the room, his eyes suspiciously red and his usually amiable expression absent. He introduces Lin Shu to everyone and announces that he would be in charge of transporting the necessary provisions for the construction.

The few officials who have not yet met Lin Shu all bow to him in greeting. During the subsequent discussion, although some continue to voice their discontent, no one dares to mention Prince Jing’s name again.

--------------------------

While Jingyan is recuperating from the injury in a mostly comatose state for the next fortnight, something crucial happened. The Xuanjing Bureau has arrested a Hua woman, which in and of itself would not arouse too much interest, if not for the fact that she claims to have come to the capital to seek family.

Now that would be odd, since all the Hua people should have been expelled from the city three years ago without exception.

After several rounds of interrogation, the woman confesses that the persons she is looking for were supposed to be in Prince Qi’s manor. Three years ago during the cleanse, Prince Qi protected them out of consideration of their long years of service. She came looking when there was no further intel for three years. When she arrived at the capital, she discovered that those two women had already been dismissed from the Prince’s household due to a transgression.

A few days ago after a morning Court session, Prince Qi heard from Lin Shu that Jingyan had been seriously injured during an assassination attempt and is still on bedrest. If the case of the woven vest comes to light, Jingyan would surely be called into questioning.
So when the emperor sends an envoy to ask about those Hua maids, Prince Qi merely replies that they were condemned of theft, and he then discovered their Hua identities so he swiftly sent them away.

The emperor seems to have dropped the subject, until ten days later, Xia Qiu and Xia Chun of the Xuanjing Bureau receive a confidential imperial decree to search Prince Qi’s manor at night.

Tingsheng is aware that Lin Chen gave a special tonic to Jingyan before he left, which can be used in critical circumstances to dull the pain and sharpen the senses. He heard that the emperor has only called one Court session since they came back from Jiu-An mountain, on the day after their return, and that Father had attended in his terrible condition.

Tingsheng does not know how his Father managed to endure the entire session, but he does know that after that day, Prince Jing’s entire manor has been closed to visitors.

Prince Qi has heard the whole account of what happened during the Hunt from Lin Shu, and has made numerous attempts to visit Jingyan, but was turned away every time with the same excuse, “Prince Jing cannot have any visitors due to illness.”

Tingsheng has felt something amiss when Prince Qi was called into the palace regarding those two Hua maids, and ten days after that, the guards in the manor have reported seeing moving shadows around the halls. Upon closer inspection, they found nothing except some faint signs of activity in the study.

Unable to quell his unease, Tingsheng tries to piece together the puzzle from a few fragmented clues, but to no avail. He cannot even discuss it with anyone else.

When Xia Jiang steps into the water pavilion, he is greeted by a smiling Banruo. Prince Yu gets to his feet in the inner room and bows towards the other man, obviously pleased, “My Mother told me yesterday that His Majesty has secluded himself in his chamber and refused all meals ever since his audience with you, Master Xia. I knew that our plan had succeeded.”
Xia Jiang nods slightly and says, “Then please accept my congratulations, Your Highness, you are one more step closer to the goal.”

Prince Yu pours the man a cup of tea himself, looking up with a simpering smile, “Jingxuan is no threat, but there is still a Jingyan, perhaps Master Xia has plans in mind?”

“I have already stated earlier that helping Your Highness eliminate Prince Qi has nothing to do with the fight for the throne,” Xia Jiang does not take the proffered teacup.

“I have been completely open and honest with Master Xia, but it seems that my sincerity has not been reciprocated. Do you truly believe that Jingyan, who was practically brought up by Prince Qi, would leave the Xuanjing Bureau untouched if he ascends the throne?”

“That is not within my consideration. When a prince becomes the emperor, he would soon realize that the Xuanjing Bureau is a necessary institution to trust and to use without reservation,” Xia Jiang replies, his expression calm and undisturbed, “Your Highness has been recruiting many talented followers lately, compared to Prince Jing, who is steadily losing support due to the Qishui case. Your Highness is in a much favorable position, no?”

Banruo notes the building tension between the two and hurries to interject, smiling, “Master Xia, please try the tea, His Highness had it specifically prepared as a gesture of gratitude.”

Prince Yu straightens and bows again, “I extend my most sincere thanks for Master Xia’s help this time.”

“Do not mention it. Your Highness was the one to devise the ingenious plot, all I did was to merely facilitate the process, sending the witness and the pouch to His Majesty.”

“One maid might have been explained as a coincidence, but since both women were dismissed at the same time from his manor, Prince Qi could not even pretend not to know their Hua identity. His Majesty would never have believed it,” Xia Jiang continues, “this time Prince Qi has truly handled things very smoothly, admitting honestly that he knew they were Hua, which incidentally was quite a convenient excuse to send them away. Wanting to spare their lives despite knowing their true identities does sound like something the merciful Prince Qi would do.”

“The issue is how much does he really know of their position within the Hua community?” Banruo smiles, a devious glint in her eyes, “The woman who was arrested had confessed the nanny’s real
name—she used to work closely for both my Mistress and Princess Linglong, even if His Majesty has not met her, he most likely remembers her name. It’s extraordinary that someone who knew so much confidential information could remain in Prince Qi’s manor for three whole years after all the other Hua have been exiled, it makes one wonder if she bribed for his protection and where she and her companion ended up after being sent away that night.”

“My Mistress’ death is still a secret. I am unsure of the reason for which Xiao Jingyan has concealed the information, but His Majesty is most definitely unaware of her death,” Banruo continues, “this actually works in our favor; now that these two women have left the capital, His Majesty would naturally deduct that they have gone to seek their former Mistress, or rather, seek her out on behalf of Prince Qi. Of course, the key to the puzzle would be that pouch Xia Chun would have found when he went to search Prince Qi’s manor. Now that would be an irrefutable evidence— a letter to Prince Yu from Princess Linglong herself.”

“Finding this pouch in Prince Qi’s place means that His Majesty’s deepest secret has now been exposed, to none other than his most talented and promising first son,” Prince Yu smirks. “Everything would derail from there; often the unresolvable questions are those that cannot be verbalized. This issue involves His Majesty’s most tightly concealed past, from now on he would become more and more suspicious of Prince Qi but cannot confront him to ask if he knows the truth. Therefore, Prince Qi’s every action would fall under careful scrutiny and his smallest mistake criticized.[5] All we need now is a gentle wave, and the entire ship would capsize.”

The conversation draws to a close, and Xia Jiang bids his goodbye after draining the tea.

When he is out of sight, Banruo asks in a low voice, “Would Your Highness be implicated in this plot?”

“No. I have not seen Prince Qi since those two maids were expelled,” says Prince Yu, and then chuckles lightly in self-deprecation, “Plus, it’s not yesterday that His Majesty is guarded towards me. As long as I have the blood of the Hua in my veins, as long as their name still exists in this world, he would never let his guard down, and he certainly would never consider letting someone of Hua blood succeed him.”

Prince Yu lets out a sharp laugh, adding, “If he has other options.”

“He also likes to draw his own conclusions. Rather than thinking that Brother Qi confiscated the pouch to use it against me someday, he would assume that it’s a bargaining chip for the naming of the Crown Prince. After all, the letter was penned by my Mother’s own hands. As long as it exists, His Majesty would never sleep undisturbed.”
“It’s a pity that we cannot frame Lin Xie this time. Ever since he left for the Western borders, it seems that he has cut all ties with people in the capital, except for regular reports to the emperor.”

“Lin Xie has always made clear his hatred for the Hua, His Majesty would not believe that he would help any Hua in this matter. Our interference would be unnecessary and incur his suspicion,”[6] Prince Yu soothes the upset Banruo, “Besides, I still wish to save Lin Shu for my use.”

“As brilliant a military prodigy as he is, I don’t believe that Lin Shu would ally himself with us.”

“Really? During the Spring Hunt, he came to visit me while I was ill and we had a great conversation. Perhaps you are reading too much into it?”

Banruo lower her eyes in contemplation. Lin Shu seems as innocent as they come, his eyes clear like water. During that visit, she couldn’t see his expression from behind the screen, but something in his voice gave her pause at a certain point of the conversation.

It was when Prince Yu was asking about the other princes...Banruo jerks from her musings and asks, “How is Prince Jing these days?”

“Jingyan?”

“Has he been attending the Court sessions lately?”

“His Majesty has been unwell and only called one session recently. Jingyan was also there. He seemed pale but otherwise fine, though everyone seemed sickly from the Spring Hunt. I haven’t seen him out and about lately, the word is that he is ill. I say that he is taking shelter from the rain-- every time it rains, those people from the Ministries of Works and Revenue are jumping over each other in distress,” Prince Yu turns to face her and comments casually, “looks like those three people you were trying so hard to persuade did not end up assassinating him.”

“On the second day of the Hunt, someone saw three people leaving on their horses, bearing medallions from Prince Qi. There has been no word of them since. The timing seems right, perhaps their attempt failed or they backed out last minute and escaped.” Banruo bows in apology, “Please forgive me, Your Highness, the majority of our spies have been lost, we are truly tight on personnel right now. I apologize for not being able to garner more information.”
“No matter, you can use that clever brain of yours on other issues for me. When I was ill during the Spring Hunt, I remember that Lin Shu had sent along some medicine. Give me some suggestions for what to gift him in return.”

Banruo thinks for a moment and answers, “A man of the military would like weaponry, but most weapons are not easily replaced. A spear ornament[7] would be too insignificant, what about a bow then?”

Chapter End Notes

Phew, I think I died more than once and forced myself back to life during this chapter's translation. I hope the plot is clear, do comment down below if you have questions! This is a transition chapter that's laying the foundation for much to come. :)

----------------Footnotes---------------------------

1 To clarify a bit about Tingsheng’s title, here translated as “young Prince Qi”, the Chinese original is 世子 (shi-zi), which is traditionally a title given to the firstborn son of a royal Prince or a high-ranking noble lord, e.g. marquis. The status confers eligibility to inherit his father’s title when he reaches adulthood. This is a different title from Mu Qing, who is called 小王爷 (xiao wang-ye), literally “little or young prince/lord”, since his father the older Lord Mu has already passed away. If his father was still alive, Mu Qing would have the same title “shi-zi” as Tingsheng. Now, if you remember this tiny little detail from canon, Xie Yu has two sons, Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi, but his heir apparent is actually the younger Xie Bi since Jingrui is considered the son of two families, so Xie Bi has always been addressed as the Marquis’ “shi-zi”, with all the accompanying responsibilities such as greeting guests, managing the household in his father’s stead, etc. That’s why Jingrui, despite being the oldest son, has all the freedom to roam the pugilist world with his bestie Yujin. :D [return to text]

2 Water pavilion: 水阁 (shui ge), perhaps a pavilion built on top of or on the side of a lake or any body of water. Here I’m pretty sure it’s referring to the same place as in the TV show where Prince Yu and Banruo had a secret meeting with Xia Jiang to formulate plans to eliminate Prince Jing and Mei Changsu. [return to text]

3 Xia Jiang says in the original “我只是顺手推舟” (shun shui tui zhou), lit. pushing the boat along the current, or making use of an already favorable situation to further one’s agenda. [return to text]

4 Qin Banruo’s Mistress is Princess Xuanji. She was one of the closest disciples of the princess, hence she address her as “师父” (shi-fu), which I will translate as Mistress
from now on. See footnotes of chapter 13 for detailed backstory of the two Hua princesses. [return to text]

5动辄得咎 (dong zhe de jiu): the slightest action, positive or negative, would incur severe criticism; used to describe a precarious situation where one is treading on thin ice. [return to text]

6Prince Yu says that Lin Xie and the Hua are 不共戴天 (bu gong dai tian), which literally means “cannot live under the same sky,” indicating deep and ongoing mutual hatred. 画蛇添足 (hua she tian zu): lit. adding a foot to the snake in a drawing, meaning unnecessary/superfluous actions that usually lead to embarrassment or worse. [return to text]

7Spear ornament: 枪缨 (qiang ying), is a red tassel-like fabric wound around the top of the spear, just below the blade. One speculation for its use is that it acts as a sponge to absorb the excess blood when the warrior pierces his opponent’s body with the blade at the tip, so that the pole remains clean and no blood drips onto the warrior’s hands to hamper his grip. [return to text]
In order to avoid suspicion from Prince Yu and the emperor, Jingyan used the medicine Lin Chen gave him and forced himself to attend the court session merely a day after their return to the capital. Fortunately, years of military life have bestowed him a strong physique and iron will, and since everyone else was also under the weather, no one saw through his guise.

When he finally makes it back to his manor, Jingyan nearly loses his footing at the gate, and is caught by Fei Liu before he collapses.

What follows are long days of feverish sleep. The medicine from Lin Chen seems to have calming and analgesic components; Jingyan fell into a deep sleep, dreaming of many people he has missed.

In those short bursts of wakefulness, all he does is eat and drink. Fei Liu seems to have gotten strict orders from Lin Chen, slapping his hands away whenever Jingyan reaches for the pile of reports. He would stuff Jingyan’s hands back under the covers, saying firmly, with childish seriousness, “Be good! Eat more! Sleep more!”

Chastised against reading and no sleep is forthcoming, Jingyan blinks in the darkness and thinks back to what Meng Zhi said when he came to visit earlier. Nothing seems amiss with the two Hua women and Brother Qi’s response to the emperor’s questions, yet Jingyan cannot help but feel that he has overlooked something crucial.

Although Meng Zhi holds immense power as the Commander of the imperial guards, there is very little he can do when it comes to the Xuanjing Bureau. The information Tingsheng sent along via Fei Liu is also too fragmented to make sense.

Thankfully Xia Jiang does not have anything on Lin Shu at this point; to him, the one person that he is dying to eliminate is Prince Qi. [1]

If it were him, he could probably piece together an entire picture from those scattered leads…

As Jingyan’s eyes grow heavier, Fei Liu suddenly snaps his head around to look outside the window in alarm, yet there is no tension in his body, indicating that whoever has come does not harbor malicious intentions.

Fei Liu is already familiar with Meng Zhi and can recognize his footsteps.

Then it must be Xiaoshu.

Lin Shu has climbed over the walls again. Before, he never bothered evading the servants because once upon a time, Lin Shu was never considered a guest in Prince Jing’s manor.
Now, however, he can only carefully make his way around the guards and towards Jingyan’s rooms. Before he even reaches the door, he feels a sharp gust of wind rushing towards him. Lin Shu blocks the attack instinctively. He pauses when he realizes that the person in front of him is no more than a child.

“Name,” the boy asks simply, raising his head to look at Lin Shu.

“I’m here to see Jingyan.”

“With name, you are guest.”

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Pretty Boy.”

Lin Shu clasps his hands in a light bow, nodding formally, “Master Pretty, my name is Lin Shu.” [2]

Fei Liu instantly perks up; many people would laugh at his name, this person not only does not laugh, he has also called him a Master!

He must be a good man.

Alas, “Lin Shu is no good.”

Lin Shu is puzzled, “Why not?”

“Lin Shu no good!” Fei Liu cannot explain the reason, he only knows that the Buffalo in the room told him not to let Lin Shu in. He clenches his teeth in frustration, “No good!”

“You heard me wrong, I’m not Lin Shu, my name is Lin Su, S-U--” his eyes glitter with mischief, “Jingyan is injured, I’m here to visit him.” [3]

“Lin Su...Su-gege!” Fei Liu’s expression wavers, an unnamed emotion grips him as he feels a sudden kinship with the name, he calls again, “Su-gege!”

He really likes that name.

Since this person is not Lin Shu, Fei Liu lets him in.

Fei Liu watches as Lin Shu sets down a package on the table and then settles himself by Buffalo’s bed. He lifts the bedcovers to check the injuries, and spends the next hour sitting like a statue. When Buffalo shows no sign of waking up, he gets up and leaves.

When Fei Liu goes back into the room, he comes face to face with an awake Buffalo, whose expression so distressing that Fei Liu feels his own heart clench.

He opens the still warm and fragrant package. Inside, stacked in neat piles are freshly-made hazelnut cookies.

Three days later, word from the palace has it that due to illness and weakened mental state, the emperor has authorized Prince Qi to govern all matters of the Court in his stead.[4] The news ignites a round of fierce debate amongst the officials, Prince Yu and Prince Xian have even kneeled outside the palace to petition for an audience, but to no avail.
Thankfully, Prince Qi has a highly regarded reputation as a competent leader, so no one voices dissent at the arrangement.

However, after hearing the news from Meng Zhi, Jingyan immediately presses the man in concern, “Did Brother Qi see His Majesty then?”

“It looks like His Majesty is quite seriously ill, even the decrees were spoken from behind his bed curtains. These past few days no prince has been to see him, even Noble Consort Yue and the empress were not able to meet with His Majesty.”

“Has His Majesty agreed to an audience with Brother Qi?”

Meng Zhi looks up puzzled, not grasping the nuanced difference between these two questions, so he answers honestly, “The orders I received were to seal the imperial palace, not admitting anyone...that would include Prince Qi.”

“Then is there a written decree stating that Brother Qi has the full authority to govern the court?”

“I have not seen one...There is a written decree with the same thing I just said, ‘names him as his proxy.’ Your Highness, please do not worry too much, Prince Qi is familiar with Court operations, and most of the officials would happily do his bidding, I am certain that he would handle everything with ease. Over the years His Highness has led various projects to completion, every single one of them executed to perfection.”

“......”

“Your Highness is a seasoned warrior, you should know the severity of your injury this time. Please take time to rest, we still have Xiaoshu in the capital, he would help out if something does come up.”

Jingyan turns to Fei Liu, as if not having heard Meng Zhi’s words, “Take a message for me to Prince Qi’s manor, tell Brother Qi to please come see me tonight.”

“Ok!”

Prince Qi arrives much earlier than anticipated. Jingyan sits on the bed dressed in his proper outer robes, his face having gained some color after another dose of medicine. When he sees his brother, he mentions no word about the assassination and steers the conversation in lighter directions, asking about Princess Qi and the young prince.

His brother’s gaze has been fixed on his chest from the start. Frowning deeply, Prince Qi opens his mouth several times to say something, only to trail off uncertainly, his face crumpling.

Jingyan has never seen Prince Qi looking so lost and perplexed before. In all his memory, his brother has always been gentle and graceful; even in the prison cell, the guards said that he shed his royal robes with dignity, never losing his poise in the face of death. He was the one who made Jingyan understand that royal birth and privilege had nothing to do with a noble heart.

Yet that calm and collected person now has worry written all over his face for Jingyan.

Jingyan averts his eyes, unable to bear the anguish on his brother’s face, and forces out the words, “I hear that His Majesty is ill and has made Brother his proxy in Court?”
“That is true.”

“Have you considered the possibility that he is not really ill?”

Jingyan knows their Father. Although he was never the favorite child, he still received paternal attention from time to time.

But before being a Father, he was first and foremost the emperor. As long as he is still sitting on the throne, he would never allow anyone to covet that position.

As a son, Jingyan respects him, but as a subject, Jingyan does not trust him.

He has also held the Imperial Seal in his hands, its intricately engraved stamp dictating everyone’s fate, he knows the weight it carries and the power it wields.

As an emperor, Jingyan did not want any of it, yet his Father would gladly exchange everything for its possession, including his paternal heart and human goodness.

That day in the Great Hall, with the tip of his Father’s sword pressed against his chest, Jingyan had firmly said that he would not become a second Prince Qi.

“Jingyan, are you making me doubt our own Father?” Prince Qi holds his brother’s gaze and continues with conviction, “I know what you are worried about, but I must trust him. Because if even we-- the closest people he has-- do not trust him, then he would truly be the most lonely man in the world.”

The most lonely man? He was once that person...

Jingyan closes his eyes. What an unsurprising answer. If Prince Qi had hesitated even one bit at the question, then the thing that all of them have been fighting for all these years, Yan Que, Lin Xie, and Mei Changsu, would be for naught. For Prince Qi, the bedridden person in the palace is not the emperor, but his aged and frail Father.

If Jingyan’s fear comes true and this turns out to be a trap, then tonight would be the last time he and his brother could sit together like this. If he were honest with himself, he called his Brother Qi here not only to dissuade him, but also to see him one last time.

He will give his Brother Qi everything he desires.[6]

Before they part, Jingyan gives into his instinct and wraps his arms around his brother in an embrace, just like when they were younger.

Prince Qi is afraid of putting stress on his wound and settles for gently patting him on the head, “The wound must hurt quite a bit...I haven’t seen you cry these past few years.”

Jingyan startles. It does seem like a long time ago since he last cried.

In the past life, after he was nineteen, he had shed tears for Lin Shu, Prince Qi and those lost souls of 70,000 Chiyian soldiers, but never for himself.

In this life, everyone around him is alive and well. There is nothing to cry about.

-----------------------------------------

Prince Yu carefully selects a silver bow from his storage, its delicate limbs covered in intricate
etchings of feathers.

“This bow was made by a renowned craftsman, Jingyan once wanted to have it years ago. It should meet the most scrutinizing standards of Lin Shu,” he says.

Prince Yu sends an envoy with the bow to Lin Shu, rather pleased with himself. Unbeknownst to him, another bow arrives in Lin Shu’s hands at the same moment, delivered by none other than Lie Zhanying.

He is holding a long box, in which lies the crimson iron bow that used to be proudly displayed in Jingyan’s room, a bow that is now severed cleanly in the middle by a sword.

Chapter End Notes

One of those days, my footnotes will exceed the length of the actual chapter. (Then you’ll know that I need help XD)

------------------------I AM FOOTNOTES ON STEROIDS--------------------------

1 Orig: 眼中钉肉中刺 (yan zhong ding rou zhong ci), lit. a nail in the eye and a thorn in the flesh, used to describe an intolerable annoyance/obstacle, often a person, that has to be removed. [return to text]

2 Lin Chen’s name for poor Fei Liu is 小美人儿 (xiao mei ren er), which literally means little pretty person. 美人 (mei ren) is a genuine and politely accepted compliment for a beautiful woman (yep, usually just women), but when you add “er” to the end which is a diminutive often used in nicknames, the whole term becomes a bit flirty and facetious. It’s either an endearment a man would use for his lover behind closed doors, or more commonly, a catcalling word in less respectable situations, e.g. a brothel. Lin Chen takes it a step further and adds “xiao” (small) at the beginning to make the name more appropriate for Fei Liu’s age. So here Lin Shu is actually addressing Fei Liu as 小大侠 (xiao da xia), which is a bit of an oxymoron since it literally means “small big master.” In the pugilist world, “da xia” is respectful term for an accomplished martial arts expert. [return to text]

3 Lin Shu purposefully says “Su” to confuse the poor boy, since Shu and Su sound so similar, and I believe it was mentioned somewhere in canon that the dialect in the capital often confounds the two sounds. The interesting thing is that for any given pronunciation in Chinese there are more than a dozen different written words to choose from, yet Lin Shu opts for the exact same word as in Mei Changsu’s name, which is 苏, and he explains in the text “苏 (su) as in 苏醒 (su xing)”, also picking the one meaning out of several for the word 苏 that is “revive” or “come back to life.” :) [return to text]

4 The proper term is 监国 (jian guo), lit. supervise the state, which is a method used in Ancient Imperial China where the emperor appoints either the Crown Prince or a trusted high-ranking official to govern the court in his stead, whether because he is away from the capital or physically unwell. Towards the end of canon, Jingyan was the 监国太子
(Crown Prince who governs the court) since the emperor was in declining health but still alive. In some occasions, this term is also used to describe a proxy who rules in the emperor’s stead when he is too young to make decisions, e.g. the young son who ascends the throne after his Father’s unexpected early demise, the proxy would be either a powerful close relative or highly respected official. Either way, having a proxy is not a decision lightly made, because that person could easily abuse the power to further his own agendas. [return to text]

5Meng Zhi says that with political matters, Prince Qi will be 游刃有余 (you ren you yu), lit. there is extra wiggle room for the butcher’s knife when inserted between joints, i.e. expertise comes with practice. It’s used to describe when someone handles something so skillfully that not much effort is required. [return to text]

6Jingyan actually uses the word 成全 (cheng quan), which has slightly different meanings depending on the context. The most common one is “fulfill someone’s wish,” or “do someone a favor,” though it usually carries a slight self-sacrificing element to it, e.g. "the situation is fraught with obstacles, but I will find a way to 成全 your wish." Here Jingyan simply says he will 成全 his brother, without specifying in what exact aspects. My interpretation is that he will give Prince Qi the best possible ending in every way.[return to text]
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Prince Qi takes over the duties to govern the Court, things run smoothly for several weeks. Until one day, dark ominous clouds begin gathering on the horizon before the sun even rises, the entire city is enveloped in a blanket of humid heat. A storm is coming.

The sky shows no sign of clearing well into the afternoon, rather, it has become more obscured; it is still before sunset, yet one would almost need a lantern to illuminate the paths.

Officials from the Ministries of Works, Revenue, and Defense have all gathered in Prince Qi’s manor, their grim eyes fixed on the dark sky outside, an oppressive silence amongst them. When night falls and the group begins to scatter, the first person to step outside the door gasps and quickly ducks back inside, “It’s raining!”

Such a simple statement plunges everyone into deep despair. The rain begins slowly yet steadily, and quickly evolves into a heavy downpour. Some officials have invited a couple of astrologists to the meeting, and their unanimous prediction is that the rain will intensify and persist for days. [1]

Prince Qi then sends for the Palace Astrologists, who come to the same conclusion as the ones before them, saying with conviction that the storm will only escalate instead of ceasing.

If this were true, the half-repaired embankments would surely not be able to withstand the sudden flood, putting the lives of hundreds of thousands at danger in the Qishui region.

Everyone turns their expectant eyes onto Prince Qi.

“Our only recourse now would be to dispatch the capital guards to hasten the construction in the downstream areas, while evacuating the residents.”

“Your Highness is only the imperial proxy, without possession of the military token to freely move the troops,”[2] protests one of the officials.

“Many of the capital guards have family in the Qishui region, including the generals. In the beginning of this quandary, their commander had sent a letter indicating their willingness to cooperate if His Highness requires their service.”

“Well...the problem is that dispatching the troops without the token constitutes an offense as small as defiance against His Majesty, as severe as high treason!”

One person chimes in, “There is word that His Majesty is comatose, if His Highness cannot exercise his full rights as the proxy and guard the kingdom against harm, His Majesty would surely dole out punishment when he wakes.”

Another person disagrees, “Moving the troops without explicit permission is a serious crime. Her
Majesty the Empress should have been the one with authority during His Majesty’s illness, but since she has chosen to pray for His Majesty’s health in the Imperial Temple, I imagine she would not grant an audience to Prince Qi.”

“So the only thing we can do now is to wait?” sighs another.

“Perhaps we can convene with the other princes, if they are all in agreement with the plan, His Highness would not bear the entire blame if His Majesty decides to punish the responsible party.”

“Have the commander and vice commanders of the capital guards come to see me at once,” Prince Qi’s voice rings out quietly, quelling the entire room of rambunctious arguments.

“Your Highness!”

“Your Highness! At least wait until daybreak…”

“Now,” he orders firmly with his back turned to them.

“Yes, Your Highness,” the soldier hesitates and ventures, “What about the Imperial Guards and the Chiyan army?”

Prince Qi turns around and shakes his head in denial, telling his butler with absolute resolve, “Take a message for me to the House of Lin.”

This bow had been scratched in two places in battle, Lin Shu had sent it to a workshop he used to frequent to be repaired before he left for Cliff Mei. In that life, however, he never came back to retrieve it.

When Jingyan returned from the East Sea, the entire House of Lin had been sealed, all of its possessions confiscated. The owner of the workshop had given Jingyan the bow in secret. Since then, it had claimed its place in Jingyan’s study, no one else dared to touch it, not even the cleaning maids. Its owner disliked strangers touching his things, so Jingyan had always been the one to polish it on a regular basis.

This time around, Jingyan had asked Lin Shu for the bow before the other boy went to the East Sea. Lin Shu had agreed without a moment of hesitation. Jingyan rarely asked him for anything; sure, there were things he liked, but few of them he genuinely wanted to possess. He was the type of person who would forget his own birthday.

Lin Shu had etched his name “Shu” on the back of the bow as a mark of ownership. When Jingyan took it from Lin Shu’s hands, he noticed a newer mark in the shape of his name right next to Lin Shu’s, “Yan,” freshly carved.

He had stood there with the bow in his hands, eyes unblinking on those two words that were tightly pressed against each other.

Lin Shu had flashed him a smug smile, saying, “If anyone gets hold of this bow many years from now, they’ll probably think that the owner was named ‘Shu-Yan’.”[3]

Inside the house, Lin Shu stands by the open window looking out onto the rapid raindrops beating down from the sky, distant thunders resonating in his ears. Princess Jin Yang[4] comes up from
behind, silent as she watches her son subconsciously stroking the two etched words on the severed bow in his hands.

“Xiaoshu, a messenger from Prince Qi came to deliver his word, ‘Tell Meng Zhi and Lin Shu, do not move a single soldier on their side’.”

When she heard the message, she instantly understood Jingyu’s intentions. She knows that her son and the fearless soldiers of the Chiyan army would want to help, but she also knows that she must convince Lin Shu not to take his men to the Qishui region. Now more than ever, the Chiyan army must remain a force that can only be commanded by His Majesty, it cannot show the slightest inclination to follow a mere man of the Lin family.

She is still deep in thought, racking her brains to formulate a way to dissuade her son, when she hears him say, “Mother, please rest assured.”

“Xiaoshu…?”

“I understand your concern and Brother Qi’s worry, though it is a bitter fruit to swallow,” Lin Shu turns around to face her, his face lined with contempt yet his voice steady, “I have already sent Wei Zheng to the base this afternoon, no Chiyan soldier will step one foot outside its gates. As for Brother Meng, I trust that he will handle things accordingly.”

Silence stretches between mother and son. Princess Jin Yang notes absently that a blanket of new grass has sprouted overnight, the heavy rain beats down on them, making relentless sounds of impact.

“Mother, will the rain stop?” Lin Shu asks.

“Yes,” she replies in a calm and resolute voice, wishing with all of her might that her prayers will be answered.

As a Princess of the Liang kingdom, she prays for the people of Qishui, but also for her son and that name etched into the bow.

If Qishui is flooded, there would be a gaping abyss constituted of thousands of lives between Xiaoshu and Jingyan, one that could never be mended.

Lin Shu has always been unapologetically extroverted since his youth, making friends with everyone and anyone, regardless of class, age and profession. He is constantly surrounded by people from all walks of life, from warriors to poets, from salesmen to officials, even questionable charlatans.

But Xiao Jingyan is different.

“Mother,” Lin Shu suddenly turns around and kneels formally in front of Princess Jin Yang, his eyes filled with steel resolve, “I wish to stay in the capital.”

This is also her wish, but at this moment, the part of her as a mother recognizes the determination shining in her son’s eyes. She tries to suppress the quiver in her voice as she asks, “Have you decided?”

“Yes.”

“…Whom will you help?”

“Father has always supported Brother Qi.”
“So you will follow your Father’s path? You do know that regardless of whether the rain will stop, Prince Qi’s fate has already been sealed from the moment he decided to dispatch the capital troops. Now, he probably…” she frowns and bites back the rest of the sentence, unable to utter the words ‘will not have a chance at the throne.’

“I would help him for the precise reason that he made the decision despite its possible consequences. If Brother Qi were someone that would forfeit the lives of the Qishui people only to preserve his own position, then what difference would it make if Father supported him instead of Prince Xian or Prince Yu? As for being punished…the Crown Prince has not been named yet, there is still time.”

Princess Jin Yang listens quietly to her son and senses that he is not finished yet, she awaits patiently. After a long pause, she hears him say in a barely audible voice, “And Jingyan, he is alone in the capital, I must protect him.”

His hand clenches tightly around the broken bow, as if molding it into his own flesh.

The capital troops have been dispatched in their entirety, rushing to Qishui through the darkness of night. Half of the soldiers immediately begin helping with the construction of the embankments, and the other half are bringing people who live in the downstream region to higher grounds.

During this time, rain has persisted but not intensified. The water of Qishui river surges downwards, grazing past the top of the embankments by mere inches, yet not a drop spills out.

By the afternoon of the second day, the repairs have yet to be completed, but the thick clouds that were obscuring the entire sky are beginning to disperse, rays of sunshine peeking from their gaps. The downpour has gradually slowed to a soft drizzle.

By sunset, the sky is completely clear.

Everyone is absolutely dumfounded, their faces pale with the distressed realization that Prince Jing was right. Some even pray desperately for another rainstorm, which would be preferable to the consequences Prince Qi would surely face.

“Your Highness…what should we do now? Who knew that the rain would stop…”

Prince Qi’s calm relief comes at a sharp contrast to the distraught faces around him. He says, “It is a good thing that the rain has stopped. Since the troops are already out there, have them finish the repairs. Shen Zhui, can you shorten the duration a bit more?”

“Yes, Your Highness. We have all the necessary supplies here. If everyone works nonstop, we can complete the basic repairs within five days, and leave the rest of the work to the local troops.”

Everyone had thought that Shen Zhui remained neutral on this issue because of Prince Jing, and assumed that he would deliberately delay the preparations for the construction, yet unbeknownst of them all, he had everything ready. They turn their eyes to him with a newfound sense of respect.

Even Prince Qi smiles in approval, “Jingyan has recommended you to me very highly on several occasions, I shall leave this to you then,” he address the rest of the officials, “Please rest assured, if His Majesty were to blame anyone, I shall take full responsibility.”

The emperor finally wakes up from several long days of coma, only to see both the empress and the
A few curt questions later, he finds out that Prince Qi has taken command of all the capital troops. He is momentarily stunned into speechlessness by this sudden news. To be honest, he handed Jingyu the power of the imperial proxy not only as a test, but also with the intention of unmasking his ulterior motives.

He had not expected such blatant act of defiance. His gaze falls on the pouch from Princess Linlong, sitting innocuously by his bedside. 

Or perhaps...an act of treachery.

A violent shudder runs through the emperor as he almost stumbles off the bed, feet still bare, he shouts hoarsely, “Where is Meng Zhi?? Where are the Imperial Guards??”

Meng Zhi has been waiting just outside the chambers, and hurries inside at the summons, falling into a kneel, “The Imperial Guards at all standing by, awaiting Your Majesty’s orders!”

His eyes red and bulging with urgency, the emperor demands in a shrill and sinister voice, “And Lin Shu? Is the Chiyan army still in the capital?”

“Chiyan army?” Meng Zhi blinks in bewilderment at the question, “Lin Shu should be home. The Chiyan army has been doing exercises for the past months, no one has left the base.”

The emperor pauses for a brief moment, then nods slowly.

“Are the troops back?”

“No.”

The emperor’s anger spikes anew at the response, he points a shaky finger at the window, “NO?! The sky is clear, what reason does Xiao Jingyu have to use my troops?! Is this his kingdom or mine?! I was ILL, not DEAD!”

“Prince Qi has been kneeling outside...awaiting Your Majesty’s punishment.”

The emperor is slightly taken aback, not expecting the subject of his fury to be so close by, “What’s he doing here? Doesn’t he have hordes of officials waiting to congratulate him on his generous deed? What’s he doing in my palace?!”

“Prince Qi has been here since last night, on his knees the whole time.”

The emperor hurls the porcelain bowl of medicine across the room, its still warm contents splattering everywhere, “He’s kneeling there because he wants to! For the sake of his people!”

Meng Zhi presses his lips together and ducks his head.

“...You are dismissed. Tell Prince Qi to go back as well, go back to his manor.”

Meng Zhi hesitates for a second but decides to press on, “Your Majesty, what about the troops?”

The emperor heaves an annoyed sigh and says, “Summoning them back now would only further ingratiate him to the populace and darken my own image. Just keep them there. Let them take their time with the repairs, I don’t even care if they don’t come back. Meng Zhi, have Lin Shu gather the remaining men of the Chiyan army and let them guard the capital. I shall leave the security of the
palace in your hands, as usual.”

Three days later, the emperor finally summons Prince Qi. It is a private audience with just the two of them, father and son, yet it is taking place in the solemn Great Hall.

The cavernous room seems far too empty without its usual occupants, leaving just the emperor, dressed impeccably in his imperial robes on the throne, looking down at his kneeling son from the raised dais.

After a long silence, the emperor opens his mouth, his voice unhurried, “Jingyu, you may explain yourself if necessary.”

“I have nothing to say. Seizing control of the capital guards without explicit imperial decree constitutes a serious offense. I plead Your Majesty for permission to leave the capital with my wife and child.”

The emperor freezes in confusion, thinking that he had heard wrong, so he leans forward and asks, “What did you just say?”

“Moving the capital guards without a decree, regardless of the motivations, has violated the laws of the court, even as a Prince.”

“Are you testing me?” The emperor feels as if his frustration has reached a boiling point, so he settles on a dark chuckle, “Then let me tell you in plain words, you have my permission. I will give you a land with splendid scenery, you may go there.”

“…” Prince Qi bows, “I thank Your Majesty for your generosity.”

“Jingyu!” The emperor rises to his feet, legs a bit unsteady as he points at his son, “What you are doing is not making a strategic retreat to boost your chances, but backing yourself into a dead end!”

“…” Prince Qi feels the sharp chill from the marble floor creep up from his knees to the rest of his body, freezing every inch on its way.

“You will never become the Crown Prince, do you understand?!” The emperor’s voice cracks, desperate disbelief tinging its every syllable.

The part of him as a father is weeping. Yet the part of him as emperor is still suspicious: no prince could remain unswayed by the temptation of the throne. Such a person does not exist. Especially not Prince Qi; he is so close to that supreme power, closer than he or any of his brothers was, decades ago.
“I knew the consequences when I decided to dispatch the capital troops.”

“Yet it did not rain. Knowing that now, do you feel regret?”

“I could not take the risk with eight-thousand lives at stake. Whatever the price might be, it was something that needed to be done,” Prince Qi concludes, and without waiting for further response from the emperor, he prostrates himself once again in a formal bow, “I bid Your Majesty goodbye. I wish prosperity for the Liang Kingdom and a long and healthy life for you, Your Majesty.”

The emperor spends the next two days in a daze, sitting in a listless state in Noble Consort Chen’s residence. Then his cold takes a turn for the worse, keeping him bedridden for another two months.

For more than a fortnight, he keeps waking up from recurring nightmares every night, covered in cold sweat but with no recollection of the dream itself.

The only thing he remembers is that in the dream, he keeps calling someone a traitor. But when he wakes up, no matter how hard he tries, he cannot conjure up the image of the traitor’s face.

During those days, he fears the approach of nightfall, because when he dreams, he sees a man in pale grey robes walking towards him, his steps unhurried. He can see every feature on the man’s face clearly, yet he does not recognize him.

Until one day, Eunuch Gao, who comes to check on the emperor during the night, sees him flail his arms in agitation, eyes still closed but his face twisted in an anxious grimace.

“Your Majesty, Your Majesty!”

The emperor snaps out of his nightmare and his eyes are still twitching with lingering terror, he takes several deep, calming breaths and snatches Eunuch Gao’s sleeves, demanding, “Do you know anyone by the name Su Zhe?”

Chapter End Notes

Footnotes just keep getting longer, don't ask me why xD

--------Come and learn the wonders of Chinese--------

1 Term used here is 方士 (fang shi), who is alchemist of sorts. The most traditional and common kind immersed himself in making tonics and using various superstitious techniques to achieve immortality. Later, their practice expanded to many other areas, such as exorcism, fortune reading, etc. Many of them then adopted Taoist philosophies into their actual practice, so a now a more common term for them is 道士 (dao shi), lit. person who does Tao. [return to text]

2 虎符 (hu fu) is a bronze or gold token in the shape of a crouching tiger used in Imperial China to dispatch the troops. Its history dates back to 7th century B.C., and is usually etched with writing for its purpose. The token is split into two halves, one remains in the hand of the emperor, and the other bestowed to the local official or commander. The emperor would give his half to the commander when he wishes to move troops, and the
decree would not be considered valid if the halves do not fit. Even though Prince Qi is the acting proxy, it would be unthinkable to also leave the token in his hands— that would be akin to giving him political AND military control. (He might as well be crowned emperor already…)

3 殊琰 (Shu Yan): apart from the obvious, this is also the way fans name this Lin Shu/Jingyan ship in Chinese. Lin Shu’s name is first to indicate that he’s the seme (top) in the relationship. (The top/bottom order is taken really seriously in the Chinese fandom, where flipping the letters around, "Yan-Shu" would indicate that Jingyan is the top.) It’s one of the tags I have here for the fic.

4 I don’t believe her name has come up in the translation yet, 晋阳公主 Princess Jin Yang is Lin Shu’s mother. She is the elder sister of Princess Li Yang (莅阳公主), who is the wife of Xie Yu.

5 The description for the emperor’s anger here is 目眦欲裂 (mu zi yu lie), lit. eye socket is about to split open. You can picture someone who is so enraged that his eyes are popping out of their sockets, though in English this kind of expression is more commonly used to describe surprise.

6 朕 (zhen): the royal “I” used by emperors to refer to themselves. It was once used by everyone to mean “I,” but the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, in the 2nd century B.C. claimed the word for himself after establishing his dynasty Qin that conquered all the other warring states, and the tradition has lived on for the next two millennia. Before then, rulers often referred to themselves as 孤 (gu), or 寡人 (gua ren), the former meaning literally “lonely,” and the latter meaning “a person with few virtues or few possessions.” Both stem from the Chinese value of humility and self-reflection, and have roots in traditional Taoist philosophy of balance and harmony: 貴必以賤為本, 高必以下為基, which means “nobility is founded on vulgarity, peak is built upon the base,” i.e. the king has attained the highest possible position of all men, with the supreme power bestowed upon him by the heavens, so he must constantly remind himself to be humble.

7 以退为进 (yi tui wei jin): lit. using retreat as a way to advance. It’s a well-known strategy to confound the opponents with the outward signs of weakness in order to lure them into a false sense of security, so you can make use of their lapse in judgment to further your plans.

8 Orig: 你这么多年在朝上呼风唤雨，如今功败垂成，功亏一篑
a. 呼风唤雨 (hu feng huanyu): lit. call the winds and summon the rain, used to describe an influential power so great that it sways the forces of nature. Here used by the emperor to describe Prince Qi’s hold on the court.
b. 功败垂成 (gong bai chui cheng): a sudden defeat at the verge of success.
c. 功亏一篑 (gong kui yi kui): lit. a deed that falls short of completion due to the lack of a final bucket of soil. The saying comes from some scripture that says “You are only short by one bucket of soil when piling a 72-feet hill.”
Chapter Notes

Do you need more of the fandom and of this fic? Of course you do! Well here comes your drug, the awesome and talented lunatique has made a podfic for this translation!!! I am beyond excited to share it with all of you! <3 She has the most gloriously sweet voice and does such a wonderful job of crafting the different voices that I am left speechless at its beauty. *O*

You can find the podfic here. Three chapters are already up!! Go and download them, they are great for the morning commute! :DD

Annnnyway for this chapter, the Mandarin original is here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as the demotion of Prince Qi is announced in an official imperial decree, the capital has been enveloped in a cacophony of voices. No one in the court has expected Prince Qi to plead guilty in this case, nor did they expect the emperor to be so merciless in his punishment of his most talented and beloved son.

Even with the sentence so clearly etched into the parchment in dark ink, many cannot believe that the most accomplished Prince of his generation will never have a chance at the throne. Such a momentous turn of events could not have happened overnight, yet no one could find the trigger. [1]

Groups of officials have kneeled in the Great Hall in supplication, their written petitions landing on the emperor’s desk one after the next. At first, the emperor is willing to ignore them, but his patience quickly evaporates: he swiftly demotes the loudest of them all, and the others gradually fall silent.

During this whole time, Jingyan is still bedridden, the feverish sleep overtakes him sometimes for half a day, sometimes more. The pain from his wound multiplies tenfold during the rainy season. The physician in his manor has increased doses based on Lin Chen’s prescription, which sends Jingyan into a deep sleep for days to mitigate the pain.

When he finally finds out about the news, things have already been settled. [2]

“What about Lin Shu and Meng Zhi?” Jingyan asks urgently, too fast that his breath catches and he is overcome by a coughing fit.

Zhanying understands his worry and answers, “Neither the Chiyan army nor the Imperial Guards have moved an inch out of place. Under His Majesty’s orders, Vice Commander Lin has been leading the Chiyan to guard the city until yesterday, when the capital troops returned from Qishui.”

“Despite his fury, His Majesty wouldn’t do anything to compromise his own authority,” he continues, “for better or for worse, this matter is finally settled.”

Jingyan shakes his head at Zhanying’s simplistic view-- he did not witness the emperor when he gave tacit permission to Xie Yu to massacre the entire Chiyan army, when he had intended to execute every last member of the insurgent troops who rose against him on Jiu-An mountain. Both
were formidable forces in his military that were the foundation of his sovereignty, yet he wasted no
time to exterminate them as soon as they showed any sign of becoming the sword in another’s hand
that threatened his throne.

Fortunately this time, at least Brother Qi has been preserved.

---------------------------------

On the day of Prince Qi’s departure from the capital, many of his close friends along with most of the
officials have come to see him off. It seems as if all the city’s occupants have flocked onto the streets
to bid him goodbye, their kneeling and weeping figures lining every road that leads to the capital
gates and miles beyond. Many have traveled from Qishui and other surrounding regions upon
hearing the news.

As per the emperor’s orders, Lin Shu is escorting Prince Qi and his family to Chushui to board the
ferry. He rides alongside the entourage, eyes taking in the prostrating crowd by the road, practically
tasting their devotion and sorrow.

The emperor does not care for their lives, he fears only their voice. Yet he has been oblivious to the
fact that commoners are humans just like him, he would never receive their genuine fealty if he does
not treat them with corresponding sincerity.

The populace is like water, they can lift up a merciful ruler like Prince Qi with their reverent bows,
but they also have the capacity to overturn an emperor who has no regard for their wellbeing. [3]

-------------------------------

It takes them a fortnight to reach Chushui. When they have to part ways, the young Prince Qi
suddenly launches himself into Lin Shu’s arms.

Lin Shu hoists him up and holds him tightly against himself. This child has grown up as the center of
attention, Lin Shu had thought that he would make a fuss at this unexpected turn of events, yet
during this whole journey, he has been his cheerful and energetic self, his antics putting a smile on
the morose face of Princess Qi, even Prince Qi would crinkle his eyes in fondness.

“When we meet again, I’ll teach you martial arts and military strategies, would you like that?” asks
Lin Shu.

Chengting shows no sign of interest.

Lin Shu privately thinks that the boy never behaves like a 6 or 7-year-old in front of him.

When he moves to put Chengting down, however, he hears the child whisper quietly into his ear,
“Uncle Jingyan is not one to easily admit defeat. No matter what happens, no matter how onerous or
painful the burden might be, he would march straight ahead. That’s why he needs a person to watch
his back, and clear obstacles on his path.”

“I trip all the time when I’m walking too,” Lin Shu jokes, then adds when he sees the boy’s brows
gather together in annoyance, “Don’t worry, I’m staying in the capital.”

The young prince seems utterly unsurprised, “I know.”

Lin Shu raises an eyebrow and says, “If you knew, why did you have to remind me? What you said
doesn’t sound like something a child could make up, nor something that Brother Qi taught you to
say, so who did?”
“Mei Changsu.”

Lin Shu startles, “You’ve met him?”

“Only a few times.”

“What’s he like? How does Jingyan treat him?”

Tingsheng pauses at Lin Shu’s demanding question which is completely unrelated to their current conversation, his eyes widen slightly as something suddenly clicks in his mind. These past few days have been just awful, he didn’t even manage to see his Father before they left due to various difficulties. Now there is finally something to cheer him up.

Tingsheng curls his lips into a smile, the childish innocence returning to his face as he chimes, “Uncle Jingyan said that Sir Su is a very knowledgeable person, and a gentleman too. It’s a pity that he always visited at night, so I haven’t see him often.”

The emperor’s illness has persisted for days, further exacerbated by the incessant nightmares, so when he hears of the impressive crowd sending Prince Qi off, he is too weak to even utter a furious sound.

However, something happens soon after that forces him out of his sickbed. The usually quiescent Yeqin Kingdom on the Western borders has aggressively expanded their military, the numbers rising to 50,000 within days.

During the past few years, the the emperor has dispatched most of the 30,000 Chiyan soldiers under Lin Xie’s command on the Western borders to various other locations, leaving fewer than 10,000 at their disposal. Even including the other 10,000 local troops, they cannot hope to withstand the rapidly growing Yeqin force. Thus, Lin Xie has sent expedited requests to the capital for reinforcements while evacuating the residents of neighboring towns to Qinglong Fortress, some ten miles away.

The emperor is furious upon hearing the news, and wants to immediately replace Lin Xie’s position with another, only to compromise after impassioned petitions from many officials. Instead, he orders Lin Xie to reclaim the lost towns post-haste.

The situation worsens by the day. Many officials who have defended Lin Xie have been swiftly chastised, while others who have long resented the man for his stellar record of military accomplishments, along with supporters of Prince Xian and Prince Yu seize this opportunity to pollute the emperor’s hearing with all sorts of accusations.

When the malicious comments reach a boiling point, Marquis Yan steps into the Hall, exuding an aura of righteousness and poise, his succinct argument quelling every single dissident voice in the vast room.

The emperor narrows his eyes in annoyance but has no legitimate retort, so he agrees to waive Lin Xie’s punishment, issuing an order for him to stay on the Western borders and recover the lost territory within the month.

Later that evening, since Marquis Yan is spending the rare night at home, Yujin has happily called for a feast, hoping to spend these precious hours with his father, accompanied by good food and wine. Holding an expensive jug of “Zhao Dian Hong” liquor, he barely has one foot in the door when suddenly someone’s head flops down from the roof, two dark, glittering eyes boring straight
into Yujin’s face.

“Arghhhhhh!!” Yujin shrieks in a terrified panic, taking several hasty steps backwards, all the while holding tightly onto the cherished liquor.

“It’s me!” announces Lin Shu smugly as he jumps down from a tree.

“It’s scary because it’s you...Lin Shu-gege,” Yujin wipes away the sweat from his forehead, mumbling, “I wouldn’t have screamed if it was actually a ghost…”

From his peripheral vision, Yujin sees Lin Shu’s mouth quirk up in that exasperating smirk of his, and he feels his heart constrict abruptly, a keen sense of doom wrapping around him. He ducks his head and berates himself silently for deciding to stay in tonight, despite knowing that Lin Shu would be coming; now, there is no Prince Jing to save him from a certain death and no Jingrui to take the fall for him.

“Yujin, please leave us,” Yan Que’s voice comes from the inside, “Since you climbed over the walls, there is no point dwelling over proper etiquettes, come in.”

Lin Shu answers with a respectful “Yes” and snatches the jug of Zhao Dian Hong from Yujin’s arms before making his way inside.

“Our Father and I are the closest of friends, you do not need to thank me.”

“You helped Father out of friendship, justice, and integrity, they are also the reasons for which I thank you,” replies Lin Shu.

Yan Que nods at the bow, then gestures for Lin Shu to sit beside him. Without much preamble, he asks, “You have witnessed your Father’s situation, what do you plan to do now?”

“I would like to ask His Majesty to reassign the remaining Chiyan soldiers in the capital, half will go to the Jicheng army, and the other half to the Imperial Guards.”

“Lin Xie has fewer than 10,000 men under his command, your decision will practically dismantle the Chiyan army.”

“The Jicheng army is highly skilled, and the Imperial Guards are personally cultivated by Commander Meng Zhi, they will only gain more competence at either place. If the day comes that our kingdom requires their service again, they will still march onto the battlefield as formidable warriors. The name of an army is trivial compared to their lives.”

Lin Shu’s blunt and bold statement has the older man nodding in approval, Yan Que says, “Indeed. Although I have busied myself with the way of the Tao, I am not oblivious to court affairs. Everyone marvels at how much Prince Jing has changed over the years, but to me, since we last met, you are no longer who you used to be, either.”

At the mention of Prince Jing, Lin Shu’s expression shuts. This small movement does not escape unnoticed by Yan Que, who heaves an internal sigh and asks, “Then what will you do? Without the Chiyu division, you are no longer the Vice Commander.”

“I would like to apply for a position within the Imperial Guards.”

Yan Que falls silent for a brief moment and then looks up with renewed hope, “This is not a step to take lightly...I see that Brother Lin has not given up on Prince Qi.”
“I have written to my Father and he approves of my decision. He said that Uncle Yan would also like to see a bright and fair future for our kingdom, and has been waiting for the right moment.”

“That’s right, though I have been waiting for too long,” Yan Que accepts Lin Shu’s proffered cup and takes a sip, “Since you will be here, I won’t have to worry when Noble Consort Chen and Consort Jing return to the palace....And Prince Jing too.”

“I know.”

...You do? The Prince Jing of the past would have stood up to petition in your favor against all opposition, but now? Excluding his insistence on more reinforcements for the Western borders, he has stayed silent as the wall during every court session. As a subject and as a friend, are you not disillusioned?”

“Jingyan was the one to ask for your help, right?” Lin Shu says calmly, “I was escorting Prince Qi’s entourage out of the capital and returned just yesterday. Upon hearing about Father, I wasted no time to come and find Yujin, yet he told me you were already on your way back, and that I was the third person to seek you. My aunt and Auntie Jing have been residing outside the palace, without swift access to the latest developments, I imagine that they received word perhaps two or three days after it has already happened. Then the first one to write to you has to be Jingyan.”

Yan Que pierces him with a penetrating gaze and nods, “Correct. I was out visiting a friend, Prince Jing had sent someone to ask Yujin to find me, allowing me to come back in time to save the life of my close friend. You have managed to maintain your integrity during those turbulent times, I am glad. As for Prince Jing, from what I could see across the Great Hall, I cannot claim to understand him.”

Lin Shu lowers his head, the rising steam from the tea on his lap gently misting his eyes, “There are many things I do not understand. The capital in its current state is like a massive whirling vortex, obscuring the vision of those who find themselves inside, but I am absolutely certain about one thing: Jingyan will never harm me, and I will never let anyone else harm him.” [5]

A few days later, the emperor has granted all of Lin Shu’s requests. He is transferred to the Imperial Guards as Vice Commander,[6] while retaining authority over all the 8,000 Chiyan soldiers who have been reassigned as imperial guards. In essence, Lin Shu has gained a promotion, his unexpected turn of good fortune taking many by surprise.

“I thought that the House of Lin would suffer great losses from Lin Xie’s misstep, yet Lin Shu has maneuvered the situation beautifully to his advantage.[7] Keeping a glorious name of an army does nothing but to attract malicious attention and envy, it can only end in disaster; it would be better to part with it now to preserve himself, only then can he have a chance for the future,” Prince Yu applauds Lin Shu’s decision with great relish, “Now that Lin Shu has helped His Majesty resolve this major dilemma while avoiding clashes in the Court, no wonder His Majesty has bestowed such privilege and responsibility upon him.”

Banruo helps him to take off his outer cape, chuckling, “Yet he has kept his distance from Your Highness.”

“As a commander of the Imperial Guards, he serves directly under His Majesty and must limit his interactions with nobles and officials, Meng Zhi is the prime example,” says Prince Yu, “Prince Xian has attempted to bribe him with gifts on various occasions, and has been unceremoniously rejected
every time. He accepted my bow though.”

“...What about with Prince Jing?”

“I actually saw them today. After the Court session ended, Jingyan and I were walking out together when we ran into Lin Shu. He did nothing except the proper greetings, and bumped into Jingyan rather hard when he left.”

“Who would have expected Lin Shu and Prince Jing to be such foes?” Banruo’s lips quirk up in amusement as she imagines the scene.

“He probably begrudges Jingyan for not having petitioned for Prince Qi and Lin Xie. Although I didn’t either, they have been close friends since childhood, it’s within reason for Lin Shu to hope for some kind of intervention from Jingyan...but in the end, it is all in the past.”

--------------------

Lin Shu has carefully calculated his timing. Right when the Court session has concluded, he rounds the corner with a group of guards, making their appearance in front of all the exiting officials. As he expected, Jingyan and Prince Yu are walking towards them in close succession.

Bowing silently towards them both, Lin Shu lifts his eyes to look at Jingyan.

The gaze directed at Jingyan is filled with genuine irritation; Lin Shu really is quite annoyed with him, the man is severely wounded and instead of staying home as he should to recuperate, he is out and about attending the Court! The injury would never heal at this rate!

When he walks past them, he makes a deliberate move to bump his shoulder against Jingyan, of course avoiding his injured side, but at the same time successfully drawing Jingyan’s attention to the sword he is carrying.

The sword itself cannot be more ordinary, yet on the hilt hangs a long ornament, almost too ostentatious for such a common weapon. The tassels sway in tandem with Lin Shu’s steps, light and cheerful like the newly sprouted branches of spring.

Prince Yu cannot contain his smugness at the obvious display of estrangement between the two, and steps forward to make conversation, “Vice Commander Lin has such an unique sword ornament.”

Noticing the fleeting surprise in Jingyan’s eyes, Lin Shu gives a pleased smirk.

Of course it is unique, it’s a gift from Jingyan.

Chapter End Notes

1 冰冻三尺非一日之寒 (bing dong san chi fei yi ri zhi han): lit. three feet of freezing waters are not formed from one day of winter, this phrase is used to describe something (usually bad) that happens as a result of a long period of cumulative reasons.

2 木已成舟 (mu yi cheng zhou): lit. the wood has already been made into boat, i.e. the deed is already done and cannot be undone. There are lots of figurative euphemisms like
this in Chinese, some other ones are 覆水难收 (fu shui nan shou), lit. spilt water cannot be gathered back, 驴马难追 (si ma nan zhu): usually used to mean a promise that once made, even riding on a carriage pulled by four horses cannot get it back. Something a bit more contemporary is 生米煮成熟饭 (sheng mi zhu cheng shu fan): lit. the rice is already cooked, (Chinese words for uncooked and cooked rice are different), which now can be found quite commonly in romance novels to indicate that a girl has lost her virginity to a man so she’d better marry him. [return to text]

This here is actually a pretty literal translation of the original sentence, since the author paraphrased meaning of a very well-known Chinese idiom: 水能载舟, 亦能覆舟 (shui neng zai zhou, yi neng fu zhou), lit. water can make a boat float, it can also capsize it. This philosophy dates back to the Warring States (2nd century B.C.), the renowned thinker and writer 荀子 (Xun Zi) wrote in a treatise that the ruler is the boat and his people are the water, they are the foundation of his authority and they wield the power to dispose of him if necessary. The idea was further cemented by a history of grass-root revolutions throughout dynastic changes. [return to text]

名存实亡 (ming cun shi wang): lit. name exists but actually gone, i.e. exists in name only. [return to text]

This conversation between Lin Shu and Yan Que is an interesting one where the tone of the dialogue evolves with shifting formality in their speech, which doesn’t quite translate into English. Chinese, unlike some other languages in its linguistic group (e.g. Japanese and Korean), doesn’t have rigid grammatical rules for talking with people from different hierarchies, but it is a bit more nuanced than English. First of all, there are two forms of “you”, 你 (ni) which is commonly used in casual conversation, and 您 (nin), which is the respectful version when talking to someone higher in social standing, even elderly family members. Lin Shu has consistently used the latter with Yan Que, as is proper. Also, in the beginning of their conversation, Lin Shu refers to himself in third person by name, instead of using the normal pronoun for I, 我 (wo). This is a little antiquated and adds distance between the him and the other person, which confers a great degree of respect. For example, when the emperor commands him to do something, instead of saying “I understand,” he would say something like “Lin Shu has received the orders,” or “Your subject has received the orders.” Later in the conversation, Lin Shu switches to the regular “I”, 我, when the topic becomes more personal. [return to text]

Lin Shu’s new title, 副统领 (vice commander, fu tong ling), is technically not the same vice commander that he used to be in the Chiyan army, which was 少帅 (shao shuai, lit. young general). The latter implies legacy, where the commander general (元帅 yuan shuai) is most likely his father. But for the sake of keeping things constant in the translation, as the vice officer under Commander Meng Zhi, Lin Shu would be the Vice Commander of the Imperial Guards. [return to text]

金蝉脱壳 (jin chan tuo qiao): lit. golden cicada shedding off its exoskeleton, the imagery describes the development of a cicada as it matures from a light yellow-colored nymph to an adult bug with hardened, brown exterior, the transformation usually happens unobserved by the common person. This idiom means using a clever strategy to escape from a particularly tricky situation without people noticing. [return to text]
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here. More fanart links at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Lin Shu first marches into the palace with Chiyan soldiers who have been newly reassigned as imperial guards, the emperor has a fleeting moment of unease. He cannot pinpoint the origin of this anxiety; perhaps it is because he has never fully trusted anyone, or perhaps it’s because that the Su Zhe in his dreams, regardless of his true identity, seems to be inching closer and closer to him.

His unease is slowly quenched after a few rounds of probing. Lin Shu has exceeded his expectations: ever since his unit of highly trained guards have taken their place around the palace, no disturbances have occurred both within and around its perimeters, even the usual petty crimes seem to have lessened.

Freed from worrying about such small matters, the emperor’s health has notably improved.

Lin Shu has asked the emperor for permission to go visit the Grand Empress in his free time, keeping her company in her old age.

The wizened lady is severely plagued by dementia, she can no longer distinguish her visitors. Today, she clutches Lin Shu’s hand warmly while alternating between calling him “Xiaoshu,” “Jingyan,” and “Jingyu.” Lin Shu humors her good-naturedly and answers to every name.

The emperor is also in attendance as the Grand Empress pats Lin Shu’s hand and chuckles, “Jingyu, do you remember when Jingyan was born, you went to hold him and wouldn’t let go! Oh how you made Jingyan cry!”

Then she adds, “Jingyan, do you remember that time when you and Xiaoshu had a fight, you came to me, all upset, saying that you’d never talk to him again. Then Xiaoshu gave you a hazelnut cookie, and the two of you made up just like that!”

“Xiaoshu, do you remember that one year, so many noble families brought in their daughters for the New Year’s festivities. It was a roomful of adorable seven- and eight-year-olds, we asked you which one was the prettiest, you pointed at Jingyan and said no one was as pretty as he was! All the girls were so mad that they ran after you to hit you, and Jingyan wouldn’t speak to you for days.”

By their side, the emperor’s expression softens at the fond memories, until the Grand Empresses adds, “But I remember that Xiaoshu...you are betrothed right? With…”

“Great Granny, aren’t you worried that my betrothed would run after me to hit me?” Lin Shu winks impishly, patting her hand, “Because I still think Jingyan is good-looking.”

The Grand Empress howls with laughter at that.

Having expected Lin Shu to go along with the Grand Empress and mention Nihuang, the emperor is pleasantly surprised when the man cleverly sidesteps the topic, apparently unwilling to remind the
Grand Empress. A wave of relief washes through the emperor and he says, “We do not have to rush the marriage, but it is time to choose a manor for you. You should have your own place and start living like an adult.”

“I am unsure whether my Mother will permit it.”

“Your Great Granny will speak with your Mother,” says the emperor.

Lin Shu considers his next words with his head cocked to one side, “Your Majesty, may I choose my own place?”

The emperor chuckles with mock reprimand, “I know what you are plotting! What else would you want except a house in the most bustling part of town? Fine fine, you may choose whichever manor that strikes your fancy in the capital, that’ll be your reward for keeping the Grand Empress company these days.”

“I heard that you are moving to your own manor?” Meng Zhi asks as he pushes open the door, genuine surprise in his voice.

Lin Shu nods, spreading the sheets of potential property deeds on the table, “Yeah.”

Meng Zhi peers at the papers and asks, “I heard that early this morning, Prince Xian and Prince Yu both sent men along with their recommendation of several houses, every single one of them spacious and extravagant.”

“And close to their respective houses,” Lin Shu leafs through the deeds half-heartedly, “but I’ve already chosen a place.”

“Already? Which one?”

Lin Shu’s mouth quirks up in a smug smile as he pushes a sheet towards the other man, “The house is already built, after some cleaning, I can move in within a few days.”

Meng Zhi blinks at the deed, struck silent by the sheer coincidence.

“I found it when I was climbing over the walls. It’s separated from Prince Jing’s manor only by a small ditch, but the two houses have entrances facing completely different directions, so the casual observer would never notice their proximity.”

“...Oh...OH,” Meng Zhi nods almost mechanically, the gears in his mind still a bit frozen, “Then are you going to drill a secret passage?”

“What would I do with a secret passage?” Lin Shu asks, perplexed, “I’ll just climb over the walls.”

“......”

A fortnight later, Lin Shu moves into his new manor.

That night, after much tossing and turning and sleep still eludes him, Lin Shu suddenly remembers the words Chengting said when they parted ways at Chushui.

He blinks at the roof with indecision, but eventually peels himself from the bed, grabbing a sweet
melon on his way out and jumps over the walls to Prince Jing’s manor.

The courtyard of the manor is filled with plum trees, only a few lonely peach trees here and there. Jingyan is standing underneath one of the peach trees, talking with another person, who has his back turned to Lin Shu, most of his body obscured by the branches.

At first, both have solemn expressions indicative of a serious conversation, later, however, the man says something that earns a smile from Jingyan. It is but a ghost of a smile, yet it somehow outshines even the peach blossoms gilded with the pale moonlight.

Lin Shu watches, entranced, from his position on top of the fence, then suddenly notices that Fei Liu is crouched beside him, staring unblinkingly at him.

“Your duty is to prevent anyone from entering this courtyard, right?”

Fei Liu nods.

“I’ve not entered, you see. Plus I’m not just anyone, you know my name.”

“Su-gege.”

“...Good boy!” Lin Shu fishes out the melon from his pocket and tosses it to Fei Liu, who immediately digs in with relish.

‘Does that person come every day?’ Lin Shu points downwards silently.

Fei Liu shakes his head, then nods.

‘You mean he’s not here everyday, but comes every few days?’

Fei Liu nods approvingly.

Unable to contain his curiosity, Lin Shu cranes his neck to get a better view. Much to his dismay, the small movement jostles a tile under his feet, and the sound immediately alerts the man, shouting, “Who?”

Lin Shu recognizes Meng Zhi’s voice from just this singular word. He is momentarily taken by surprise, but quickly recovers and waves goodbye to Fei Liu before taking off.

When Meng Zhi jumps onto the fence, all he finds is a content Fei Liu, who has just finished eating his melon, his eyes glittering as he watches the other man.

Meng Zhi’s mood instantly lightens, “Lil’ Fei Liu,[1] so it was you! Good timing, I just finished my business here, let’s go have a spar!”

“Not, Fei Liu!”

“...I really can’t call you by the other name, cut me some slack!”

--------------------------------------------

“That house has been unoccupied for years, I thought if I suddenly purchased it, too many curious questions would be raised. Yet who knew…” sighs Meng Zhi.

“It was originally his anyway.”
“That’s right,” Meng Zhi chuckles, “You know, Your Highness, when I recommended the house to him the first time, it was for that very reason. I even told him, ‘You could find someone adept at drilling passageways, then the two of you could have secret rendezvous!’”

“......Can’t you use another word?” Struck speechless by the absurdity of the image, Jingyan sighs.

“Right! He said the same thing!” Meng Zhi barks with laughter, clapping his hands.

Jingyan pauses at this, then smiles.

Jingyan has never had a dedicated person to collect intelligence for him. His few trusted men are too obvious for the role, and Meng Zhi does not know the first thing when it comes to information gathering, despite him being loyal to Jingyan and in an ideal position inside the palace.

This disadvantage is slowly being remedied when Lin Shu joins the Imperial Guards.

Meng Zhi cannot pinpoint the exact date from which he suddenly becomes the receptacle for an influx of information, some of them important, some of them trivial, some casually mentioned by Lin Shu during their conversations, others relayed to him by his subordinates.

Though he is honest to a fault, Meng Zhi is far from stupid; he soon notices that Lin Shu is passing him these information on purpose.

This entire process is executed with great discretion: although the intelligence has passed through many levels of hierarchy before it reaches him, Meng Zhi has never heard any trace of it in other parts of the palace. Li Gang and Zhen Ping seem to have an extraordinary talent of fishing for information in this labyrinth of a palace.

The next day when he pays Prince Jing a visit, Meng Zhi informs him of this latest development.

Jingyan frowns, “Xiaoshu knows of our alliance.”

“What?” Exclaims Meng Zhi, jumping in surprise, “I didn’t say anything!”

“Then why do you think he would go through such lengths to tell you about the information he worked so hard to obtain?”

“...What shall we do then?”

“The information he passed onto you is a mixed bag, clearly unfiltered. I imagine that he doesn’t know what might be useful to me, so he’s told you everything he hears.”

“But...I remember that Xiaoshu told me...he supports...”

Jingyan cuts him off, his voice resolute, “He is now in the Imperial Guards and no longer enjoys the same freedom as before. He is hoping that I would use the information to protect Brother Qi.”

“He knows of Your Highness’ plan?”

Jingyan shakes his head lightly, “He has merely confirmed from the assassination attempt on me that I wouldn’t hurt Brother Qi.”

Meng Zhi scratches his head in mild befuddlement; to him, it totally seems like Lin Shu wants Prince Jing to be able to protect himself with those information!
It was the same with Mei Changsu. Despite having completely altered his physical appearance and
donning the mask of the strategist who single-handedly transformed the political landscape of the
capital, he had never wavered in his protection of Jingyan. There are things that cannot easily be
changed.

“One more thing,” Meng Zhi lowers his voice, “Your Highness has asked me to investigate what
transpired that day in the Great Hall between Prince Qi and His Majesty. I knew that even Eunuch
Gao was absent that time, but later I discovered that there was a servant who was delivering
medicine to His Majesty, who was feeling unwell. The servant was waiting just outside the Hall.”

“Did he manage to hear what they said?”

“He was too far away, and the doors were closed, so he did not hear much of importance, just when
Prince Qi had already opened the door to leave, His Majesty had casually asked, ‘Have you ever
seen this pouch before?’”

To Meng Zhi, this off-handed question is neither here nor there, so he hasn’t mentioned it until now.
He is honestly a bit disheartened by the fact that days of hard work has only yielded such paltry
results.

So he is completely taken by surprise when Jingyan shoots up from his seat upon hearing it.

“What kind of pouch? Did he see?”

“The servant said he got a close glance when he passed on the medicine. It was a blue pouch with
some kind of cloud embroidery...he also said that His Majesty was in such a furious state that he
smashed the bowl of medicine on the floor, berating him for being late...Your Highness, what’s
wrong?!” Meng Zhi pauses in alarm when Jingyan’s face suddenly drains of color, he hurriedly takes
a step forward to catch the other man’s swaying figure.

“How did Brother Qi respond?”

“Prince Qi had replied no.”

“......” Jingyan feels as if someone had abruptly submerged his entire body in freezing waters, his
limbs completely frozen. After quite a while, he shakes off Meng Zhi’s arms, “You should go back.”

“...Your Highness, is something the matter?”

Jingyan shakes his head stiffly, “I cannot think of anything, you may go.”

Unconvinced, Meng Zhi peeks at the other man’s pale face and muses that perhaps his long visit has
disturbed His Highness’ rest, so he bows and takes his leave.

----------------------------------

After Meng Zhi’s departure, Jingyan remains in the same spot of the courtyard, staring unseeingly at
the barren branches of those plum trees, until well into the night, until the sky is illuminated by the
bright moon, does he make his way inside.

He puts one foot in front of the other mechanically, each step seems to deplete every last drop of
energy from him.

Once inside, he bolts the door and punches the table, hard, again and again.
He does not stop until the open parchments are stained with crimson droplets.

He knows what was inside that blue pouch embroidered with clouds. It was the letter written by Princess Linglong to Prince Yu, containing not only Prince Yu’s true identity, but also the secrets behind the emperor’s rise to the throne.

All those years ago, Banruo took the pouch with her when she escaped from Prince Yu. And when Lin Chen captured her, the pouch fell into Mei Changsu’s hands.

Mei Changsu decided against using it after brief deliberation, “This pouch is like a spark, burning a fire to consume whomever possesses it. Its secrets are the emperor’s taboo, he would kill anyone who knows of it.”

It all makes sense now: Tingsheng had said that Prince Qi’s study seemed to have been searched after the incident with the Hua maids, the emperor’s spies must have found this pouch during their investigation.

It’s not difficult to envision the murderous intentions the emperor must have harbored towards Brother Qi when he found out about the pouch. Especially after knowing that he had usurped the capital troops.

Perhaps it was Prince Qi’s confession of guilt that eased his suspicions, or perhaps he truly did not have the heart to execute his son without mercy, in any case, this seemingly casual question in the Great Hall meant that the emperor no longer intended to kill Prince Qi. However, it also means that as long as the emperor is still in power, Prince Qi would never be named Crown Prince.

It no longer matters whether Prince Qi answered “Yes” or “No” to that question.

Jingyan feels deep fear rising to grip his heart. This time, for himself.

When he found himself in the East Sea after dying in the imperial chambers, he had already planned the route he was going to take. He would amass enough power to reach Brother Qi’s height in the court while curbing the influence bit by bit of the other princes. Then when the times comes to name the next Heir, he would commit a few obvious mistakes, and Brother Qi would naturally be crowned.

It would be a precarious plan that strives for the best possible ending for everyone, but Jingyan has persevered on this path, each step more trying than the next.

After Prince Qi left the capital, his situation has become all the more perilous.

Since Prince Qi had admitted to his crimes and requested the punishment himself, the publicized imperial decree did not go into details of the reasons for his demotion, such as a severe lack of filial piety. Prince Qi still has the staunch support of the Lin family, Marquis Yan and many other officials, if the other princes prove to be unworthy, he could still be called back years later to become the Crown Prince.

If this were the case, Jingyan would need to make absolute certain that Prince Yu and Prince Xian would stand no chance to be named Crown Prince, instead of merely reducing their power. He would not be able to avoid a direct confrontation in cold blood with his brothers, and Brother Qi would never forgive him for it.

He thought this would be the worst case scenario.
Until today, Jingyan was convinced of it.

He would not bat an eyelash to give his life for Lin Shu or Brother Qi, but he also longs to live. When everything is finally settled, even if he cannot enjoy the proximity of his loved ones, he could still watch them from afar.

But not anymore.

Prince Qi ascending the throne is the wish of Lin Xie and Yan Que, of Lin Shu and all the Liang people.

It is also the wish of Xiao Jingyan.

These past years he has forced himself into a dead end by his own hand, one move after the next, all for the sake of this wish.

Now it has become perfectly clear, there is only one path in front of him.

Xiao Jingyan must become the Crown Prince.

Last time, when he entered the fight for the throne, his motivation was to prevent the supreme power from falling into the hands of scheming men like Prince Yu and Prince Xian, now he must keep a firm hold on that seat so that Brother Qi may have a glimmer of hope in the future.

---He has made himself into a disposable pawn.

It is not until the last moment when he disappears from the chess board, has the game truly been won.

Lin Shu comes home after a long day of patrol duty, absolutely exhausted. Just when he is about to collapse onto his bed, he hears someone tapping his window with pebbles.

Opening the window, he sees a distressed Fei Liu eager to get his attention, “Su-gege!!”

It takes Lin Shu but a moment to realize the cause for Fei Liu’s anxiety, he leans out of the window, hands gripping the panes hard, “What happened to Jingyan?!”

Jingyan is drunk.

He is not one to indulge frequently, even on the rare occasions he does drink, he’d just down a few bowls of water and sleep it off, never making a fuss.

Fei Liu has never seen him in this state. Before, when he stayed with Lin Chen, the other man had also never drunk to this excess, so the boy is completely bewildered by the situation.

And Jingyan had sent away his closest guards, including Lie Zhanying, in order to be properly drunk for once. When Fei Liu couldn’t find anyone he usually spoke with, he remembered that Lin Chen said to look for the person who came to visit in the wooden hut on Jiu-An mountain, if anything were to happen to Jingyan.

Lin Shu inches closer quietly to get a better look, heaving a small sigh of relief when he realizes that Jingyan is merely asleep. He cradles the other man carefully against his own body to reposition him...
on the bed, turning his head to Fei Liu and says, “He’s fine, just asleep. You can go and I’ll take care of him.”

“.......” Fei Liu feels an inexplicable sense of trust towards the man in front of him, so after a brief moment of hesitation, he disappears from the window.

-----------------------------------------------

Jingyan thinks he is dreaming of Lin Shu.

Lin Shu’s body is a warm presence against his own, the hands caressing his spine gently and the voice calling his name, again and again.

There are many things he’s always wanted to tell Lin Shu.

‘Actually I have been emperor before, and did quite a good job at it, though you were not there to witness it.’

‘Everyone can say that I could never hope to match the talent of Brother Qi, except you.’[5]

These are words that he’s never even contemplated during his waking hours, now they have materialized in his dreams, yet he cannot utter a single word.

And now he must die.

For the sake of Mei Changsu and the dream for which he has spent more than a lifetime to achieve.

Abruptly, Jingyan sits up from the bed, hands shooting out to pull Lin Shu close by his collar.

Looking into those bloodshot eyes inches from his own, Lin Shu almost believes that Jingyan is going to punch him.

Yet instead of a fist, all he receives is a barely audible whisper in his ear, so fleeting and so soft, with all the poignant beauty of a goodbye.

He says, “Xiaoshu, I love you.”[6]

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE EXCUSE ME WHILE I GO MEND MY BROKEN HEART T^T

Another gorgeous piece of accompanying fanart by the amazing SemiMage here.
Translation:
Ch. 25: "Jingyan, do not fear, you won't die."
Ch. 29: "You've met Mei Changsu? What's he like? How does Jingyan treat him?"
Ch. 29 (second frame): "Of course it's unique. It's a gift from Jingyan."
Ch. 30 (parody): "What should I do when my love interest confessed to me?? URGENT, PLEASE HELP"

--------Footnotes---------

1 Meng Zhi calls Fei Liu with the endearing prefix 小 (xiao), lit. small, which is
generally added to children’s names by their elders. [return to text]

2 引火烧身 (yin huo shao shen): lit. attracting fire to burn oneself, describes a self-destructive act. [return to text]

3 分庭抗礼 (fen ting kang li): lit. bowing at opposite sides of the courtyard. It used to mean when a host and his guest meet each other from the two sides of the courtyard, they perform the same greeting. Now, the idiom describes a situation where two people/forces have equal footing or influence. [return to text]

4 孝 (xiao), or filial piety, is one of the most important virtues in Chinese culture, originating from Confucian scriptures centuries ago. It goes beyond being obedient to one’s parents and elders, and includes obligations such as meeting their mental and physical needs, potentially sacrificing your own gains for their well-being, etc. Being filial is considered so pivotal that being 不孝 (bu xiao, unfilial) was a legitimate crime in Ancient China. On the political level, many dynasties abided by the principle of “以孝治天下” (yi Xiao zhi tian xia), or to rule the world with “Xiao”, where the emperor hoped to indoctrinate his people with the importance of filial piety by being a role model himself, emphasizing that once the children are filial, the family would be happy, and the entire kingdom would be peaceful. Basically this is all to say that being charged with “unfilial” is a serious offense, especially for a prince; it shows the people that he does not possess enough self-discipline to be filial to his own father, how would they expect him to perform his duties as a ruler to his people? [return to text]

5 望其项背 (wang qi xiang bei): lit. watch the back of the other person’s neck, meaning there is no hope to catch up to that level of talent/achievement/capability. [return to text]

6 Literally here Jingyan says “I like you”, with 喜欢 (xi huan) for “like,” since “I love you” (我爱你 wo ai ni) is a very very weighty phrase that ancient Chinese couples most definitely did not use for each other. For the purpose of a love confession, you’d mostly hear “I like you” in TV shows and such, it is enough to indicate romantic interest but nowhere as serious as “I love you”. Ancient Chinese people have perfected the art of speaking in euphemisms, think Romeo and Juliet, they’d write poems to praise the way your dress flutters and liken your eyes to starry nights, but they wouldn’t proclaim their love in any obvious fashion. In fact, talking about love and desire for another person in plain words was a sign of vulgar plebeians, the educated gentleman would never do that to a self-respecting lady. So it means a lot for Jingyan to say even “I like you,” though it’s clearly something he’s regret once he’s sober. (I’m ignoring potentially how historically inaccurate the phrasing is...It’s fanfiction people! And I’m not a historian~) [return to text]
Inside the Xuanjing Bureau, Xia Jiang stares at the map and the short list in front of him, deep in thought.

It’s been a year since the Qishui incident, since Prince Qi had been demoted. He has always been the one closest to the throne, now with him out of the picture, the next ruler of the Liang Kingdom would have to be either Prince Yu, Prince Xian or Prince Jing.

The emperor is not the sole person with a tough decision to make on this matter, the same goes for all the officials, including Xia Jiang himself.

If he wishes for enduring prosperity for his Bureau, he must carefully weigh his options.

Neither of these three princes could claim superiority as primogenito or di-zi, and each has his own set of accomplishments. In the unpredictable political arena of the capital, the past year saw Prince Yu as the leading candidate, Prince Jing followed closely behind, and Prince Xian as the weakest.

When it comes to parentage, Prince Yu is adopted by Her Majesty the empress.

When it comes to political achievements, Prince Yu and Prince Jing are closely tied.

When it comes to support from the officials, Prince Jing has lost the heart of many after the Qishui incident, where he aligned himself with the emperor and paid no heed to the lives of thousands. On the other hand, Prince Yu has donated generous amounts to help repair the embankments, despite his publicly neutral position, winning the loyalty of those who have been disillusioned by Prince Qi’s departure.

Others who have been criticized by Prince Jing and never valued by Prince Qi, including the Lord Qing Guo with substantial military power, have all declared their alliance with Prince Yu.

The emperor has given his tacit permission to the rising influence of Prince Yu in the Court; perhaps a small part of him as father still harbors some tender feelings towards his sons, though a more compelling motivation is the fear of reconstructing a situation where a single prince dominates the political scene.

This past summer, Prince Yu has been awarded two more imperial pearls for his excellent work in inspecting the fourteen states of Jiangzuo. Along with leading the end-of-year ceremony and his participation in the yearly selection of officials, Prince Yu’s glory seems to have long surpassed the other two.

At the end of the year, however, the emperor has also promoted his seventh son Xiao Jingyan to be a Prince with seven pearls, balancing the Court with two high-level princes.

The casual observer might believe that Prince Yu is leading the race, but much of his outward
popularity is a mere reflection of the emperor’s favor, a closer inspection would reveal that both princes are standing on equal ground.\(^2\)

Not to mention that Prince Yu has a fatal disadvantage: his parentage.

The prince himself clearly knows that his Father would be willing to stand by idly while he lobbies for support in the Court, but his tolerance has its limits—unless there is truly no other choice, the emperor would never allow the throne to fall into the hands of someone with barbarian blood.

Then he only needs to do one thing—eliminate any other possible candidate, so that after his Father’s passing, he could legitimately ascend the throne.\(^3\)

This is also the reason for which Prince Yu has been currying the favor of Xia Jiang, because if the day comes when he is left with only one recourse, he would need Xia Jiang’s backing.

Yet Prince Yu is not Xia Jiang’s best choice.

Compared to Prince Yu’s rising fame, Prince Jing seems to pale in comparison: in the past year he has only campaigned for reform of military horse policies, even that has been repeatedly thwarted by underhanded politicking from the Ministry of Defense;\(^4\) although the emperor has not voiced his complaint, he is certainly not pleased by the delays.

But to Xia Jiang, Prince Jing is merely biding his time.\(^5\) His aggressive show of power in the past couple of years has cemented his position as a worthy candidate for the throne, but at the same time has gained him a substantial number of enemies. This year he has stayed low in order to better plan for the future.

And then there is Lin Shu. The man has established himself as a trusted confidant by the emperor’s side, many of his proposals for military reforms have been swiftly passed. The emperor has demanded the Ministry of Defense to hasten their processes, even adopting Lin Shu’s suggestions to reorganize the Imperial Guards.

Both Prince Yu and Prince Xian are contending for Lin Shu’s favor, yet the man himself has always remained neutral, concentrating his efforts on doing His Majesty’s bidding.

Nevertheless, no matter whom he chooses to support in the end, it certainly will not be Xiao Jingyan.

In the past year, although Lin Shu has not actively hindered Prince Jing’s efforts, he has not done anything to aid him either. When Prince Jing was lobbying for the military horse policies, if Lin Shu had used his network within the Ministry of Defense to lend him a hand, the Prince would have had a much easier time.

It is truly a pity for any prince to lose the support of Lin Shu, but for Xia Jiang, there could not be better news.

Lin Shu is the same kind of person as Prince Qi; even if he never finds out the conspiracy behind Cliff Mei, he would never collude with Xia Jiang.\(^6\)

If Prince Jing does not ally himself with the House of Lin or Prince Qi, Xia Jiang could potentially trade with him. Well, since it is a trade, he has to show some concrete evidence of his sincerity.

Xia Jiang’s hand smoothes over the map in front of him— it is a map of a manor, Prince Qi’s manor in Taizhou.
As long as the House of Lin still exists, Prince Qi remains a threat.

If he brings the lives of Prince Qi and his family as a goodwill gift, perhaps Prince Jing would believe his sincerity.

The entire capital is startled out of its dreams by a loud explosion from the harbor.

The emperor jumps off the bed, still barefoot, and finds out that several ships bearing gifts from the Southern regions for his birthday have been destroyed by the explosion, including a rare naturally formed rock in the shape of the word “Longevity.” Shaking with rage, he orders a swift investigation.

“Blasphemous child!” he spits, still mourning for the lost gifts.

Prince Yu mourns for another kind of loss. His men had originally planned to set off the explosion after the smuggled gunpowder is transferred to the private armory, which would demolish all the surrounding residential houses. Then, under the pressure of the people’s outcry, the emperor would surely dole out a more severe punishment.

He has not expected the Ministry of Revenue to stop the ship at the harbor, demanding for a thorough check for His Majesty’s birthday tributes. As Shen Zhui, who claimed to be under Prince Jing’s orders, set out to inspect the shipments, Prince Yu feared that if they found the gunpowder and avoided a catastrophe, the whole incident would slip under His Majesty’s radar, so he ordered his men to set off the explosion earlier than scheduled.

Although there has been no casualties, the fire still consumed all the imperial tributes as well as large amounts of cargo on the docks, causing a sharp spike of discontent.

The investigation finds that one of Prince Xian’s ships with fresh fruits was the origin of the explosion, and further digging reveals that the Prince has close ties with a newly constructed private armory just outside the capital. The emperor immediately suspends Prince Xian from his duties and confines him in his manor until further notice. Still rather vexed, he demotes him to a two-pearl prince and withholds his stipend for the next two years.

In the blink of an eye, the peach blossoms have come and gone, another Autumn Hunt has concluded, and the Qishui river has frozen again. ‘Tis another year.

Lin Shu is on his usual patrol duty in the palace. His boots are made of leather from the deer he caught during the Autumn Hunt, and stitched by his Mother. The thick leather sole is a warm shield that insulates his feet from the snow on the ground.

He came in first during this past Autumn Hunt, yet his heart is heavy, for he saw that Jingyan only caught a few small fowls-- his injury was right on the chest, even after healing, it would be a few years before he could properly wield a bow again.

The doors of the Great Hall swing open, accompanied by Eunuch Gao’s resonating drawl announcing the end of the Court session.

Prince Yu steps out of the hall by himself, his expression as chilly as the biting cold of the weather outside. When he sees Lin Shu, his face brightens into a smile as he pats the other man casually on the shoulders, trading some small talk.
Lin Shu knows that Prince Yu is troubled about Lord Qing Guo’s involvement in the land annexing case.

Prince Yu is well aware of what Lord Qing Guo has been doing. Annexing the land has been a widespread phenomenon throughout the kingdom, and the emperor has always turned a blind eye to it, yet his unusually firm attitude to try the involved officials now can probably be attributed to the fact that several recent cases have implicated military generals stationed on the borders. Corruption in the military has crossed the emperor’s bottomline. This sudden turn of events has completely soured Prince Yu’s good mood from having bested Prince Xian with the private armory case; Lord Qing Guo is the first military official to publicly declare his support for him, he has to be preserved.

He cannot pressure Xia Jiang, so he’s settled for sending assassins after Xia Dong on her way to investigate the case. However, she seems to have obtained protection from a Mei-something pugilist man, successfully evading his ambushes along the way.

After much probing, Prince Yu discovers that the man is Mei Changsu on the Langya list, but his activity is so unpredictable that few have even seen his face, never mind trying to dispose of him. Even imperial power cannot do anything to thwart an unknown opponent, Prince Yu could only watch helplessly as Xia Dong successfully escorts several witnesses back to the capital.

Prince Yu casually asks Lin Shu about the emperor’s recent health, trying to use garner the smallest hints to help him out of the dilemma with Lord Qing Guo.

Lin Shu nods and interjects in all the appropriate places, while his eyes follow the crowd of officials who are retracting their necks into their capes for warmth; he frowns in worry, Jingyan must be cold when the snow stops.

At that moment, the object of his thoughts appears in his line of sight: Jingyan is dressed in robes befitting of a seven-pearl prince, with a cape around his shoulders. The long, open sleeves are doing nothing to ward off the cold as the man’s fingers turn a slight shade of pink from the frigid air.

When Lin Shu leads his group of guards past the Hall, he walks alongside Jingyan.

No word passes between them, and when their shoulders brush briefly, the long tassels from Lin Shu’s sword ornament swing by to intertwine with Jingyan’s fingers, like crimson threads linking them together, like the crimson bow that has returned to its place in Prince Jing’s manor.

Jingyan flinches almost instinctively, pulling his fingers back into the sleeves, as if scalded by the heat of those tassels.

That day, he woke up to an unexpectedly tidy room-- someone had obviously cleaned up the mess he made in his drunken state. He looked at his own fresh undershirts in bewilderment.

It was not until he saw the crimson bow gripped in his hands-- the one he sent back to Lin Shu-- did he realize that Lin Shu had been there.

He had been too far gone at that point, without any recollection of when Lin Shu had stopped by or why he returned the bow.

He also had no memory of what he might have said. He questioned Fei Liu, who shook his head vigorously, indicating that he didn’t hear a thing. Jingyan heaved a sigh of relief.
The bow had been repaired. The fuse joint was uneven, clearly avoiding the part with the etched words. Lin Shu had hidden the knobbly scar carefully with layers of fine red threads, interwoven around the limb of the bow.

Today, when he catches sight of Lin Shu again in the palace, the man is in his usual high spirits. Jingyan sighs softly. It's better that way.

He is walking down a path with a destined end. With each step forward, with each obstacle removed, he is one step closer to his fate.

There can be no one to accompany him to the end, especially not Lin Shu.

Lin Shu gathers the tassels in his hands, caressing them between his fingers, in a pale imitation of holding Jingyan’s hand.

After uttering those words that night, Jingyan promptly fell into a restless sleep, leaving Lin Shu to sit by his side all night, holding his hands.

While the other man was still asleep, Lin Shu slipped away to retrieve the bow from his house.

He placed it in Jingyan’s hands, the chill from the iron jostled the man awake, his blurry eyes landed on the bow and his fingers tightened impossibly around it, mumbling that it was his.

He whispered again, “Xiaoshu, I love you.”

“......I know,” Lin Shu lowered his head and placed a soft kiss on those closed eyelids, “so don’t you dare throw away anything I give you again.”

(The footnotes exceeded word limits of the end-notes section, so I had to split them up)

1 The concept of 嫡庶 (di shu) was an important construct in ancient feudal China, feeding directly into the strictly defined social hierarchy of the times. When marriage used to be polygamous, a man would have one wife, or 正妻 (zheng qi), and several “small wives” or concubines, 妾 (qie). The wife would be one matching in his social status, usually arranged by their parents, while the concubines were chosen by the husband according to his personal interests. Any child born from the wife would be 嫡子 (di zi), while children of the concubines were considered of lower status, called 庶子 (shu zi). Usually only the “di zi” would be eligible to inherit his father’s wealth and title, unless he was dead, disowned or otherwise unavailable. In those cases, the inheritance would go to one of the male “shu zi”, the decision made based on their merit or how much their father favored one of them. The same idea applied to the imperial family as well, where the son of the empress usually stood the best chance of being named Crown Prince, but of course the lure of the throne was so great that it led to many bloody incidents of brothers fighting to be the heir. In Lang Ya Bang, the empress does not have her own child, Prince Yu is her adopted son, so in this case, the oldest born male, Prince Qi, would be considered the next heir, plus he has more than proven his worth politically. Now with him gone, the other three princes are on more or less equal footing when it comes to their birth, so none of them could claim “legitimacy” over his brothers. [return to text]
2平分秋色 (ping fen qiu se): lit. equally divide the autumn scenery, used to describe when two parties have equal shares of something, or hold equal influence in a situation.

3名正言顺 (ming zheng yan shun): lit. (if) the names are correct, words carry weight. The original meaning is that only if the reasons are justifiable logic would follow naturally. The contemporary meaning is more of “legitimacy”, or actions with perfectly justifiable, morally sound motivations. Since Chinese rulers considered their powers to be bestowed by the heavens, they placed a substantial emphasis on the legitimacy of their throne, e.g. the eldest son named Crown Prince, etc. If someone obtains the throne with questionable methods, he would not have the full confidence of his officials and his people. So unless there is truly no better way, a prince fighting for the throne would absolutely try to avoid a bloody confrontation. Moral shaming was real, guys. :P

4掣肘 (che zhou): lit. pull at someone’s elbow, used to mean hindering someone’s work, especially in political matters. The story comes from a 1st Century B.C. book called 吕氏春秋 (Lü shi chun qiu, or “Lü’s commentaries on history”), where two scribes reported that their master, a court official named Fu Zi Jian, was pulling at their elbows while they were trying to write, resulting in barely legible work, and the master blamed them for it. Of course everyone else laughed at Fu Zi Jian for being so unreasonable. When the king heard of the incident, he realized that Fu Zi Jian was trying to subtly remind him to leave the regional matters in his hands and to have faith in his abilities, instead of being clouded by his suspicions as a ruler, thus “pulling Fu Zi Jian’s elbows” to prevent him from getting work done.

5韬光养晦 (tao guang yang hui): lit. hide (your) talents and cultivate virtues until the end of the month. Appearing in the late Qing dynasty, the phrase is used to describe keeping a low profile and not flaunting one’s assets in order to better objectively evaluate the situation, and strategize with a clear head. It is often used to mean hard work before finally attaining success.

6水火不容 (shui huo bu rong): lit. water and fire cannot tolerate each other, used to describe extreme animosity.

7Lord Qing Guo’s 圈地案 (quan di an), the case of annexing the land, was also in canon. He was one of the first supporters of Prince Yu to go down by Mei Changsu’s hand. The case essentially involves an official illegally usurping the land of his people without giving them proper compensation. In feudal China, where land=produce=money+sustenance, this was a pretty serious offense, but due to corruption, many of the cases were swept under the rug.

8Traditionally 红线 (hong xian), or red thread, is a symbol for romantic relationship between two people.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

As we draw closer to the inevitable conclusion, my brain gets fried at a higher frequency. xD
Each chapter will be more plotty and involved, so sit tight and enjoy! :)

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the case of Lord Qing Guo arrives in the emperor’s study, he gives the task of overseeing the trial to Prince Ning instead of Jingyan.

Prince Yu has poured all his efforts into thwarting the trial process: mistakes here and there in the documents from the Ministry of Justice, the mysterious deaths of two of the witnesses, scaring the other three into silence, etc. After three long months of bureaucratic maneuvering, the sentence still has not been declared, until one day, the emperor’s patience has reached a limit, he severely chastises the few heads of the Ministry of Justice, finally pushing them to produce a hasty penalty.

It really is a pale imitation of a punishment: the Lord is fined a certain amount and the annexed lands returned to their owners. Nothing more.

Deeply dissatisfied with how things concluded, the emperor glares down at Prince Ning kneeling on the marble floor, his face drained of color. Sighing of exasperation, he waves for his shaking son to leave. He knows perfectly well that it was not Jingting’s lack of effort that resulted in this debacle--he really had no means to counter Prince Yu’s relentless hindrances.

He has so many sons, yet so few are worthy of the position as Crown Prince.

Xiao Jingyu is out of the question.

Jingxuan is spineless and greedy, Jingting is shy and unassuming, Jinghuan...he used to be a favorite, but judging from the case of Lord Qing Guo, he is much too immature...what’s more, his parentage remains a sharp thorn, the emperor still remembers vividly the Hua incident a few years ago.

That leaves only Jingyan.

This son of his is nearly faultless. He is well-accomplished in both the military as well as the court, he is decisive and considerate in his dealings, and has never put a toe over the line in his interactions with other officials.

What’s more, he holds no military power.

A few years ago he had intended for Jingyan to get closer to Lin Shu to mitigate the power of the Chiyan army and Jingyu’s influences. Now, however, the situation is drastically different, neither Jingyu nor the Chiyan army poses a threat anymore; as an established and well-respected Prince, Jingyan would become trouble if he still had the support of Lin Shu, the Vice Commander of the Imperial Guards.
Though fortunately Jingyan and Lin Shu appear to be as good as strangers now. They don’t even trade greetings when they pass by each other, never mind any other closer relationship. Every year during Lin Shu’s birthday, Prince Jing’s manor would send along the usual gifts out of courtesy, while Jingyan himself has stopped attending in person.

The emperor holds absolute command over the Xuanjing Bureau and the Imperial Guards, two formidable forces loyal only to him, so even if Jingyan were to be given the power of the Crown Prince, he could be easily controlled.

After making up his mind, the emperor decides to choose a feudal land for Prince Yu, before he sets out to arrange for Consort Jing’s return to the palace.

Around the same time, Cai Quan from the Ministry of Justice and Shen Zhui have just submitted a report, revealing that the explosion at the harbor was not an accident, but rather a premeditated act by Prince Yu’s brother-in-law, Zhu Yue of the Da Li Si.

Mad with fury, the emperor orders a round-table trial of Zhu Yue with all three justice institutions: Da Li Si, the Xuanjing Bureau, and the Ministry of Justice.

When the empress hears of the news from one of her spies, she rushes to prostrate herself in front of the emperor, her usual poise completely gone as she sobs and begs for him to keep Prince Yu in the capital. Her palpable desperation is an impeccable act of an ordinary mother wanting the ordinary happiness of having her son by her side, as if the thought of expecting him to bring her glory has never crossed her mind.

“Your Majesty, have you considered the dishonor that this type of trial would bring upon the imperial family? This is a serious allegation, at least give Jinghuan a chance to explain himself!” she beseeches.

Unmoved, the emperor gestures for someone to help her up, then right in front of her, he orders the execution of all the servants in the hall.

He glances at the woman who has kept him company until their old age, and cannot suppress the shudder that runs through him at the biting resentment in her eyes. Suddenly, the sinister shadows from his dreams seem to overlap with her figure in a brief moment of vertigo.

He shakes his head minutely, his decision solidified.

It is not for the lack of love of Jinghuan, rather, it is because of those steadily approaching shadows in his dreams, their malicious faces becoming more and more distinct in the past year.

And in the throng of figures with their weapons raised high, he has seen the faces of Jinghuan and Linglong.

“Prince Yu, Xiao Jinghuan, has disobeyed my imperial mandates, his actions have been immoral and unjust. From this day henceforth, he shall be demoted to a prince of two-pearls, expelled from the capital and relocate immediately to Qingzhou.”

“No, no way,” upon hearing the decree, Banruo shakes her head in utter disbelief, unable to process the shock that years of hard work have gone to waste, as if someone had so swiftly taken away their game board before they could even finish laying down all the pieces. “Even if His Highness were implicated in the case of Lord Qing Guo and the private armory incident, demotion and expulsion
from the capital are too severe of a penalty! There must be another reason!”

Another Hua girl beside her bursts into tears, “Ever since the Imperial Guards have been reorganized, the palace security has been impenetrable! Our spies cannot get a word out even if they discover something inside! Now we don’t even know what’s going on!”

Banruo forcibly wipes a lone tear from her face, turning to the other girl sternly, “Stop crying! We have yet to fulfill my Mistress’ dying will! Go and gather everyone you can find, we must know the reasons behind this decree!”

At that moment, Prince Yu strides into the room with a barking laugh, he waves a hand dismissively, “No need.”

“Your Highness? Why does Your Highness say that? We have to find out the reasons for a last fighting chance! Normally His Majesty would never be so furious over two such incidents. Your Highness could probably maintain the seven-pearl position, and definitely not expelled!”

Prince Yu continues to laugh, his entire body shaking from its forces, “Banruo, we’ve been digging our own grave!”[4]

“Your Highness knows what happened?” Banruo remembers that before the decree came, a servant from the empress had stopped by to leave a short missive for Prince Yu. She hurries to ask, “Did Her Majesty find out about something?”

“It’s not Mother, His Majesty found out out.”

“...His Majesty? Found out about what?”

“He has been plagued with nightmares lately, often startled awake by them.”

Banruo processes the information and says, “I have also heard word of it.”

“A few days ago, Mother heard him call my name in his sleep, saying ‘So you finally found out, I knew you and Linglong wanted to kill me’.” Prince Yu lets out a humorless laugh.

Banruo’s face drains of all color as she asks in a trembling voice, “Your Highness means...His Majesty knows that you found out about your identity.”

“That’s right. Although I don’t know how he found out, but judging by those words and that brutal decree, this is the only explanation.”

“.......” Banruo continues hesitantly, “We have always covered our tracks well. His Majesty must have spent a long time investigating this matter, he must have gone to great lengths.”

“That’s why I said we were digging our own graves,” replies Prince Yu, pouring himself a glass of wine, sipping leisurely. “I’ve asked around; did you know that His Majesty first started having those nightmares right after Xia Chun found the pouch we planted in Prince Qi’s manor?”

“.......!”

“The fire we made for Brother Qi ended up burning ourselves! The greater irony is that I’m in the same position as he was, with no chance to defend my case-- because His Majesty will never ask.”

“Please do not be disheartened, Your Highness. We still have ways...Master Xia contacted me yesterday, saying that--”
“Banruo, we lost, that’s the reality,” Prince Yu cuts her off with a wave of his hand. “You do not have to follow me to the feudal land, I’ve already prepared a house for you in the capital. Leave.”

“Your Highness!”

Prince Yu is the second prince to be expelled from the capital. Unlike his predecessor, however, there are no crowds of sobbing residents lining the streets, even his close associates from the Court have not come to see him off. His small entourage, comprised of just a few carriages, passes through the city gates and leaves the bustling world behind.

No one has foreseen that a mere ten days after his departure, news reaches the capital of Prince Yu’s death. According to the report, the guards led the group astray and they wandered into a perilous part of the mountain. When night came, the horses were startled by wolf’s howling, dragging the carriage with Prince and Princess Yu off the cliff. No remains were found.

When Jingyan hears of the news, he is deep in discussion with Meng Zhi about the newly elected officials in the Ministry of Defense. Meng Zhi peers at the other man’s stony face and assures him, “This was not Your Highness’ fault.”

Jingyan shakes his head and says, “I was the one who told Shen Zhui about the source of explosion on that ship, Lin Chen was the one who escorted the witnesses of Lord Qing Guo’s case into the capital...Although I did not personally kill him and Princess Yu, they died indirectly by my hand. He might have deserved death last life, but this time...he did not.”

“Your Highness means to say that Prince Yu’s fall from the cliff was not an accident, it can’t be...Noble Consort Yue?”

“The guards were locals from Qingzhou, it’s suspicious that they did not know the right way; traveling at night was also unnecessary. Although that woman knows little about political machinations, she is masterful in underhanded manipulations and is merciless to boot-- when she failed to drug Princess Nihuang those years ago, she immediately wanted her guards to kill me instead. Noble Consort Yue is from Yunnan, which is close to Qingzhou, it would not have been difficult to find willing participants for this ploy……I should have seen it coming.”

“Your Highness…” Meng Zhi frowns at Jingyan’s downcast eyes, but finds no words for comfort.

Jingyan looks out of the window, unconsciously rubbing the fabric of his sleeve between his fingers, “He always said that he was ruthless in his dealings, yet even he...had spared Princess Yu and her unborn child.”

Prince Xian rushes into the palace with his composure hanging by a thread, only to see the Noble Consort Yue calmly in her chambers, as if nothing is out of place. He quickly dismisses all the servants in the room and asks, “How can Mother be so relaxed? Something major just happened!”

“What major thing? It’s just a dead person.”

“It’s Jinghuan! Prince Yu! He’s dead!!” Jingxuan’s voice trembles with panic, “Last time when you said you’d find a way to avenge us, I thought I dissuaded you! How could Mother...how could you have killed him??”

“It’s been years since the empress and I have been at each other’s throats, and so have you and
Prince Yu. You took such a hard fall when he publicized the armory debacle, I couldn’t have idly swallowed that bitter defeat,” the Noble Consort lowers her voice as she continues, “plus, all I arranged was for his entourage to take the most circuitous and rocky routes, merely wanting to roughen him up a bit. Must be his terrible luck that he actually died.”

“Mother truly did not do it?”

“Why would I be in such a hurry to kill him? When he is settled in his feudal land, give it a few years, whether he dies of illness or assassination, it would be too far away for His Majesty to feel the loss keenly. But now, Prince Yu has just left the capital, His Majesty is still wracked with guilt, he’d be grieving for quite a while!”

“Then...if His Majesty conducts an investigation, would Mother be implicated?”

“.......He wouldn’t investigate.”

“Why does Mother say that?”

“He wouldn’t,” Noble Consort Yue curls her lips in a sinister smile, “I have lived with the man for years, I know him too well. Regardless of the reasons behind Prince Yu’s expulsion, the fact of the matter is that His Majesty has already been suspicious of him. Now he’s dead, His Majesty would be saddened, but also relieved. It is like with an ancient tree that’s barely been standing for years, and one day when it finally falls, you’d bemoan its loss, but at the same time feel relieved that the tree wouldn’t fall in your moment of inattention and wind up injuring someone.”

She caresses her beloved son’s head gently, an almost self-deprecating smile crossing her smug features, “Open your eyes and truly see your Father. He is fond of you, and that is all. If the day comes when Xiao Jingyan threatens your life, as an emperor he would do nothing to protect you except issuing a few useless censures. His tears of regret hold no value to us, only the throne is the absolute power. Now Prince Yu is dead, there is only Xiao Jingyan standing between you and the throne. I will do everything in my power to eliminate him, whatever the cost may be.”

Things progress exactly as Noble Consort Yue has predicted.

The emperor is overwhelmed with grief, refusing sustenance for a whole day. He locks himself in the study, howling for the death of his son, and swiftly orders the execution of everyone in the prince’s entourage.

Then, he insists on a funeral befitting of a seven-pearl prince, despite Prince Yu’s transgressions before his death.

Yet throughout the whole thing, he mentions no word of investigating the questionable circumstances surrounding his son’s death. Even after his men reported that they failed to find the bodies of Prince and Princess Yu in the shallow waters below the cliff, the emperor merely sheds a few more tears in mourning and shows no desire to further the investigation.

On the grand scale, the death of Prince Yu has barely made a ripple. To the general populace, he was but one of many self-absorbed narcissistic nobles who cared nothing about their welfare, and they do not care about his death either. To the officials who had allied themselves with him, his expulsion from the capital practically marked the end of their relationship anyway.

In just two months, the capital returns to its bustling state.

When another Autumn Hunt comes around, the emperor takes his usual entourage to the hunting palace on Jiu-An mountain. Noble Consort Yue keeps him company the entire way, her demeanor as
cheerful as always; Jingyan rides along with all the other princes.

As soon as they arrive at the hunting palace, Jingrui and Yujin take off for a brief hunt, the latter promising to catch a sable for Lin Shu. [5]

What they bring back, however, is a man covered in blood.

“Your Majesty--! Prince Yu...Prince Yu has revolted with the Qingli army! Their 40,000 men have killed all the sentinel station guards, and they are rapidly approaching Jiu-An mountain!”

This time, without Tong Lu’s timely communication at the cost of his own life, and the unexpected resurrection of Prince Yu, the pressing fleet of rebels have already arrived at the foot of the mountain when Jingyan and Meng Zhi receive the news.

Who would have foreseen that even with two divergent paths in two lifetimes, fate has still brought Xiao Jinghuan to Jiu-An mountain in the end?

When Meng Zhi enters the hall of the hunting palace, he can already hear the distant clamor of the rebel armies, their battle cries resonating in the air.

All the nobles have congregated here in the vast entrance hall, a palpable silence like an oppressive blanket over them. Noble Consort Yue presses herself against the emperor in trepidation, her finely manicured fingers twisting and tearing at her own sleeves and her rouged lips trembling uncontrollably.

“Prince Yu leading 40,000 Qingli troops?! Where are the troops from, and with what power is he commanding them??” rages the emperor, his face incredulous as he sneers, “He first faked his own death, then mounts an attack with his own men. He wants to kill Jingyan and Jingxuan, and then me! Humph, I can already hear his story-- Oh the emperor was unfortunately killed in the commotion! At that point he could legitimately inherit the throne with a simple decree from the empress, then he’d be the emperor!”

“My throne-- Xiao Jinghuan is not worthy to sit on my throne!” he sends the low table tumbling onto the floor with a vicious kick, and then turns his flaming eyes onto Jinghuan and Jingyan, “Do you two have any counter plan?”

Jingxuan is caught off-guard by the sudden question, his mind still swimming with all the past grievances he’s had with Jinghuan and that his brother would never spare him now. He stalls a long time for a response before finally venturing in an unsteady voice, “I think we could stay in the hunting palace and wait for reinforcements.”

The emperor barks out a laugh, and before any retort could come from Jingyan, Noble Consort Yue says ominously, “The empress must have been involved in Prince Yu’s rebellion. Since the army is coming from the direction of the capital, the empress must have seized control of the Imperial Guards.”

The emperor does not even have the energy to berate her for her rivalry with the empress in such an emergency, he admits, “True...the empress has enough power to control the Imperial Guards...seems like we can’t expect reinforcements from the capital.”

When he finishes the sentence, the emperor collapses into his chair as if all life has left him, “The capital has fallen…”
Jinghuan pales and hurries to ask, “Then...we can’t go back?”

“I can move some troops from Jicheng,” at this point, Jingyan’s low yet strong voice resonates through the hall, like an unwavering hallmark of strength that instantly calms the stirring anxiety in everyone’s heart.

The emperor nods in reluctant agreement after hearing Jingyan’s brief explanation, “You will need three days if you leave via the northern slopes. Meng Zhi, can you give us three days?”

Meng Zhi feels doubt bubbling to the surface. They had planned to settle in the hunting palace during the Autumn Hunt, and while the precarious location of the palace makes defense possible, the situation this time is fraught with unfavorable circumstances. Jiu-An mountain has been completely surrounded, with every outbound path heavily guarded. Even if Jingyan could make it down the mountain successfully via the northern slope, it would take him longer than before to circumvent the approaching troops to reach the base at Jicheng. Three days is an optimistic estimate at best.

Last time, they held up their defenses until the Jicheng reinforcements arrived because they had the help of many pugilist masters like Zhen Ping and Li Gang. Princess Nihuang had also been instrumental in devastating the enemy morale by killing the general Xu Anmo, effectively paralyzing the pillar of the Qingli rebels.

But this time, there is no Mei Changsu with them to strategize for every eventuality, no talents like Li Gang in their troops, nor Nihuang’s timely rescue.

The situation is even more grim than last time. With things the way they are, keeping the defenses up for one day is already stretching their limits, for three days is practically impossible. Due to the unexpected turn of events, Meng Zhi did not have time to convene with Jingyan before coming to see the emperor, and now he must make his decision, fast.

He clasps both hands together in a solemn bow, his voice carrying to every corner of the hall, “I will fend off the traitors for three days even if it costs my flesh and blood!”

He trusts Prince Jing, even though he does not share Lin Shu’s unique ability to communicate with him with just one glance, because this is the man who had been the emperor that looked after the hundreds of thousands of people in their kingdom, the man who had been Meng Zhi’s lord and sire.

“Good,” the emperor steps off the dais, taking the military token from Eunuch Gao’s hands and pressing it into Jingyan’s upturned palms. The Noble Consort Yue opens her mouth to voice her dissent, only to be cut off brusquely by the emperor, who comments coldly, “Jingxuan is right here, if you disagree with my decision, I can always send him instead.”

Chastised and stunned by the reality, Noble Consort Yue falls to her knees and begs for forgiveness in a low voice.

Jingyan spares a dispassionate gaze at the burning grudge in her downcast eyes, and turns his heels to leave, the token gripped tightly in his hand.

“Your Highness,” Meng Zhi follows Jingyan out and queries in a hushed tone, “Prince Yu’s troops are already at the foot of the mountain. Even if the northern slopes are unguarded, further down the road would definitely be heavily patrolled, it would take an extra day if Your Highness takes a side road to avoid them.”
“I have no time to waste. I’ll bring a few more men and force our way through.”

“Your Highness!”

“I will only get past them, not engaging in any unnecessary combat,” Jingyan explains as he changes into a heavier suit of armor, “Should be fine.”

“But Prince Yu’s forces are pressing at our doorsteps, we have even less time than in the last life. We could perhaps hold up the defenses for two days, not three.”

“Not necessarily,” Jingyan turns to give Zhanying the list of men he plans to bring along and then returns his attention to Meng Zhi, “I had already arranged for Xu Anmo to be demoted three years ago, he’s now in a lowly position in Yizhou. The Qingli army was significantly trimmed in numbers along with the Chiyan army a few years ago during a reorganization, now their total count cannot exceed 40,000.”

“For the Autumn Hunt, there are 5,000 accompanying Imperial Guards with His Majesty’s entourage, a whole 2,000 more than last time. Two years ago when Brother Qi updated all the military supplies, some of the outdated weaponry are stored here in the hunting palace, including bows and catapults. Though they are the older models, they should still be serviceable.” He then pulls out a roughly sketched map, its ink still fresh, and hands it to Meng Zhi, “Here’s the defense plan devised by Sir Su last time, please adjust it to our situation as you see fit.”

Meng Zhi takes the map in a daze, thinking that His Highness was not even present last time when Xiaoshu planned the defenses...he must have heard from Xiaoshu later.

He nods with revived enthusiasm at the marked positions for the catapults on the fortress and says, “With these, perhaps we can hold on for half a day, no, one more day!”

“I will definitely be back by the day after tomorrow,” Jingyan jumps onto the horse, “and reinforcements will come tomorrow, if not earlier.”

“Tomorrow? Given the distance, the only troops that can make it are the Imperial Guards...Your Highness means—” Meng Zhi’s eyes widen impossibly at the implication, “Xiaoshu?!”

“The empress would surely have claimed that I have taken His Majesty hostage, Xiaoshu would have not believed her.”

“But...he’s now in the Imperial Guards, which, unlike the Chiyan army, are tightly controlled by the imperial family. If the empress has forbidden them to move, no one could disobey! They would all be charged with high treason if they leave the capital now! Even if Xiaoshu believes in you, he has no means to come to our rescue!”

Jingyan’s eyes are fixed in the direction of the capital, as if piercing through the distance. He says in a steely voice, “He will come.”

Meng Zhi knows the strict regulations that limit the activity of the Imperial Guards, since last time he and his men were also confined within the capital. He suppresses the overwhelming skepticism and asks curiously, “Your Highness is sure of this, or is it merely a hope?”

Jingyan turns his eyes back to the other man, his expression confident and unwavering, “I trust him to come, not only because he is my friend, but also because he is Lin Shu, Vice Commander of the Chiyan army.”
Chapter End Notes

1 封地 (fēng dì) was a practice adopted by Chinese rulers and emperors to bestow land to princes, nobles, and other officials, usually as a reward. Its history dates back to the Zhou (周) Kingdom in the 12th century B.C.. The recipient had full property and taxation rights to the land, i.e. he could collect tax from the crops grown on his land, similar to the Medieval feudal system. For a member of the imperial family to receive a feudal land, they often had to leave the capital and move to reside there. In other words, this was a sugarcoated way to remove them from the political scene. When Prince Qi left the capital, the emperor had also chosen a land for him, supposedly one with beautiful scenery for him to grow old there. [return to text]

2 大理寺 (dà lǐ sì), lit. grand justice court, was a government institution in ancient China whose main role was to re-evaluate severe, criminal cases. Its name can be traced back to the Han Dynasty in the 1st century B.C.. Concluded cases, especially major ones, would be submitted to the Ministry of Justice for review. In canon, it’s where Xia Jiang transferred Wei Zheng to in order to lure Jingyan and Mei Changsu to come and rescue him. Because of the much more lax security, they were able to get Wei Zheng out. [return to text]

3 The type of trial ordered by the emperor is 三司会审 (sān sī huì shěn), lit. put to trial by three institutions. It was a practice originating from the Han Dynasty, usually used for high-profile cases, its objective was to ensure a thorough and impartial process for the parties involved. The three institutions have had various names throughout history, in this fic, they are Da Li Si, the Ministry of Justice, and Xuanjing Bureau, the last one is invented by the canon author, the most recent historical counterpart is probably 都察院 (du cha yuan, Court of Censors). For the sake of simplicity, Da Li Si is like the Supreme Court, Ministry of Justice is the main administrative body of legislation, and the Xuanjing Bureau is like the FBI. [return to text]

4 作茧自缚 (zuò jiǎn zì fù): lit. the silkworm produces strands of silk to trap himself in the cocoon, i.e. doing something to cause one’s own downfall. [return to text]

5 The author says in her notes of this chapter that she originally wanted to elaborate on Yujin and Jingrui’s action here: Lin Shu was dejected that he couldn’t go to the Hunt this year, since he’d wanted to capture a sable. He complained to Yujin and Jingrui, who decided to get the sable as a gift for him. What Lin Shu hadn’t said is that he didn’t want the sable for himself, but to use its fur to make Jingyan a furry collar. :))) [return to text]

6 鸦雀无声 (yā què wú shēng): lit. ravens and birds make no sound, i.e. it’s so quiet that even the birds are not chirping, used to describe extreme silence. [return to text]

7 天方夜谭 (tiān fāng yè tán): lit. nighttime legends from the borders of heavens. It is the Chinese title for the anthology “Arabian Nights,” but as an idiom it means something preposterous, impossible and unrealistic. “Tian fang”, or the side/borders of heavens, was how the ancient Chinese referred to the Arabic world. [return to text]
Banruo dismounts the horse just outside the base of Qingli army, and lifts the flap to enter the
general’s tent, “Your Highness.”

“You came.”

“I have just heard that Prince Jing came down the mountains from the northern slopes and forced his
way through our guards, he must have gone to get reinforcements!”

“I know. It’s been half a day since he left. He came via the northern slopes with a team of highly
competent men who were willing to defend him at all costs, our guards could not have stopped him.”

“Your Highness will not go after him?”

Prince Yu scoffs dismissively, waving a lazy hand, “No matter; judging by the direction he’s headed,
he’s most likely going to seek assistance from the Jicheng army. The round trip would take at least
three or four days, and we only need half more day.”

“I parted ways with Master Xia by the Qishui river, now he’s probably returned to the capital
already.”

Prince Yu nods, kneading his forehead in unsuppressed fatigue, “Mother has limited means deep in
the palace, I would feel more reassured if Xia Jiang were there.”

“The capital is in deep turbulent waters now, when Master Xia returns, he can both prove that Your
Highness is still alive, as well as regather those who were loyal to our cause. With the influence of
Her Majesty and Master Xia, few would openly doubt what we say.”

“At this point, popular opinion is the least of my worries. I only wish that he could control the
Imperial Guards. When His Majesty and Jinghuan are killed in the commotion by Jingyan, whose
traitorous life will be taken by my hand, I will return to the capital as the victorious and filial son.
With Mother’s decree as Empress, I can swiftly ascend the throne. It will all be too late by the time
Prince Qi hears of the news.”

“Though I am afraid that Master Xia would hold his grudge against us, since we coerced him into
colluding with us with secrets of the past,” Banruo frowns in concern.

Prince Yu shakes his head and replies, “The unsuccessful attempt to frame the Chiyan army all those
years ago, although a severe crime in itself, cannot compare to the gravity of a coup against the
emperor. Xia Jiang must have had other reasons for agreeing to work with us. With his current
political standing, he would not be punished with death even if His Majesty found out about his role
in the conspiracy against the Chiyan army and Prince Qi; he could have easily removed himself from
this fight, and waited to reclaim his glory once the next emperor ascends the throne. Yet, he chose to lend me his support merely because he knows that Prince Xian is not emperor material, and Xiao Jingyan would never tolerate him. After all, I do remember that when Prince Qi first proposed to abolish the Xuanjing Bureau, Prince Jing was the loudest opposition. In hindsight, it was but one of his early attempts to distance himself from Prince Qi’s policies. He is as steadfast and unyielding as they come, he’d have no use for the Xuanjing Bureau. Even if he were to keep the Bureau itself, he would never condone someone like Xia Jiang and his constant scheming.”

“Your Highness can rest assured on this matter,” Banruo beams. “Earlier today, before Master Xia departed for the capital, I asked him the same thing, and he answered me quite plainly.”

“What did he say?”

“Master Xia had sent men to investigate the current residence of Prince Qi in his feudal land.”

Prince Yu sneers, “Investigate? More like assassinate. He’d never give up on wanting Prince Qi dead.”

“The men he sent were all highly skilled agents from the Xuanjing Bureau, yet they couldn’t find a single loophole. There is constant security in and around the manor, and whenever Prince Qi leaves the house, he is tightly protected by a hidden force,” Banruo curls up her lips in an excited smirk, “one of them was recognized by Master Xia’s men, he was from Prince Jing’s manor.”

“I see...If Jingyan is going to such lengths to ensure Prince Qi’s safety, there is indeed a high probability that he would invite Prince Qi back to the capital when he ascends the throne. It is no wonder then that Xia Jiang would make such a risky move, willing to place all his stakes on us!”[1]

A messenger enters and interrupts their conversation, “Your Highness, our men have arrived at the gates of the hunting palace!”

Xiao Jinghuan shuts his eyes forcibly, as if expelling the last shreds of doubt, and snaps them open again, “On my orders, kill those traitors! Seize the hunting palace! The first one to ascend the palace fortress will be awarded one thousand gold coins!”

“Yes, Your Highness!!”

“...Your Highness, are you worried?” Banruo peers at his slightly dazed expression and asks.

Xiao Jinghuan shakes his head in denial, “Banruo, I’m just thinking about how easy it is to seize the throne. In hindsight, all those tireless nights of strategizing and years of calculating our every move amounted to nothing![2] In the end, all we needed to do was to heed the advice of my Aunt, which we thought to be the worst alternative!”

“My Mistress said that this method was considered the worst alternative not for its complexity, but rather for its absolute finality: once Your Highness has taken this step, there would be no turning back for you or the Hua people,” Banruo is dressed in her usual red robes, the flaming color swishing around her as she hands Prince Yu another goblet of wine. “For two years after the Chiyan army’s battle against Da Yu on Cliff Mei, my Mistress had used all her means to plant our people in the Qingli army for this very eventuality. Xu Anmo was very promising, and my Mistress had already sent some sisters to convert him, only to have him demoted by the emperor when Prince Jing exposed some of his blunders.”

Jinghuan pats her hand in mild comfort, “It was a pity. We would have had a stronger hold on the Qingli army if we had him here. The leaders we have now are simply not of the same calibre. Good
thing that I am here to personally oversee the operations with these 40,000 men. We should be able to reach the top of the Jiu-An mountain by tomorrow sunset.”

“Please stay vigilant, Your Highness. Although the odds are in our favor, we are putting everything on the line this time, we must be wary of any unexpected development.”

“Unexpected development?” Prince Yu chuckles darkly, the few months of life on the run has etched tired lines on his face and added gray roots to his hairs, “I am inches away from being devoured by this quagmire, my only recourse is this last gamble. Even if I successfully gain the throne this way, how can I expect to escape the censorship of the historians? Once upon a time, I thought that if I had any other alternative...it wouldn’t be too bad to live the life of a rich and carefree prince, far away from all these machinations!”

“Your Highness!”

“But my Father won’t spare me!” he rasps out a desperate laugh, his eyes red and his voice on the brink of breaking, “All those years, I have only loved him and submitted to his will, never once wishing him harm! And how does he reciprocate? He wants me dead! My body discarded in the wilderness for the wolves to take!

“Brother Qi had all the attention from Father and the privileged position as firstborn, Prince Xian had the protection of his mother, even Jingyan had Brother Qi’s care and affection. What about me?! For everything I have done in all these years, I don’t get a single bit of consideration!” Prince Yu stumbles backwards, his steps unsteady and his voice fraught with bitterness, “I waited from sunrise to sundown at the bottom of that cliff, my wife’s dead body becoming so cold in my arms, and still no help came. If you and Xia Jiang had not found me, I would have been devoured by the beasts.

“I was so naive to think that he just got tired of me and wanted me out of his sight,” he continues in a more composed tone, “I never expected him to kill me. Those guards who led us astray on purpose, our horse that easily startled, and even my carriage has been tampered with... It was not until I woke up in the wreck under the cliff did I realize that my Father-- my own Father of flesh and blood-- wanted me dead! So I’ve submitted to his will one last time. Now I will use my death to take the throne that he owes me!”

Prince Yu punctuates each word with increasing venom, his face twisting, “There is a total of 5,000 soldiers in the hunting palace, no more than 5,500 if you count all the servants. Hit them all with flaming arrows!”

-------------------------------

Meng Zhi blocks an incoming arrow with his sword, strands of loose hair scorched by the passing flame. He clenches his teeth and gathers himself before shouting, “The reinforcements are coming! Guard the palace at all costs!”

With two lifetimes combined, Meng Zhi has fought hundreds of battles, yet the battle of the Jiu-An mountain is one that he never wished to relive.

As a warrior, he has always readied himself to face death every time he picks up the sword to fight. But this battle is like no other. Losing means utter defeat and complete obliteration of their every endeavor. Behind him lies the turbulent Kingdom of Liang, as well as the life of the friend he holds most dear. That is why he cannot afford to lose, even at the cost of his life.

The attacks from the Qingli army persists for the rest of the night, the smoke painting the outside of
the fortress a sinister shade of black. Their morale is further bolstered by Prince Yu’s incitement, as more battalions rush towards the palace with renewed vigor.

The remaining Imperial Guards on top of the fortress have fought for this whole day, their energy already depleted. At the sight of the incoming Qingli soldiers, they tighten their hands on the weapons, nodding to each other in tacit encouragement, even as despair begins to cripple their resolve.

It would be another day before Prince Jing’s reinforcements could arrive.

In a situation as precarious as this, where Death could claim them at any moment, how many lives must be sacrificed before they could fend off the attackers?

Some of the flaming arrows make it over the fortress wall and land on the closed doors of the palace inside. A group of servants hurry to extinguish the fire while some trembling children of nobles burst into tears.

“Look! What’s that?” A soldier on the fortress exclaims, pointing in the distance, “Are those our reinforcements?”

Meng Zhi turns his head towards that direction. On the horizon, where the still dark sky meets the rising light of dawn, a shadow rapidly approaches.

-----------------------------------------------------

The Qingli army is instantly engulfed by panic, “Coming from the West...the Imperial Guards??”

“Aren't the rest of the Imperial Guards supposed to be controlled by Her Majesty in the capital?”

“It must be the Imperial Guards! Look at the dust kicked up by the horses, it must be a big squad!”

“What shall we do? We are trapped on both sides!”

From his vantage point halfway up the mountain, Prince Yu has his eyes trained on the fast advancing shadow. The cloud of dust trailing behind them obscures the horizon-- it is no mere squad, but rather an army.

Who could it be?

Banruo also rises to her feet, fingernails digging so hard into her palms that they almost draw blood, “They are coming from the West, so it can’t be the guards from the Imperial Cemetery, it must be--”

“It can’t be the Imperial Guards!” Prince Yu immediately vetoes the idea, “Mother must have them tightly under her control, it’s inconceivable that this many would dare to disobey her orders for a suicide mission on Jiu-An mountain!

“Her Majesty has full authority in the emperor’s absence. Right now, the wisest course of action for the Imperial Guards is no action at all. If they act without permission, they would be punished for colluding with the rebels. If they do nothing, in the event of my failure, my Mother would bear most of the blame and the Imperial Guards would be charged with nothing more serious than negligence. If I succeed in taking the throne, however, they would be rewarded for their assistance,” Prince Yu throws his head back with a laugh, “Who would trust Prince Jing over the words of the Empress? And who would have the capacity to dispatch this many men from the heavily secured capital?”

He pauses abruptly when the last words leave his mouth. He slowly turns to face the approaching
troops. In just few minutes, the dark shadow has materialized into a fleet of cavalry, a thick cloud of dust behind them. Leading the group is a figure on horseback, his silver armor gleaming in the hazy morning light.

“He tricked me…” Prince Yu forces out the words through his clenched teeth, as if uttering the name of his most feared nightmare, “Lin Shu…”

“Hurry! Retreat to the back of the base, protect His Highness!” Banruo commands the men around them. What a fatal oversight.

Lured into a sense of security by Lin Shu’s sensible and low-profile presence in the past few years, Prince Yu had been so sure that even if he does not support him, he would never oppose him so openly, especially at such a critical juncture.

“Lin Shu--!” Prince Yu pushes Banruo aside and roars at the man who would never hear him at this distance, “Are you coming here to save the emperor, or Xiao Jingyan??”

Lin Shu has assembled 5,000 of his fellow Chiyan men in the Imperial Guards and rushed nonstop towards Jiu-An mountain. He has taken a leaf out of his ancestors’ books and tied tree branches to the horses in the last formation, so that the dust cloud would be multiplied, giving the illusion of a much larger army.

It has worked like magic on the Qingli soldiers. Their already shaky morale crumbles into nothingness at the sight of Lin Shu’s legion, they toss their weapons aside and sprint in the opposite direction in fear. Their general barely manages to stall the force of their retreat, but before he could voice the command to charge, a spear pierces through his throat in the blink of an eye. The silvery head of the spear is stained crimson with blood, its tip glistening in the glorious morning rays. Lin Shu turns his attention towards Jiu-An mountain, barely visible through the thick layers of smoke, his eyes blazing with fiery intent as he shouts, “Charge!”

The experienced Chiyan soldiers have perfected their skills on the battlefield, dominating their opponents wherever they go. Now they are unleashing their full strength against the enemy, barring the ones who have surrendered their weapons earlier, and within the hour, they have decimated the entire west wing of the Qingli army.

With a curt command from Lin Shu, the cavalrymen quickly retreat out of their enemy’s reach. When the reserve battalions of the Qingli army arrive in short order, intent on pursuing their retreating opponents, they find that they are no match for the Chiyan elites, whose every move is highly coordinated and accurately calibrated.

Xiao Jinghuan watches the development with mounting fury-- he had thought that the hunting palace would be an easy victory, but he could not have foreseen Lin Shu’s arrival.

What seemed to be the perfect siege has now turned into a tough predicament: their men have surrounded the hunting palace, yet in the front they are stopped by the impenetrable fortress, and in the back threatened by a pack of ravenous wolves. If they make the slightest move to attack, these wolves would sprint forward from their hiding spots, their canines tearing through human flesh with ease.
Although the fame of the Chiyan army precedes itself, for Xiao Jinghuan, who has never stepped onto the battlefield before, he has never witnessed and cannot begin to envision the Lin Shu in the heat of battle.

Lin Shu and his Chiyu Division are like a pack of wolves on a vast frozen plain, their movements swift like the wind and their senses sharp as knife, they can pinpoint the enemy’s weakness with a terrifying accuracy and then deliver the fatal strike.

And when Xiao Jinghuan comes back to his senses to mount a counterstrike, they have already withdrawn out of his reach.

The ground is covered in splattered blood and severed limbs of the Qingli soldiers, while the flag of the Imperial Guards flutters in the wind in the near distance, intact and powerful.

“Vice Commander, we are all in the perimeters of the battlefield, without proper provisions or a rest place, it isn’t sustainable.”

“I know, I am waiting for reinforcements,” replies Lin Shu.

“Will there be reinforcements?”

“Jingyan must have left the hunting palace via the northern slopes and gone to seek aid from the Jicheng army. In another day, they will be back,” Lin Shu pats his horse affectionately, “we are few in number, there is no need to fight our way through, our priority is to stall their attacks on the palace.”

Zhen Ping comments after a brief deliberation, “If things go smoothly, Prince Jing may be able to return by tomorrow morning.”

“If Jingyan turns back first with only the elite division, leaving the rest of the troops to take the route along the Qizhu stream, he should be here by tonight at the earliest,” Lin Shu says, his voice brimming with confidence.

He faces the Chiyan men behind him, shouting, “Gather your strengths! Protect the palace at all costs!”

“Yes, Sir!”

----------------------------------------

Within the hunting palace, its occupants have not shut their eyes for the entire night, the sounds of battle resonating in their ears. Many of them have never witnessed war or death. The stagnant air is saturated with the smell of scorched flesh and the coppery taste of blood, despair seeping into everyone’s heart.

By the emperor’s side stands Jingxuan, whose long robes cannot hide his tremors.

Suddenly, a completely different type of shouting pierces through the din outside, the relieved exclamations a sharp contrast to the hoarse sounds of struggle before.

The emperor pushes himself to his feet immediately, “What are they shouting about? Quick, someone go take a look!”

A servant bows and exits the hall. He rushes back the next moment, ecstasy written on his face as he answers, “Your Majesty, the reinforcements are here!”
Everyone heaves a unanimous breath of relief, some break down sobbing with joy.

“Is it Jingyan? ...No, even the fastest route would take another day. The Jicheng army does not have the best cavalry, they wouldn’t be here so soon, did you see whose troops they are?” demands the emperor.

“I did not see clearly. They came from the West and seemed like the Imperial Guards!”

“Imperial Guards…” someone mumbles in the crowd, “who knows if they are here to help us, or Prince Yu…”

“Her Majesty sent the Imperial Guards to aid Prince Yu…” adds another.

“Silence!” the emperor smashes a goblet on the floor. “Bring me Meng Zhi!”

This time, before a servant could go relay the message, a battered Meng Zhi stumbles into the hall, exclaiming, “Your Majesty, the reinforcements are here!”

“Reinforcements? Our reinforcements? Are you certain?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Within an hour, the Qingli army has already lost 5,000 men to our reinforcements, and their attacks have slowed as well!”

“Meng Zhi, you have yet to tell me, who is it that came?”

The sun has now risen, its golden rays warming up the entire hall. Meng Zhi’s voice reverberates through the space, “It’s the Vice Commander of the Imperial Guards, Lin Shu.”

Chapter End Notes

Hiatus notice: I will be away for the next week, coming back May 9th. So please check back in 10-ish days for the next installment! I've grossly overestimated my abilities...I thought I could finish at least the main story before I go off into the mountains to find my inner spirit...but nope. :(  

-------------------FOOTNOTES aka Chinese idioms 301-------------------

1 Two literary idioms here that basically mean the same thing: a) 破釜沉舟 (po fu chen zhou): lit. smash the cooking pot and sink the ship, used to describe using all your means to achieve your goal, without any exit plan. b) 背水一战 (bei shui yi zhan): lit. engage in battle with [their] backs turned towards the river, i.e. there is no way out but forward, meaning a last desperate fight in a life or death situation. Both idioms are derived from ancient Chinese military writing dating back to the 2nd century B.C. [return to text]

2 Again, two very literary idioms here: a) 殚精竭虑 (dan jing jie lü): lit. spend all the energy and exhaust all worries, used to describe pouring all of one’s energy and dedication into achieving a goal. b) 步步为营 (bu bu wei ying): 步 means steps, but in ancient writing, it means a distance of five feet. So literally the idiom means building a barrack every five feet during wartime, implying a vigilant and conservative military strategy. In modern terms, it is used to describe careful contemplation, or very cautious
behavior. Both are neutral phrases that can be associated with positive endeavors too. [return to text]

3 孤注一掷 (gu zhu yi zhi): put all the money on the table for a single bet, used to describe putting all one’s strengths and resources into a desperate gamble or a last fighting chance in a difficult situation. [return to text]

4 腹背受敌 (fu bei shou di): lit. attacked by enemies front and back. [return to text]

5 囊中之物 (nang zhong zhi wu): lit. an object inside the pocket, i.e. something easily attainable. [return to text]

6 Here the soldier actually addresses Lin Shu by his old title 少帅 (lit. young general) from his days in the Chiyan army, since they are all men that served under him before being reassigned to the Imperial Guards. But for the sake of consistency, “vice commander” will have to do— (I knew one of those translation choices would come back and bite me in the rear... =.=) [return to text]
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Back from (extended) hibernation! This chapter brings you some much-anticipated fluffy goodness. :)

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

As Lin Shu had predicted, the Jicheng troops arrive promptly at the foot of Jiu-An mountain shortly after midnight. Despite his faith in Lin Shu, Jingyan couldn’t help the anxiety gnawing at his consciousness as he led the reinforcements hastening through the night all the way to Jiu-An mountain. It is not until he sees the heavily battered yet still standing fortress of the hunting palace, as well as the fleet of vigilant Imperial Guards, does he heave a sigh of relief.

Between Lin Shu and him, no words are necessary as they trade a glance across the vast battlefield, above the heads of tens of thousands of armed men. Implicit trust and unspoken intimacy come as naturally as breathing, effortless and instinctual.

At the moment when the battle horns blare from the Jicheng army, Lin Shu orders his men, “Follow the bronze shields!”

The heavily armored soldiers with shields are at the forefront of the Jicheng army, leaving a gap in their formation for Lin Shu’s Imperial Guards; in the back they are immediately followed by the infantry battalion bearing arrows.

Zhen Ping’s eyes are trained on the legion as it advances steadily towards Jiu-An mountain, the blazing torches seem like the golden scales of a dragon poised for attack. His heart is filled with wonder. The Vice Commander and Prince Jing have completely different approaches when it comes to military strategy: the former is unconcerned with norms and often gains victory through unorthodox methods, while the latter deals with a steady hand, his every move founded on sound logic. Yet now the two different forces have become one, their collaboration so fluid as if they had practiced many times beforehand. Both of them are complementing the other’s strategy seamlessly without compromising their own. It is as if they were made to fit together.

It is truly a heavenly fortune to have these two as protectors of the Liang Kingdom. “Trust” cannot even begin to describe the level of tacit understanding and connection between them.

“Zhen Ping, stay close to Jingyan,” Lin Shu raises his eyes to look at the Jicheng army, where Jingyan is taking 10,000 men to attack the Qingli army base. “I haven’t seen that young bodyguard of his, he must have left the boy in the hunting palace, and Lie Zhanying is not here either...Don’t let anyone harm him.”

“Yes, sir,” Zhen Ping adds after a brief pause, “Prince Yu must know that his end is near, his men have no intention to fight further, Prince Jing would not be in any serious danger in this battle.”

“I know...just do as I say.”
At that, a resigned comment floats to the forefront of Zhen Ping’s mind: emotions reign supreme over all logic.[1]

----------------------------------

By the time the Jicheng forces arrive at the base of the Qingli army, most of the insurgents have already fled, knowing that they have no chance at success. The entire base is deserted save a few of Prince Yu’s personal guards.

Xiao Jinghuan knows that his fate has been sealed; he has remained in the tent instead of escaping merely to witness the conclusion of this debacle.

After apprehending an unresisting Prince Yu, Jingyan turns his horse around and sprints towards the hunting palace. When he steps into the entrance hall, the sight that meets his eye is one of a kneeling Lin Shu, asking for the emperor’s forgiveness.

Surprise is written on the emperor’s face, as if befuddled by Lin Shu’s actions, “You have done superbly, for what infraction do you seek forgiveness?”

“As a commander of the Imperial Guards, I have deployed the troops outside the capital without Your Majesty’s permission,” Lin Shu removes his armor and his sword in his kneeling position, head bowed. “Although the situation was of an urgent nature, I have disobeyed Her Majesty the empress’ orders, and have violated the regulations of the Imperial Guards. I shall accept all punishments Your Majesty sees fit to dole out.”

“Putting it like that, are you accusing me of being unjust?” the emperor asks with mock irritation. “Since you noticed something amiss, if you had not disobeyed the orders to come here, would you have left me to die on Jiu-An mountain?”

“I--”

The emperor waves a hand, walking down the dais to personally help Lin Shu up, “Enough with this talk about forgiveness, tell me about the capital.”

“That day, the Empress said that Your Majesty was held hostage by Prince Jing on Jiu-An mountain, while Prince Yu was leading the Qingli army in a rescue attempt, and that the capital had been sealed to protect it from the insurgents. The explanation may have seemed reasonable at first, but was in fact fraught with loopholes,” Lin Shu says. “It was highly suspicious that Prince Yu could have taken command of the Qingli troops while his death was publicly known, he had neither the military token nor the resources. Commander Meng’s loyalty to Your Majesty is absolute, and the 5,000 Imperial Guards in the entourage answer directly to Your Majesty as well. Thus, nothing short of a large army could have overpowered Your Majesty’s protection, and the only major force advancing upon Jiu-An mountain was Prince Yu’s Qingli army.

“The Imperial Guards were the closest reinforcements from the capital. The Empress could have easily ordered them to go to Jiu-An mountain as added insurance, but she did not. The most probable explanation would be that Prince Yu did not dare to touch the Imperial Guards, since he knew very well that these loyal men would never commit such a crime of treason if they realized his true intentions. No amount of promises or threats could have shaken their devotion to the throne. Thus, I concluded that Prince Yu was the instigator of the rebellion, and so I rushed towards Jiu-An mountain with reinforcements. Since we had to leave the capital before curfew, I picked only the best of the cavalry. The remaining Imperial Guards are standing by inside the capital, they are loyal to Your Majesty without question.”
Lin Shu enumerates his reasons one by one calmly. In reality, those pale excuses came to him when he was already miles away from the capital, the 5,000 elites of the Imperial Guards trailing closely behind him. He cannot truthfully tell the emperor that when it came to the explanation of the empress, he wouldn’t doubt it, hell, he wouldn’t believe a single word.

He knows what kind of person Xiao Jingyan is.

The reason for which he left the capital ready for battle was really quite simple: the emperor of the Liang Kingdom was on Jiu-An mountain, and Jingyan, he was also there.

He had to go.

-----------------------------------------

“When did you notice something amiss, and what made you take this risky step that could have meant your death?”

Jingyan stands by the side, a relieved sigh leaving his lips. The emperor would never insult a well-meaning subject who has just saved his life by verbalizing this question. Yet with his suspicious nature, he would mull over all the possible answers until Lin Shu himself gives a satisfactory one, and none of those imaginary possibilities would work in Lin Shu’s favor.

Jingyan had already steeled himself for this moment, that even if he must risk the public ire of the emperor, he would interrogate Lin Shu on his audacious move.

Fortunately, with Lin Shu’s wit, he has foreseen the question and has volunteered the answer in such a natural manner, no mention of Jingyan at all in his explanation, not only successfully obliterating the lingering doubt in the emperor’s mind, but also cementing his own trustworthy position.

“Excellent! The Imperial Guards have displayed extraordinary bravery, truly exemplary as sons of my Liang Kingdom! Meng Zhi, Lin Shu, you two have also been capable leaders to them, good, good!” the emperor praises with satisfaction. “Just in case, Meng Zhi, you will take the 50,000 Jicheng soldiers when you return to the capital, not for fear of resistance from the Imperial Guards in the capital, but for eliminating any possible rebel along the journey. Lin Shu will stay here to protect the royal family. As for Jingyan…” he turns his eyes to his kneeling son on the side, “You have truly worked hard these past few days, go and take care of your injuries, have the imperial physicians take a look.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Jingyan bows and then asks, “Would Your Majesty like to personally interrogate the leader of the rebellion? I can have him brought to the hunting palace.”

The emperor falls into a deep silence, after a long while, he releases a heavy sigh, his voice so hoarse and weary that the next words are barely intelligible, “No more...I have already shed tears for him once, that’s enough.”

Then he rises to his feet as the rest of nobles and officials fall to their knees.

“All of you, listen well. My fifth son, Xiao Jinghuan, died four months ago. The traitor here is nothing but a lowly insurgent usurping the name of Prince Yu. There shall be no mercy for he who impersonates an imperial prince, he will be beheaded immediately upon our return to the capital. From now on, I do not wish to hear a single word from anyone that besmirches my son’s name!”

Everyone in the hall has prostrated themselves obediently on the floor, no one dares to raise an eye to glance at the emperor’s tear-stained face.
Lin Shu and Jingyan exit the hall as one.

Dawn has yet to break, the torches are still blazing from the night before, a barely visible sliver of white gleaming on the horizon.

Before Jingyan could open his mouth to ask, Lin Shu lowers his voice and says, “The empress had the capital patrols pass along the command to seal the city. When I received the news, I asked them to delay the communication to the capital gates, which gave me just enough time to assemble the 5,000 cavalry from the Chiyu division and make it out of the city. When I left, I’ve arranged for my Mother as well as Auntie Jing to be escorted safely out. They are in a secure place, you do not need to worry.”

The pungent smell of charred flesh and blood still hangs heavily in the air, Jingyan feels a sudden vertigo overtake him, only to be caught discretely by Lin Shu’s arms before he could lose his footing.

After three days of trying journey without a single pause and then commanding his men through such an intense battle, plus watching his every action in front of the emperor during the aftermath so as to dispel all suspicions, Jingyan feels his overtaxed body screaming in protest. If he was drained after the Jiu-An mountain incident in the last life, then this time around, since he has quite a few years less in military service and quite a few debilitating injuries more than in the past, Jingyan knows that he has gone far past his limits.

Lin Shu has firmly planted himself to Jingyan’s side, his worry mounting as he watches the other man place one foot in front of the next with a surprising steadiness only sustained by his iron will. Yet he cannot so much as to support him by the arms with so many eyes are on them.

Once they reach the road leading down the mountain, Jingyan’s body wavers as he struggles to mount onto the horse. Lin Shu hurries to catch him, only to have his arm roughly knocked away by the other man.

“Xiao Jingyan! What kind of stupid tantrum are you throwing now?!” Lin Shu hisses in exasperation, worried and annoyed all at once.

Jingyan startles.

In those twenty years on the throne and an endless life without Lin Shu, he has been so accustomed to masking all of his emotions with cold detachment and distant indifference. Yet in front of this very man, his long discarded heart struggles to beat with life, with the emotions of a nineteen-year-old Xiao Jingyan, emotions that he thought he would never remember again.

He did not just push Lin Shu away out of any lingering resentment— he’s forgotten that technically they were still not on speaking terms. Lin Shu has many friends, but he considers Jingyan as his closest one not only because of their shared childhood memories, but also because Jingyan is capable of walking alongside him.

But look at him now, completely exhausted to the point of passing out after just three days of horse riding and a battle, while Lin Shu, who has traveled a similar distance to come to their rescue and fought valiantly in the same battle, barely shows a sign of weariness.

Jingyan admits to himself, he is sulking rather juveniley, trying to hide no small amount of self-pity from Lin Shu.

Lin Shu’s face darkens as Jingyan finally sits atop the horse, and without a second of hesitation, he
flips onto the same horse behind Jingyan. Their two bodies are so seamlessly nestled together that any lingering chill on the armor disappears without a trace. The warmth from his back finally registers in Jingyan’s sluggish mind, “...Nonsense!”

“That’s all you ever say and I’m quite immune to it,” Lin Shu huffs, still not pacified. “Plus, Your Imperial Highness, this is my horse you are riding.”

“......!!” Speechless, Jingyan realizes that he was so focused on getting himself onto the horse without tripping that it completely escaped him whose horse he was attempting to mount.

When he makes a move to get down, Jingyan finds his waist encircled in an iron grasp as Lin Shu pats their horse and commands, “Forward!”

The white horse rears its head at its owner’s voice and breaks into a steady trot down the mountain, completely ignoring the fact that its reins are held in Jingyan’s hand.

The two of them shared a horse more often than not when they were younger, and later when they entered the military, they would do the same when one of them was injured, the other would care for him during the ride.

Yet now, they are ostensibly strangers, each walking on a divergent path.

“Don’t worry, it’s still dark and no one will look at us closely, plus all the guards leading down the mountain are my men, there is no concern of anything reaching His Majesty's ears.”

“......”

Lin Shu is at a complete loss as to the reason of Jingyan’s sullen mood, but can only resign himself to following along-- it’s not like he could leave the man here. As the notorious prince of mischief in the capital, Lin Shu has always been the one to make others bend to his will, humph, when had he so helplessly but voluntarily endured such sour treatment from anyone else? He sighs with exasperation.

They move along at a slow pace on the meandering mountain road, the seasoned battle horse making the ride easy and smooth. Without having to hold onto the reins, Lin Shu has both arms loosely wound around Jingyan’s waist to guard against any accidental tumble, and his eyes vigilantly scanning the area in case of an attack from remaining rebels.

Pure willpower has been the only thing that sustained Jingyan through the past few days. Now, in the hazy morning light, surrounded by trees and cocooned in Lin Shu’s scent, he finally lets his guard down, and sleep overtakes him almost immediately.

Lin Shu is deep in thought about how the other man could be so thin even with a full suit of armor when that said person suddenly falls backwards onto him, a dead weight in his arms.

Lin Shu jolts in apprehension, and sighs in relief when he notices that Jingyan is merely asleep from exhaustion. He adjusts the body into a more comfortable position, taking the reins from his slack hands and says softly to his horse, “Go slower, Jingyan is sleeping.”

----------------------------------------

By the time they arrive at the temporary camp at the foot of the mountain, Jingyan is still sleeping and shows no sign of waking even when Lin Shu gently carries him off the horse and places him on the bed.

Lie Zhanying, who has been waiting in the tent, hurriedly summons the in-house physician, who
diagnoses a low fever induced by the sword wound on the arm and extreme fatigue, and says that the prince would be fine with a good night’s sleep.

“His Highness truly needs some rest, but cleaning up the battlefields and compiling a list of the rebels…”

“Let him rest, I will do it,” interjects Lin Shu.

Zhanying still holds some animosity towards Lin Shu from the assassination incident; although he knows that Lin Shu would not harm Prince Jing, he is unsure of how much help he would provide, or whom he would choose if there were a conflict of interest with Prince Qi. So he asks rather acidly, “You will?”

“About half of the Jicheng army is composed of men who served in the Chiyan army before, they would obey my commands even without Jingyan’s presence. They are more than experienced when it comes to cleaning up the aftermath of a battle, I will have the task done without delay. We can wait to wake Jingyan up after everything is finished,” Lin Shu rises to his feet, “But you still need to come with me.”

Zhanying nods in understanding, “Of course. You and I are carrying out the inventory duty as per His Highness’ directives.”

Lin Shu sits down by the bed and helps Jingyan drink a small cup of water, before turning towards the outside, where Fei Liu is standing guard, “Watch over Jingyan for me.”

“...For...” Fei Liu cocks his head in thought, remembering that Lin Chen has also said on numerous occasions to watch over the Buffalo when he is sick or injured. He clarifies, “For Lin Chen-gege?”

By this point Lin Shu and Zhanying are already a small distance away from the tent, Lin Shu stomps back upon hearing this, he grabs Fei Liu’s face and stuffs a sweet berry rather forcibly into his mouth, punctuating his next words, “For me!”

The fresh berries of the autumn harvest season are bursting with flavor, a happy Fei Liu nods obediently at his Lin Su-gege and promises, “For Su-gege!”

Lin Shu feels his blood boil at anything resembling “Mei” or “Su” these days, his eyes bulging out with irritation as he yells, “For ME!!!”

“.......” Lie Zhanying clears his throat in exasperated embarrassment before fleeing the scene.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who has followed my translation so far! Your feedback and support are invaluable to me!! The story concludes in eight more chapters, plus two chapters of epilogue. I will absolutely finish this (even if it kills me XD)! There mayyy be a few more fanarts related to the fic that I might also translate~ ;P

-------Footnotes-------

1Original here is 关心则乱 (guan xin ze luan), lit. caring [too much] leads to the loss of composure/rationality. This phrase is often prefaced by 无欲则刚 (wu yu ze gang),
meaning a lack of desire makes for a steely resolve. Together they imply that one who wants for nothing would not be easily swayed by external temptations, while one who is too emotionally involved cannot make rational decisions with a clear mind.
Soon after the commotion in the entrance hall, Prince Xian falls ill from the shock of the rebellion and the chill of the palace. When the words reach the emperor, he lets out a sardonic huff at the ridiculously delicate physique of his son—really, he gets sick while all of his elders are perfectly fine! Disappointed, he never follows up with Prince Xian’s health, not even inquiring if the imperial physicians have treated him.

Unfortunately for Prince Xian, not even his mother the Noble Consort Yue cares to tend to him on his sickbed. There is a more pressing matter on her mind: the military token. The token that can command all the troops in the kingdom is still in Prince Jing’s possession, and whether deliberately or coincidentally, the emperor has not demanded its return. If Prince Jing holds onto the token for any longer, there can only be one explanation— to use it as a bargaining chip with the emperor, where his terms are most likely the still-vacant position of the Crown Prince.

Noble Consort Yue gnashes her teeth in barely suppressed agitation; her son Jingxuan is not in a favorable situation now, and Prince Jing is like an unsurmountable mountain in front of them. If he can be eliminated, Jingxuan’s path to the throne would be clear. At the same time, she knows perfectly well that while she could remove a prince from the equation with years of careful plotting, she would never dare to employ the same machinations against a Crown Prince.

Once Jingyan is named heir, all chances would be lost.

And so she stumbles back to the emperor’s side, pleading with all her might, despite knowing that such behaviors would displease the emperor, because she understands him well, understands that the seeds of suspicion are always growing in his mind, that he would never allow someone more talented than himself to possess substantial political power or command over the military.

When the emperor’s expression darkens impossibly from rage, Jingyan’s lieutenant enters the hall to deliver his report.

“Not including the 50,000 men taken away by General Meng Zhi, the Jicheng army has concluded post-battle cleanup as well as the apprehension of remaining rebels. Prince Jing has bade me to return the military token to Your Majesty,” says Lie Zhanying.

The emperor shoots a glare at Noble Consort Yue and asks in a softer tone, “Where is Jingyan? Why has he not come personally?”

“His Highness has collapsed upon returning to the base.”

Still wracked with guilt for having to kill Prince Yu, the emperor stands abruptly at the news of Jingyan’s ill health, visible apprehension on his face.

Lie Zhanying hurries to add, “The in-house physician has already been to see him, saying that it’s a
minor fever from traveling in the rain and some battle injuries, His Highness has taken the medicine and should be fine.”

“You inattentive fools!” rebukes the emperor impatiently, then summoning Eunuch Gao into the hall, “Send the imperial physicians to have a better look, use the medicine they packed for me...Jingyan has always been one to swallow his complaints in situations like this.”

Eunuch Gao bows in understanding and leaves the hall, sweeping by the kneeling Lie Zhanying and the seated Noble Consort Yue, whose face contorts in barely restrained indignation.

Upon their return to the capital, Prince Yu is immediately incarcerated in the Imperial Prison, in that “Han” cell reserved for princes.

The public statement of this entire affair announces Prince Yu’s death four months prior during his journey to the feudal land; as for the empress, considering that she was deceived by maneuvering traitors like Xia Jiang, her imperial seal has been confiscated and her person confined to her chambers.

The escaped Xia Jiang has been accused of high treason and beguiling the empress and Prince Yu’s followers into collusion. There shall be no pardon for his crimes, and his arrest wanted for the highest bounty. After thorough investigation, the Ministry of Justice has declared the rest of the Xuanjing Bureau innocent, thus sparing them from being implicated in the case. Officer Xia Dong shall take over the position as director in the interim.

The emperor makes no more visits to Xiao Jinghuan after giving him everything he could reasonably bestow. When he presses the crimson seal on the decree announcing his son’s execution, he expels a long breath, face visibly aging as if all life has left him.

Jingyan follows the official who goes to deliver the decree into the Imperial Prison and watches from the shadows; he is merely here to see his fifth brother go, not to engage in any conversation.

Prince Yu’s end has not changed much. The only thing different from the past life is that Princess Yu died in that crash over the cliff, and she was not yet with child. Perhaps that is the reason for which Xiao Jinghuan has not begged the emperor for a dying wish, instead has calmly waited for the poisoned wine from his Father in this darkened cell. Or perhaps he had many questions he wanted to ask the emperor, only to have them disintegrate into nothingness when he knew that his Father signed his death warrant.

Before the official could finish reading the full decree, Xiao Jinghuan snatches the wine flask from the tray and pours its entire contents down his throat without hesitation. He cannot even wait for a second at the thought of his wife, already expecting him on the other side of the Lethe.

Though the “Han” cell has not housed Brother Qi in this life, it is still tainted with the blood of an imperial prince.

There was a small part of Jingyan that had wished for the emperor to spare Prince Yu. After all, he is not nearly as obsessed with the throne as he was in the last life; if not for the grave that he dug for himself and the suspicions he planted in the emperor’s mind, perhaps Prince Yu could have preserved himself in a carefree life. But if the emperor did spare him, Jingyan would have demanded indignantly as to why he insisted on killing Brother Qi in the past, why the differential treatment for two equally beloved sons?
Knowing that Xiao Jingyu is still alive and well in this life does nothing to erase the endless grief and despair that he felt so keenly all those years ago, the loss of his closest friend and his most respected brother etching an indelible scar on this resurrected body of his.

He remembers the countless days after finding out about the tragedy, in which he sobbed so hard that it almost took his breath away; he remembers the sharp pain of rubbles digging into his palm when he stumbled off his horse just outside the vacant mansion of the Lin family; he remembers the permanent chill from Mei Changsu’s fingers, the weight upon his arms every time he lifted the pen over the parchment on his imperial throne, as if Brother Qi’s gentle hand was covering his own.

When he steps out of the Imperial Prison, he sees Lin Shu waiting for him. A flurry of snow falls between them.

In a flash, he sees his much younger self playing with Lin Shu in the snow, and then, Mei Changsu’s pale but determined face in the blizzard, urging him against rash actions.

The same snowfall is like an impenetrable barrier, separating two lifetimes.

With the departure of Xia Jiang and Prince Yu, many familiar faces have also disappeared from the palace, some from illness and some from death. The palace enjoys a rare period of tranquility before things fall back to their usual rhythms.

The palace is bustling with activity as the workers hasten the renovation of Zhiluo Residence for Consort Jing’s return. With this influx of new servants, Noble Consort Yue has requested several for her own use. Xiao Jingyan is like an invisible blade in the darkness, it would be too late to escape when you feel its weight on the your neck, and perhaps even at the moment of death, you still do not know the face of its wielder. Though she has no concrete evidence, but her instincts, or rather, her stubborn bias tells her that he is inexplicably connected to the fall from grace of both Prince Qi and Prince Yu.

So whether it is for Jingxuan’s sake or for sheer survival, Xiao Jingyan is an obstacle that must be removed. There is no more reason to hesitate.

Fortunately, the number of new faces in the palace makes disguising her men as servants an easy task.

Noble Consort Yue’s plans are focused on assassinations and poisons. Compared to intricate schemes that take months to execute, this kind of method would have a higher chance at success for its brusque efficiency and unpredictability, particularly for men like Prince Jing, who believes that a suit of armor and an honorable disposition would shield him from all harm.

Pleased with herself, Noble Consort Yue delivers the first strike.

Yet the servant bearing the poison never reports back. She awaits anxiously for several more days before following up with an investigation, which only reveals the mysterious disappearance of the servant, as if evaporated overnight. Alarmed, she lays low for the next few days and sighs in relief when nothing seems out of the ordinary, and Prince Jing shows no sign of marching into her residence, accusing her of murder.

Perhaps the servant simply fled in fear, scared that her actions would be exposed. A few days later, Noble Consort Yue tries her luck again. This time, she sends a eunuch to carefully bury a poisoned needle in the seam of a robe that is part of a gift from the emperor to Prince Jing. Unfortunately, the
eunuch never makes it back either. Prince Jing enters the palace the next morning to give his gratitude to the emperor, dressed in that very robe, his strides sure and swift as always.

Discreetly, Li Gang and his men hoist up the body of the poisoned eunuch onto a service wagon to exit the palace, the blackened end of the needle gleaming ominously on the man’s neck.

Since those initial incidents, none of her numerous attempts has been successful, whether it is paid assassins from the pugilist world, or petty schemes to frame the prince. It is as if an invisible hand has weaved an indestructible web of protection, shielding Prince Jing from all harm. The peculiar thing is that this puppet master does not seem inclined to expose any of Noble Consort Yue’s misdeeds to the emperor—so far he has only been adopting defensive measures against her attacks.[4]

Then it cannot be Prince Jing himself. But how could she be completely unaware of such a person who can single-handedly control the entire capital?

Finally, after so many failed attempts, Noble Consort Yue feels her patience expire and decides to have one last shot during the New Year’s Eve banquet in the palace. One simple plate of drugged taishi pastry[5] would have passed many hands before it reaches its victim, she could easily claim innocence even if it were discovered.

Thus, it is with much consternation that Noble Consort Yue watches helplessly as the plate somehow arrives on Prince Xian’s table instead.

When those poisonous taishi pastries that were supposed to be for Jingyan suddenly appear in front of his eyes, Prince Xian startles so hard that he almost jumps from his seat. He exchanges a horrified glance with his Mother, chopsticks clattering onto the table from his trembling hands. Noble Consort Yue does not fare much better in her position right next to the emperor, cold sweat has broken out all over her and she clenches her fists in fright.

While she is gripped by terror, Lin Shu enters the hall, having finished his task to deliver celebratory meals to noble households courtesy of the emperor.

In high spirits from the festive drinks, the emperor beckons Lin Shu closer with a benevolent smile, “You have had a busy year yourself, now that you’ve moved out into your own manor, I shall give you this chance to choose any dish you wish, think of it as a well-earned reward.”

Lin Shu perks up and forgoes the usual politeness, his eyes sparkling with unfeigned want as he asks, “Are there taishi pastries?”

The emperor chuckles at Lin Shu’s childish delight and waves a hand at the plate on Jingxuan’s table, agreeing easily, “Take it, take it! And those date pastries on Jingyan’s table too, you may have them all!”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!” Lin Shu hugs the two plates close with a satisfied smile, and on his way out, tosses one of each kind into his mouth.

Prince Xian’s face instantly drains of all color.

Noble Consort Yue grips her wine goblet so hard that it threatens to crack.

While the emperor’s eyes are glazing over from the wine, hers are perfectly lucid: she distinctly saw Lin Shu sliding the piece of taishi pastry into his sleeve before it could reach his mouth, only eating the date pastry instead.
He knew that the taishi pastries were poisoned!

She slumps helplessly back into her chair next to the oblivious emperor. Years of navigating through the machinations of the Inner Palace have molded her into a consummate actress-- she could cry even when she is overjoyed, and she could laugh even when agony has swallowed her whole.

But now, she cannot muster any energy to smile, because she knows that her son will never win.

Because Lin Shu and all the Imperial Guards under his command are that invisible hand. It is a hand that has cocooned Prince Jing in an impervious shield, it is also a hand that would transform into an iron claw to clamp around her and Jingxuan’s neck, when the time calls for it.

There is nothing they can do against its prowess; they can only wait obediently as the executioner’s axe falls upon their exposed necks, coldly ending their lives.

-----------------------------------------------------------

The situation cannot be more different from last life: Jingyan is now the most accomplished prince in the Court, plus the overt animosity from Prince Xian and Noble Consort Yue, there is no longer need to conceal his talents, instead, the best course of action is to put every fiber of his being into this fight.

Soon enough, Prince Xian is backed into a corner by Jingyan’s relentless attacks, his wrongdoings exposed one after the other. Within a year, his supporters have been either demoted or jailed.

At first, the emperor has attempted to exert his imperial control to preserve his second son, but he soon realizes that this disappointment of a son is beyond saving. And while Jingyan has been unyielding in his political censures against his brother, he seems utterly disinterested in gaining favor with the emperor.

This night, the emperor dreams of his fifth son seated on a raised dais, the glamorous ornament of a seven-pearl prince upon his head; by his side is Jingxuan dressed in the robes of a Crown Prince.

A man in white approaches as both rise to their feet, offering a polite bow with identical fawning smiles, they call out, “Sir Su.”

That man sits quietly amongst the others, poised and elegant, with the guileless appearance of a scholar.

But the emperor knows that he must not allow this man to come near him. This is a dangerous man, he comes only for vengeance. Curiously, however, everyone around the man seems oddly familiar with him: Nihuang, the Grand Empress, Grand Princess Li Yang, Xie Yu, Jinghuan, Jingxuan and Jingrui...The emperor watches the scene from barely a foot away, yet none of them takes notice of his presence, ignoring His Imperial Majesty!

Everyone flocks to him.

Everyone will help him to plot against me!

He sweeps his resentful eyes across the small crowd of the people gathered around Su Zhe, burning their faces into his memory. Then, as if scorched by the intensity of his hatred, these figures in his dreams turn their heads in unison towards him. Su Zhe rises to his feet from his place in the center of the group, fixing his penetrating, half-mocking gaze on the emperor, who hurriedly lifts a sleeve to shield his face, which does nothing to stop Su Zhe’s approaching footsteps.

“No...Stop! You traitor!!”
The emperor snaps awake from his nightmare, arms still flailing in a futile attempt to fend off the terror of his dreams. Sleep eludes him.

He stumbles off the bed to reach his desk when he suddenly realizes the answer he’s been looking for-- there is still Jingyan.

Jingyan has never appeared in his dreams with all the others. True, with a personality like his, he loathes strategists like Su Zhe. The emperor glances at the growing pile of reports on his desk, each voicing a louder complaint against Prince Xian after the next, he heaves a heavy sigh and calls Eunuch Gao into the chamber, “Summon Jingyan into the palace after sunrise...he’s won.”

---------------------------------

The position of a consort rises with the prestige of her son. In preparation for the naming the Crown Prince, moving Consort Jing back to the palace becomes a top priority. Before Eunuch Gao could reach her residence in the country villa to pass on the imperial decree, another eager servant has already delivered the good news to Consort Jing.

An involuntary shudder runs through her when she hears that Jingyan has been named Crown Prince. She grabs onto the messenger maid and asks repeatedly in a whisper, “What did you say? Say it again.”

The maid mistakes her nervousness for excitement, thinking that Consort Jing must not wish to disturb Noble Consort Chen with a raised voice, so she happily repeats the news again.

But this time, only muffled sobs meet her words. When the maid raises her head slightly in puzzlement, the sight that greets her eyes is one of a trembling Consort Jing, whose long sleeve could barely hide the tears streaming down her face, as she tries desperately to quell the sobs and the violent shudders that wrack her entire frame.

None of this seems like tears of joy, muses the maid, but no matter how she placates the Consort, the only response she receives are silent shakes of the head. Then, she and everyone else are summarily dismissed from the chamber, leaving Consort Jing sitting by the window alone.

“Jingyan...my child...are you abandoning your mother…?”

---------------------------------------

When Princess Jin Yang receives the news, she finds Lin Shu in a daze by the window of his new manor, his hands unconsciously stroking the crimson tassels of the sword ornament. Jingyan is now the Crown Prince. Princess Jin Yang feels a pang of concern for her son-- she knows well the reason for which he has stayed in the capital these past several years.

Lin Shu wants to support Prince Qi, but would never do anything to potentially harm Jingyan. These two aspirations are completely contradictory by design, only someone as stubborn as her son still deludes himself in finding the perfect compromise.

“There is only one vacancy for the Crown Prince, I’ve already known that Prince Xian cannot do anything to obstruct his path,” says Lin Shu quietly, as if to himself. “He has finally fulfilled his wish.”

“Xiaoshu…” Princess Jin Yang takes a step forward, watching her son as he stares out the window silently; of all the spacious rooms in his new manor, he’s chosen one that faces nothing but the back wall as his bedroom, “What are you going to do?”
When the question leaves her mouth, she is unsure of what answer she wishes to hear. But Lin Shu shakes his head.

Princess Jin Yang mistakes the gesture as a negative affirmation, when she hears him say in a firm voice, “I will do nothing. The chosen candidate for the Crown Prince has already been announced in an imperial decree, if I insist on helping Brother Qi to contend for the throne now, His Majesty would have to revoke Jingyan’s title...it would not be a small transgression...I cannot do it.”

“Then...have you given up?”

Lin Shu shakes his head again, this time meaning, ‘I don’t know.’

Seeing her son in such a state of anguish tears at Princess Jin Yang’s heart. She takes one of his hands in her own and says softly, “Xiaoshu, I should not be telling you this, but Jingyan is different from our current Imperial Majesty, even if he ascends the throne one day, you would not find yourself in the same situation as your Father. But you must remember one thing: between the two of you, things will no longer be the same as they were before. From this moment on, you must treat him as your sovereign.”

She sighs, “Even throughout the course of history, there have only been a few that stayed true to their promises both as a friend and a subject.”

“......I know, Mother.”

As Lin Shu utters these words, an image flashes across his eyes-- an image of his seventeen-year-old self and Jingyan walked side by side, with their shoulders brushing, onto the barren hills overlooking the capital, of the promises they made to each other as they pointed at the vast expanse of beautiful land before them, saying that they would always stay together, to protect the Liang Kingdom together.

Lin Shu does not want to forsake these promises.

“As a son of the Lin family, I will never abandon my duty to guard our Kingdom, and I will give all my life to protect our ruler...Jingyan will be a good emperor,” he pauses, his fearless confidence on the battlefield completely absent as he adds in a trembling voice that resembles a sob, “we will never be the same again…”

Chapter End Notes

My selective memory sometimes serves me quite well, sometimes it really comes back to bite me in my unsuspecting rear. I realized that I have very little recollection of what happened in these next few chapters leading up to the end, probably because the contents were automatically filtered out after I read it the first time-- the brain is really very good at self-preservation, you see? XD This is all to say brace yourselves against the giant bomb of angst that will be coming your way very soon.

-------Footnotes-------

1 凤印 (feng yin), lit. seal of the phoenix, is the symbol of the empress’ power as the ruler of the Inner Palace, aka the emperor’s household, as well as her status as second-in-command if the emperor is absent. [return to text]
防不胜防 (fang bu sheng fang) is used here to describe Noble Consort Yue’s assassination plans, literally it means “to guard but cannot guard,” i.e. impossible to defend effectively, impossible to guard against something even with all of your might. It is often used in situations where the attack is foreseen but still unavoidable. [return to text]

兴师问罪 (xing shi wen zui): lit. deploy an army to denounce the faults of (the enemy). Originating in the Song Dynasty in the 1100s, this phrase has obvious military roots, but it is often used in contemporary writing to mean “confronting someone/some group publicly to accuse them of a crime.” [return to text]

兵来将挡 (bing lai jiang dang): lit. [if] the armies come, [we have] military generals to block them. This phrase often precedes another, 水来土掩 (shui lai tu yan), lit. if the flood comes we’ll block with earth/soil. Together, the idiom usually means using appropriate measures for different situations, however, here in context the first half also conveys the meaning of adopting a defensive tactic, i.e. Lin Shu would thwart whatever schemes Noble Consort Yue devises without simply taking her out of the equation, his actions like a silent warning to her. [return to text]

太师糕 (tai shi gao): lit. the imperial tutor pastry, believed to be an invention of the TV production team. When they were filming, they could not find a proper representation for a fictional pastry described in the book, so they made up this taishi pastry instead. It’s supposedly Fei Liu’s favorite snack. The closest real-world equivalent, taishi cake, is a round pastry with a flaky crust and a sweet-savory filling, usually composed of minced pork, bean paste and sometimes dried osmanthus flower. [return to text]

母以子贵 (mu yi zi gui): lit. the mother’s position depends on her son’s accomplishments. Stemming from patriarchal societal structures, this phrase explains the fundamental reason for which women, especially those in higher classes, poured all of their energy into creating a better future for their sons, which usually entailed becoming civil or military officer, or in the imperial family, the Crown Prince. In a world where women had next to no careers of their own, their value and thus their status were dependent largely on those of their sons. [return to text]
I know you all want more angst after ch. 35, right?? so here is one of the fanarts I said I'd translate. The gorgeous art belongs to the talented 橡树洞, and I'm sharing it here with her permission, please go and support her original on LOFTER here. She has done a couple more pieces that I will also translate later. :)

Father......
In this stormy night...

My dear husband, can you find your way to Cliff Mei?

This is...
The military camp in the East Sea when I was nineteen...

I'm the Fireball? Hah! Then he's the Buffalo! I have to keep him on a leash!
SIR!

We are just one day away from Cliff Mei,

There is someone claiming to be Prince Jing here to see you...
Jingyan?!

My name is not Lin Shu, it's Lin Su, S-U-- Jingyan is ill and I'm here to see him.

Lin Su...

Su-gege!!
I found it when I was climbing over some walls— it's separated from Prince Jing's manor only by a hidden ditch, but since the entrances of the two houses face completely different directions, no one would be the wiser.

The house itself is already furnished, it just needs a good cleaning and I can move in in a few days.

*Land deed

Are you going to dig a secret passage?

Why would I do that? I'll just jump over the walls if I need him!
Look! Our Young Prince is holding onto Prince Jing for dear life! He won’t let go!

The child must feel a special kinship to Jingyan, before now nobody could make him laugh or cry!
In this life,

Have you fulfilled all of your wishes?
《一世真》
擂文
Dressed in crimson formal robes, Jingyan stares at his frosty reflection in the icy pond below, in the same Eastern Palace he had occupied in the last life.\footnote{1}

Back then, he was standing here in Brother Qi’s stead. Now, he is standing here for the sake of Brother Qi.

In the past, while burdened by the uncleared injustice of Brother Qi, Xiaoshu and 70,000 Chiyan soldiers, and bolstered by many grand plans to help revive the kingdom, Jingyan’s mind was constantly whirling between the past and the future. But now, all he feels is the kind of calm that comes after a long and harsh storm, when everything has fallen back to its place.

It’s been so long...so many years of tirelessly marching forward, and with this last step, he can finally have his respite.

His hazy reflection looks back at him, the ephemeralness of it all like a reminder that the life he has now is but a manifestation of all the undying hopes of those who have passed in time.

He has never really existed in this world.

He has carefully stowed away everything that belonged to the young and innocent Xiao Jingyan, never daring to touch it nor claiming it for himself. Despite his coveted position now as the Crown Prince, where he bows to none but one other person, the only thing that he can truly call his is Mei Changsu, who is only an entity of the past.

Fortunately, with the years he spent to detach himself from those around him, they are already accustomed to his increasing distance. Then very soon, they will be used to his absence as well.

--------------------------

“--That’s what I’m saying! Xie Yu and his family had it coming…”

Qi Meng’s boisterous voice drifts from the direction of the Great Hall, Jingyan draws his cape closer and walks towards him.

“Something interesting? Please do share.”

At the sight of Jingyan, Qi Meng gives a proper bow in greeting before saying with a laugh, “Nothing of importance, just some words on the street about scandals involving Xie Yu’s family!”

When he notices that Jingyan has stopped in his tracks, apparently quite intrigued by the information, Qi Meng stutters through the whole story.

Ever since the true circumstances behind Jingrui’s birth were revealed a few years ago, the Xie and Zhuo families have completely cut ties; Zhuo Dingfeng has gone so far as to declare that no member...
of his clan would ever set foot in the capital again. Two years ago, Zhuo Dingfeng had arranged a match for his son with the daughter of a fellow esteemed pugilist leader, however, much to everyone’s consternation, his usually obedient and filial son eloped on the very day of the wedding with none other than the youngest daughter of the Xie family, Xie Qi.

To have such a scandal arise on what should have been a day of celebration had completely dishonored Zhuo Dingfeng and incensed Xie Yu, both of whom had then immediately dispatched search teams to find the two wayward children.

Jingrui had also personally left the capital in search for his sister, hoping to find her before the Zhuo family to spare her any further harassment. Unfortunately, looking for someone in the pugilist world requires a very different approach than the proper official channels, so much of the Xie family’s efforts have been to no avail.

Qi Meng finishes the tale as he would any other interesting anecdote outside the palace walls, only to hear his lord say, “Take a team of men and you must find them.”

Befuddled, Qi Meng scratches his head and inquires gruffly, “...Your Highness? This is the dirty laundry of the Xie family, they’ve become the laughing stock of the pugilist world for losing their son, why should we get involved in this business?”

“......” Jingyan offers no word of explanation, but his slight frown immediately shuts up the other man.

The silent and imposing aura emanating from Jingyan elicits an involuntary shudder from Qi Meng. His Highness would only ever relax in a moment of laughter with those who have fought by his side from the beginning, but since being named Crown Prince, even these last vestiges of smile have left him.

Even someone as dense as Qi Meng has noticed the change, and has tried to enliven the atmosphere with all sorts of amusing stories. Yet this one time when he finally manages to catch His Highness’ attention, the amount of uncanny interest he receives is utterly unexpected.

Lie Zhanying, who has been silent so far, takes a step forward to voice his opinion, “Your Highness, Zhuo Qingyao is a martial arts master of the highest calibre, it would not be an easy task to find him.”

“Go ask Gong Yu, the Langya Hall should have information on it.”

“The Langya Hall?” Zhanying startles at the name; although Lin Chen said that he did not wish to be involved in casual matters of the Court when he left Gong Yu in the capital, the arrangement clearly granted Jingyan access to the resources of the Langya Hall, should he ever need it.

Jingyan has never taken him on the offer since, but now he is about to owe the Langya Hall a big favor for the sake of the Xie family, not to mention that Gong Yu still has an unresolved personal feud with Xie Yu, now he would ask her to help the man’s daughter.

Though to their relieved surprise, when Zhanying goes to find Gong Yu, she hands him a silk pouch without much preface.

“Please pardon my impudence, but Miss Gong Yu seems to have anticipated that His Highness would come with such a request,” asks Zhanying.

“My Master has bade me to give Prince Jing this pouch if he inquires about this matter. I do not
know anything else, do not ask me further,” she replies coolly.

When Jingyan opens the pouch, he finds a brief message with the words “Linxia Mountain, Jianming Temple”.

Zhanying immediately sets off with a group of men and indeed finds Zhuo Qingyao and Xie Qi, who is already two-months with child.

Qi Meng has disguised the two discretely in a group of men who are transporting supplies to the border guards in the north. They’ve stopped just before reaching the northern borders, in a remote village where the retired Master Zhou Xuanqing has a small villa for occasional lectures. The place is well-secluded and rarely frequented by the pugilist crowd, making it the perfect hideout for Xie Qi to have a smooth pregnancy.

The couple is immensely grateful, as expected.

When Qi Meng returns to the capital, he complains with a sullen face, “Your Highness went to such lengths to help them, even owing a huge favor to the Langya Hall! If it were me I wouldn’t have bothered, it’s not as if Xie Yu would thank us.”

Jingyan shakes his head without further comment, instead turning his attention towards the window. The Eastern Palace does not have plum trees, nor is there anything besides piles of official scrolls in the Crown Prince’s room, the whole atmosphere quite austere. Yet this morning a single branch of blooming plum blossoms had appeared on his window sill, its distinct fragrance permeating through the room and bringing life to the otherwise barren space.

Jingyan’s gaze falls on the crimson center of the flower. Mei Changsu had always felt regret for Xie Qi’s tragic end. Now that he has erased that regret in this life, that man would be glad, right?

Plus, this whole affair has given him a renewed sense of optimism-- that although the wheels of time has never stopped churning, although the oceans of yesterday have become today’s mountains[3]-- the crimson thread of love still finds its destined recipients.

Once he takes over the duty to govern the Court, he can finally summon Nihuang back to the capital. Very soon.

The emperor continues to be plagued by incessant nightmares these past couple of years, his declining mental clarity has made him transfer more and more responsibilities to Jingyan.

This autumn, he leaves the capital on a customary inspection of the harvesting season in the surrounding provinces, making the Crown Prince the imperial proxy in the Court.

Under the Crown Prince’s governance, both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Revenue have seen significant overhauls in policy, in comparison, the Ministry of Rites has taken the sidelines. So it is to everyone’s surprise that the Crown Prince has suddenly called for an urgent audience with the Minister of Rites as well as his direct subordinate.

When the Minister has barely entered the grand hall of the Eastern Palace, the Crown Prince hurls a report at his feet, demanding, “What is this?”

The minister takes a couple of steps forward to pick up the pages and stammers, “This...this is a request from Princess Nihuang...indicating her wish to marry next year...to Captain Nie Duo.”
In the absence of the late Lord Mu, the current head of the family has rights to submit a written betrothal. Although Princess Nihuang has always been in the emperor’s favor, if the imperial family does not arrange for a marital union, then at her age, the elders of her clan do have the authority to choose a match for her. In addition, the emperor has decreed last year that everything except military matters would go directly to the Eastern Palace, so when the Ministry of Rites received the Princess’ request, no one thought twice about it. It was stamped with the ministry’s seal of approval before being submitted to the Eastern Palace for review.

Thus, the Crown Prince’s abrupt summons came as a complete surprise; the minister and his colleague exchange a tense look, neither having any idea as to what they have done to incur the ire of the Crown Prince, who usually does not spare much time for the affairs of their ministry.

“With Nie Duo?” asks Jingyan.

The official ventures hesitantly, “…Yes, a captain in the Guangzhou army. He used to serve in the Chiyan army and is the younger brother of vice general Nie Feng.”

“Enough! You are lying!!” Jingyan snaps around, his robes whirling, “How dare he!”

Both the minister and the official are veterans in the Court, but neither has seen the usually mild-tempered Crown Prince in such a state of rage. They immediately duck their heads in stunned deference, afraid to even breathe too loudly.

“Who gave you the permission to approve the request??” comes the next incensed demand.

Princess Nihuang has been the acting head of the Mu household and the Yunnan province in her younger brother’s stead ever since the late Lord Mu’s passing, and it has been more than a decade since she was promised to Lin Shu in marriage. However, the two families have never formally exchanged a betrothal contract, so they have practical freedom to marry whomever they wish now.

Anyways, the Lin family has yet to voice any objection to the marriage, on what grounds is the Crown Prince having such a fit?

Yet, out of concern for their own lives, the officials would rather swallow their befuddlement than risk the obvious ire of the Crown Prince, privately musing that the Princess has extraordinary bad luck today, perhaps she had somehow displeased the Prince?

“Then this request…”

“Put it on hold,” says the Crown Prince without hesitation. “Redirect all communications from the House of Mu to the Eastern Palace from now on, and you are strictly forbidden from relaying a word of this matter to anyone.”

Both officials know enough of the Prince’s unyielding style to realize that this command brooks no argument, so they hurriedly bow their understanding and exit the hall with their heads still lowered. Not a word passes through the nervous silence between the two as they make their way out of the palace.

He still remembers that day when he stood on the parapet of the capital gates to send off the troops, the farewell he witnessed between Nihuang and Lin Shu before they parted ways.

It was not until many years after his succession to the throne, during one of her visits to the capital to pay respects to the Lin family memorials, did Nihuang finally divulge the words that she traded with...
Lin Shu that day.

“Brother promised me that in our next life, he would accompany me to see the distant lands together, to experience all their glory;” her gaze fell onto the pearl in front of Lin Shu’s memorial tablet, visible longing in her eyes. “He was the liveliest of us all, but now he only has this pearl to keep him company.”

“If there is another life...” the usually composed military commander whose name alone inspired tremendous fear in her enemies of the South collapsed onto the floor, overcome with the force of her sobs. “Brother...please remember your promise.”

The last syllable of her words still resounds in Jingyan’s ears as if it were yesterday.

**Xiaoshu is still waiting for her!!**

*How could she betray him?! How dare she break his heart? How dare she not love him?!!*

Jingyan tightens his fist impossibly around his pen, glaring daggers at the two adjacent names on the parchment in front of him. Nie Duo...this should have been Lin Shu’s place! Lin Shu’s name should have been the one written here!

In this life, he is no longer the frail Mei Changsu whose every breath could have been his last, now he can tour the world with his loved one by his side, watching the seasons change and their hairs gray, and he would finally be able to fulfill the promise he made a lifetime ago.

Jingyan’s gaze is burning a hole in the report, flames of indignation dancing in his eyes, as if the thing he treasures more than life itself has been tossed away carelessly by another.

He cannot even dream for Lin Shu’s love, yet Mu Nihuang cares nothing for it. Lin Shu has suffered through so much, for the prosperity of their kingdom and for the name of justice, he deserves only the very best person, the very best of everything in the world.

Indignation, resentment, and anguish are welling up in Jingyan...for Lin Shu.

Overcome with a maelstrom of emotions, he dimly registers crimson droplets of blood dripping onto the parchment.

The pen has snapped into two pieces from his force, its sharp edges digging into his palm, yet he feels no pain. He watches with detachment as blood quickly suffuses his entire hand, then, a sudden shudder runs through him.

In the last life, Nihuang never had any interaction with Nie Duo, since Mei Changsu had sent Wei Zheng to help her in the battle against the Southern Chu. In this life, however, he was the one to save Nie Duo and bade him to go in Nihuang’s aid with the naval strategies. After that, it was also he who had arranged for Nie Duo to serve in a town near Nihuang’s southern bases.

When he searches his memory, Jingyan remembers that several years ago, when Nihuang came to the capital to take Mu Qing back to Yunnan, she had mentioned that Nie Duo would help her train the navy every spring and autumn.

So it was he who spun the wheel of misfortune.

It was he who pushed Xiaoshu over the precipice.
It was he who has condemned Xiaoshu to a desolate life without his most beloved one.

Xiaoshu...the person he has loved for two lifetimes...the person whose happiness means more than his own life.

He stumbles back a few steps, his long sleeves brushing through the ebony ink on the desk, knocking over the flickering candle. He drops into the chair, deep anguish contorting his features.

“Xiaoshu...I’m sorry…”

Outside the room, Lie Zhanying first hears the sound of objects crashing onto the ground, followed by a long silence, then faint, broken sobs. He frowns in concern and hesitates for a brief moment, before deciding that the matter cannot wait, so he says, “Your Highness, there is word from the Grand Empress’ residence...requesting your attendance immediately.”

-----------------------------------------------

The health of the Grand Empress has been on a steady decline since autumn, and her dementia worse than ever.

A crowd of weeping nobles has already gathered by her bedside, and at Jingyan’s hurried approach, they all part ways to make room for him to kneel by the Grand Empress.

Jingyan feels as if a dull knife has sliced his throat into shreds, he cannot utter a single sound as he grasps her withered hands.

“Jingyan...you came…” the ancient woman cannot even open her eyes, though she’s identified Jingyan with her hands caressing his.

“...Yes.”

“Good, good...glad you are here,” she turns her head with great difficulty and asks, “Where are Jingyu and Xiaoshu?”

“Grandmother, they are almost here,” assures Princess Jin Yang, looking towards the door to see Lin Shu rushing towards them, still clad in armour from his military exercise, his eyes red.

Princess Li Yang says softly in the Grand Empress’ ear, “Grandmother, Xiaoshu is here.”

“Xiaoshu...where?” she struggles to get up when everyone hurry forward to support her, “Xiaoshu…”

“Great Granny…” Lin Shu clutches onto her hands, his voice raspy.

“Xiaoshu, you just said that you were playing hide-and-seek...and you couldn’t find Jingyan,” she smiles her usual benevolent smile.

At that, Princess Li Yang quickly muffles her sob as tears begin streaming down her face.

In their childhood, this group of children would often play hide-and-seek in the palace. Whenever Lin Shu couldn’t find Jingyan, he would simply go back to the Grand Empress’ residence, waiting to catch the other boy when he returned for a candy break.

“Xiaoshu...Jingyan is right here, Great Granny has caught him right here for you,” she takes Jingyan’s hand and places it in Lin Shu’s open palm until the two hands are tightly clasped together.
“...You two be good, Great Granny is leaving…”

The wizened hand gives one last pat on their joint hands, then drops lifelessly onto the bed.

The sound of the knell tolling echoes through the capital, one after the other, a total of twenty-seven times, each one wailing a story of loss.

Chapter End Notes

Current translation goal: how can I make this sound more angsty? xD

---------------Footnotes-------------

1 东宫 (dong gong): lit. Eastern Palace, is the residence of the Crown Prince. As the heir, the Crown Prince was the next-highest in authority after his father the Emperor, who resided in the center of the palace, so the heir’s residence was the next best location in the east, a direction that faces the sun. It is also used to directly refer to the Crown Prince, e.g., “The Eastern Palace has requested your presence”. [return to text]

2 不怒自威 (bu nu zi wei): lit. (referring to one’s disposition) naturally intimidating without being angry. The phrase is usually used to describe someone in a position of authority, their strong personal aura that inspires involuntary reverence. [return to text]

3 Original here encompasses the usage of the idiom 沧海桑田 (cang hai sang tian), lit. the blue seas [have turned into] marshlands, it’s a widely used phrase to express the inevitable passage of time, usually in the context of irretrievable love/friendship. [return to text]

4 In describing Jingyan’s disposition as viewed by his subordinates here, the author uses two adjectives, 说一不二 (shuo yi bu er), lit. says one and [there will not be] two, i.e. one who does not go back on his word. 雷厉风行 (lei li feng xing): lit. fierce as the thunder and swift as the wind, originally used to describe the efficient fashion in which the emperor executed new legislations, but now can indicate simply the speed and certainty with which something is accomplished. Both idioms have positive connotations. [return to text]

5 A reminder: Nihuang calls Mei Changsu/Lin Shu 兄长 (xiong zhang) in the drama, which is a polite form of “older brother”. It’s in the Chinese culture to address someone older in age but still in the same generation with “brother” or “sister”, it confers both respect and a degree of intimacy. It does not automatically imply any sort of biological relationship, although the form of address is the same for one’s blood-relatives, which can become a source of confusion. (That’s why context is key~) [return to text]

6 Here Nihuang is referred to as “巾帼女将” (jin guo nü jiang), lit. jin-guo female military commander. 巾帼 was a handkerchief or headdress that women (often of higher classes) wore in Ancient China, it then became a term to refer to a woman. In literary writing, it is often used in the context of the idiom 巾帼不让须眉 (jin guo bu rang xu mei), where 须眉 (beard and brows) refers to a man, so together they mean that a
woman is not inferior to (or as good as) a man. Obviously in the feudal patriarchal society, this was the highest compliment a woman could receive for her accomplishments that were measured by the same standards as a man’s, usually including martial arts expertise, military prowess, scholarly achievements, etc.. Mulan would be the prime example of someone that would have been praised as 巾帼不让须眉. :) [return to text]

7始作俑者 (shi zuo yong zhe): 俑 (yong) was a figurine made of wood or porcelain that was entombed with the deceased to keep them company in the afterlife. Literally the phrase means “one who first began to make the figurines.” Originating from the works of philosopher Mengzi (Mengcius) in the 3rd century B.C., the idiom now means the instigator of something bad, or one who started a negative chain of events. [return to text]
Five days after the passing of the Grand Empress, the emperor finally returns to the capital and then falls rapidly ill. On his sickbed, the only decree he issues is one that orders Prince Qi to keep vigil in his feudal land, saying that there is no need for him to rush back to the capital for the formal funeral.

Jingyan kneels in front of the memorial tablet of the Grand Empress, as the servants toss handfuls of dried shu-ji stems\(^1\) into the crackling flames. The gathered nobles clap their hands in unison, then prostrating themselves on the floor in the highest gesture of respect for the deceased.

He knows that Xiaoshu is right outside the hall, kneeling with all the others, sending off their Great Granny on this last journey. He is finally back to the place where he belongs.

Due to the emperor’s persisting illness, the Crown Prince continues to govern the Court from the Eastern Palace after the thirty-day funerary period. He summons the Minister of Rites and hands him the request from Princess Nihuang.

“In the wake of the Grand Empress’ passing, Princess Nihuang, who is filial at heart, will partake in a mourning period of three years along with the entire House of Mu,” he intones.

The minister is taken by surprise— it is customary for all the imperial princes to mourn for three years in respect for the Grand Empress, but to impose the same on the House of Mu...and for three years too, that would mean no marriage could take place during that time!

“Just write as I said,” the Crown Prince does not seem inclined for further discussion, “I will give my seal of approval.”

-----------------------------------

“Imbeciles! How dare you not tell me that my hair ornament was tarnished? What a disgrace it was to have my own grandson point it out, completely shaming me in front of Consort Jing and Consort Chen!”

Inside the Zhaoren Residence, Noble Consort Yue is having a massive fit. Earlier in the day, Prince Xian came to visit with his wife and son, and Noble Consort Yue took the young child into the imperial gardens, where they encountered Noble Consorts Jing and Chen. The child immediately begged for the silver ornament in Consort Jing’s hair, the latter had kindly obliged. Since extravagance is forbidden during the mourning period, Consort Jing only wore that one ornament, leaving her hairdo looking quite pitiful after she took it out. Noble Consort Yue had snickered and said to the child, “You can have the one Grandma’s wearing.”

The child shook his head vigorously in denial, pouting, “Grandma’s is old and dirty, I don’t like it.”

Since realizing that her son would never attain the throne, she has lived in a constant state of anxiety.
Thoughts of counterstrike have crossed her mind more than once, but she cannot even find anything against Lin Shu, never mind bypassing the impenetrable defenses of the Imperial Guards to reach the Eastern Palace. Lin Shu, on the other hand, holds all the evidences of her misdeeds in the palm of his hand, like a watchful executioner in the shadows that forces her into terrified quiescence.

To make her situation worse,[2] Consort Jing has returned to the palace with Consort Chen. The emperor has made a special allowance for them to both live in the renovated Zhiluo Residence, praising their sisterly devotion to each other.

And since the day of Consort Jing’s return, the emperor has yet to set foot in Zhaoren Residence.

Noble Consort Yue had always considered Consort Jing as a worthless attachment to Consort Chen, never sparing her more than a glance, yet that same woman has now not only been promoted to a noble consort due to her son’s status as Crown Prince, but she has also swiftly gained the emperor’s favor upon her return to the palace. Despite having lived in that desolate countryside villa with Consort Chen for all those years, she is now solely entrusted with the care of the emperor’s daily routines. What’s more, Consort Chen, mother of the expelled Prince Qi, seems to also regain her past glory.

Consort Jing has always been this way—never begging for the emperor’s attention nor gloating in his favor[3]—but her poise only serves to fuel Noble Consort Yue’s jealousy, as if she deserves all the gifts and affection from the emperor.

There is also something else: Noble Consort Jing used to be a skilled medic, and she has dedicated all her efforts to take care of the emperor’s health, who has praised her on more than one occasion, saying that he could finally sleep through the night with her special blend of incense. Yet, even in her attentive care, the emperor has still aged at an alarming speed; his ebony hair from a few years ago have now been speckled with gray, his countenance often bears the obvious signs of fatigue. And this time he has fallen so abruptly ill after rushing back to the capital for the Grand Empress’ funeral, even when the illness recedes, most of his day is spent on the bed.

Noble Consort Yue is struck by the stark realization that the man who has sheltered her for half of her life is soon going to leave her forever.

Perhaps that is also the reason for which the Crown Prince and Consort Jing are in no hurry to dispose of her and Jingxuan.

She stares blankly at the the hair ornament carelessly tossed on the floor, the pearls have dulled into a lifeless grey and the gold long lost its lustre.

As both a mother and a consort, she is completely at a loss.

At this moment, a sobbing Princess Xian stumbles into the room, falling to her knees in front of Noble Consort Yue and wailing for her help.

In the past few months, Prince Xian has indulged in wanton revelry in his manor with in-house musicians and dancers,[4] even going so far as to secretly take a concubine. Princess Xian has silently swallowed her discontent, but now three months later, the concubine appears to be two-months pregnant! It is the height of disrespect to have a child during the period of imperial mourning, knowing that, Prince Xian has planned to suppress the news for as long as possible, and when things become too obvious, he would send her away. Yet somehow the word has gotten out, now becoming a hot topic for gossip on the streets.

So the terrified Princess Xian ordered her men to drown the concubine while she and the Prince
came into the palace for their visit. The unexpected part is that a maid escaped and told the truth to the woman’s brother, who then immediately presented the case to the Ministry of Justice in his grief.

The Minister of Justice, Cai Quan, is never one to cower at the influence of a noble. Upon hearing the allegations, he sent a team right away to Prince Xian’s manor.

“...And the body?” asks Noble Consort Yue.

“We didn’t have time to dispose of it, so it was taken away by Cai Quan’s men.”

“What about the maid?”

“She accused His Highness of debauchery...and was also taken to the Ministry of Justice as a witness.”

Noble Consort Yue shakily gets to her feet, taking a few unsteady steps forward before almost slipping on something on the ground. She looks down and sees the tarnished hair ornament, already bent from the force of her step.

“Mother,[5] please think of a solution! If we don’t take action now...the Ministry of Justice will have their report on His Majesty’s desk soon!”

“...” Noble Consort Yue remains utterly unmoved to the supplication of her daughter-in-law, instead picking up the crushed ornament from the ground and placing it back into her hair. “Take my message to Jingxuan, tell him to please take care...I am afraid that we would not be seeing each other again.”[6]

As expected, the report from the Ministry of Justice lands on the emperor’s desk in his Yangju Hall that very evening.

The emperor leans heavily against the headboard, his eyes half closed as he listens to Cai Quan’s summary of the case. When the man moves to pass over the scrolls containing all the allegations, the emperor waves a hand tiredly, “The charge of unfilial disrespect is obvious, the rest...leave it to him.”

“But Your Majesty...”

“There is no need to keep the matter confidential. It has already become public since the case went through the Ministry of Justice. There is no need for a joint hearing with the other ministries either, I trust that with your investigation, Jingxuan would not be wronged.”

“Your Majesty!” Cai Quan glances at the Crown Prince, who is standing silently by the side, “This case involves an imperial prince and manslaughter, I beg Your Majesty to adjudicate with your imperial authority to quell all possible dissents.”

“Then he shall be demoted to a prince of the second rank. He will keep vigil for the Grand Empress for six months before moving to a feudal land,” says the emperor and then adds, “Oh, and his mother shall be demoted to a concubine, henceforth relocated to the West Yard.”

“But--”

“I said, there is no need for further trial,” the emperor cracks open an eye, his gaze landing on Jingyan, “this is also the intention of the Crown Prince, no?”
“...Your humble son does not dare to object.”

The emperor scoffs and turns his eyes away, “When Jingxuan leaves this time, I will not be able to see him again...let me personally write the decree for him.”

After Cai Quan departs with the completed decree, the emperor slumps into the chair, his breath wheezing as if all strengths have left him. He stares at the report before him for a long time before asking Jingyan, who has remained in the hall, “...Are you happy now?”

“......”

“He is your brother! Why couldn’t you have spared him?!”

At that, he snatches the nearest object on the desk and hurls it at Jingyan. The bowl of medicine smashes onto the ground merely half a foot in front of Jingyan, the bitter fragrance of its contents suffusing the space around them.

Jingyan has not moved an inch, his back stiff and straight as he stands in his place.

“He no longer has any power or influence, he cannot pose any threat to you! What are you afraid of, Jingyan?” the emperor presses mercilessly, “Though he was never kind to you, he’s never sabotaged you, either!”

“...I have not wronged Brother Xian.”

“Yes, you did him no wrong, not out of kindness, but out of your own vanity,” the emperor’s lips curl up in a mocking smile. “Don’t tell me that you don’t know how the words got out of his manor, or who let the maid escape to inform the family of that concubine!”

“......”

“Now everything is the way you want it to be,” he sighs with fatigue. “Charged with the highest filial disrespect, this shall be the end for him.”

It only took two days to close the case of Prince Xian. The emperor himself has decreed that Madame Yue be demoted, Prince Xian and his family expelled from the capital, first serving six months of vigil by the imperial mausoleum of the late Grand Empress in repentance for his transgressions.

Ruling the kingdom is like a game of go, and Xiao Jingyu will be the game master.

All that is left for Jingyan to do at this point is to place every go piece in its most advantageous position on the game board. He will do everything that Brother Qi is too reluctant to do, the less than honorable things that he would not lower himself to do. One by one, he has removed all former supporters of Prince Xian and Prince Yu from the Court, including the Minister of Defense, whom Mei Changsu had preserved in the last life. Jingyan had managed to rein him in with a strict hand last time, but he was a man too set in his ways to be easily inspired into deference by Brother Qi’s benevolent approach.

Jingyan wants everyone to go to his destined place, to accompany his destined person.
Lin Shu is already there.

With Brother Qi as the righteous ruler, Lin Shu could be himself and freely exercise his brilliant mind in the Court.

After moving into the Eastern Palace, Jingyan did not bring Fei Liu along, nor did he send him back to Langya Hall, instead he entrusted the boy to Lin Shu. Lin Chen had insisted that since there is no one by the name Mei Changsu, then “Fei Liu” should never come into existence either. And Jingyan knows that the wide pugilist world is far more suitable for the boy than the busy capital, he merely wanted him to spend these last days with his Su-gege before returning to Langya Hall.

Lin Chen had said that he would come and take Fei Liu away on the coronation day of the new emperor. 

*It won’t be for long.*

Correspondence between him and Brother Qi have been few and far in between these years.

Shortly before Prince Yu’s execution, Brother Qi had written several letters to him, then one more when he eliminated the Minister of Defense, one when he suggested to expand military conscription, and two more in the wake of Great Granny’s death. The last letter came yesterday.

The parchment was blank.

Jingyan knows that this will be the last.

There is nothing more left to be said between the two of them.

As for his subordinates including Zhanying, he has reassigned them all to be under Lin Shu’s command, in a draft for military restructuring that has yet to go into effect.

They will be the most prized trump card for the Liang Kingdom.

There, they will be able to fulfill their aspirations as honorable warriors, without worrying about the stigma of having served under Prince Jing.

One by one, he checks these matters off his list. What had seemed to be a barely sufficient amount of time to accomplish everything has suddenly stilled to a stop, its empty excess quite jarring.

All that is left to do now is to calmly await for the the day of farewell.

--------------------

[BONUS FLUFF ft. Fei Liu]

When Jingyan gave the boy to him, Lin Shu took him in without much questioning, saying to everyone else that he has a new bodyguard.

For Fei Liu, he doesn’t quite understand the arrangement, but he is not opposed to it, either. Actually, the Lin manor is a lot more fun than Prince Jing’s place, which, despite its spaciousness and a steady supply of delicious food, was full of serious people, and none of whom was ever a match for him.

Lin Su-gege, on the other hand, is much more fun and smart: he knows so many things, he can make intricate boxes full of tricks, he is a lot stronger than those people in Prince Jing’s manor, well-versed in many different weaponry and different techniques, he can always engage Fei Liu in a good fight!

Even that person Fei Liu cannot beat lost to him once, though he said it was because he
“underestimated” his opponent.

All in all, Su-gege is the best.

Everyone in the house is so nice, too. Auntie Ji would always stuff his pockets full of yummy munchies, though Li Gang likes to fight with him to snatch the pigeons—so annoying.

But Fei Liu remembers that Lin Chen-gege said to protect Buffalo, so he still needs to go.

There have been three times when Fei Liu has tried to get into the palace. The first two times he was caught by Meng Zhi and sent back, and the third time he managed to get as far as the walls of the Eastern Palace, before being caught by Lin Shu.

Lin Shu pulls Fei Liu onto the roof, striking up a conversation, “Was it Lin Chen who asked you to protect Jingyan?”

“Yeah!”

Lin Shu then asks, “You are very skilled in martial arts, right?”

Fei Liu nods vigorously, “Yepyepyep!”

“But look at how I caught you too!” Lin Shu reaches over to pinch Fei Liu’s crestfallen face, “So you see, as long as the intruder is no stronger than you are, I’ll catch them all. I am now the Vice Commander of the Imperial Guards, in charge of securing the entire palace, including the Eastern Palace. Your Buffalo-gege is now under my protection, ok? I am here, and I won’t let harm come to him ever again.”

Chapter End Notes

How sweet was that??! The author seriously took pity on us and gave us some long-overdue fluff. XD

-----------Footnotes-----------

1黍稷梗 (shu ji geng): the stem of a crop similar to millet, they are the things that were burned in a brazier for the dead in the drama. (Even many Chinese viewers had no idea what they were, some thought they were peanut husks...lol). Clearly the production team did their homework on the proper funeral rites in that historical period. This custom is said to have originated from *The Book of Rites* from 200 B.C., where it claimed that burning shu-ji stems and giving foods like pork as tributes would help to carry people’s wishes to the gods. Similarly, as you saw in the drama, the bowing+clapping hands is a historically accurate way to pay respect to the dead. [return to text]

2雪上加霜 (xue shang jia zhuang): lit. adding hail on top of snow, used to describe a situation that just took a turn for the worse; some external factor just exacerbated the already terrible situation. [return to text]

3宠辱不惊 (chong ru bu jing): lit. not moved by positive attention nor humiliation, describing a calm, poised disposition, not easily influenced by the treatment of others,
external gains or losses. [return to text]

夜夜笙歌 (ye ye sheng ge): 笙 is a traditional wind instrument, literally the phrase means every night there is music and singing. It is used in context to describe the debauchery of high-class men, i.e. nobles and emperors. To have such a corrupt lifestyle was highly frowned upon in a society where self-discipline and scholarly composure were the desired characteristics of a gentleman. [return to text]

娘娘 (niang niang): the customary way to address any concubine/consort in the harem, including the empress. All the servants would use this appellation. Although Princess Xian is Noble Consort Yue’s daughter by marriage, she would still address her like this, or perhaps adopt the same name as Prince Xian uses, which is 母妃 (mu fei), lit. mother consort. Prince Yu most likely called the empress 母后 (mu hou), lit. mother empress. [return to text]

好自为之 (hao zi wei zhi): the original meaning of this idiom is simply “to take care, live the life you want despite pessimistic circumstances.” However in modern usage, this phrase has taken on a more cautionary connotation, often used in situations to mean “think carefully of the consequences before you act.” [return to text]
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

Again, an exceptionally difficult chapter to translate, thanks a ton to my awesome beta, caradhras, who spent many late-night hours with me to go over the details. <3

“I heard that yesterday was the birthday of Noble Consort Jing. She did not host a celebration, as was proper during the mourning period, but the Noble Consort said that she had to take care of Consort Chen and refused all guests. The Crown Prince was kneeling outside her door for over an hour!”

“Everyone thought this was the perfect time for Brother Qi to return to the capital, but His Majesty vetoed the idea, and my aunt has fallen ill since,” Lin Shu pulls another dagger from his sleeves, charging at Meng Zhi in a duel, using some new techniques from the southern school of Hmong. “Perhaps she was upset that while all the officials joined in a petition for Brother Qi’s return, Jingyan said nothing in his favor.”

Although Meng Zhi is highly skilled in martial arts, his has mainly trained in one particularly style, unlike Lin Shu, who has dabbled in many. He was skeptical when he heard that Lin Shu learned various techniques here and there from his pugilist acquaintances while he was away from the capital. After all, when it comes to martial arts, practicing techniques from different schools would often hinder one’s competence in actual combat, since the styles could easily conflict with each other.

Much to his surprise, however, Meng Zhi realizes as he dodges another strike from Lin Shu that the other man has managed to seamlessly integrate all the diverse techniques into his own-- like replacing a dagger movement with a hand gesture from the pearl divers tribe at the East Sea, his fingers hooking and slashing like a blade, making his every move all the more unpredictable. Add his natural nimbleness to the mix, Lin Shu is a formidable opponent.

The only reason for which Meng Zhi still holds his ground is that Lin Shu has yet to master these newly learned moves, but with time, Meng Zhi is sure that no one would be a match for his sheer fickleness in battle.

After barely blocking an unexpected mid-air kick, Meng Zhi catches his breath and continues their earlier conversation, “Prince Jing must have his reasons for doing so.”

“Brother Meng, you should be cautious of your words, it’s the Crown Prince.”

Meng Zhi’s face twitches as he mumbles silently to himself, ‘You are the one to talk, you call him by his name!’

Lin Shu sidesteps Meng Zhi’s attack, hooking his knees around the tree branch and twisting away from the approaching sword. Then he flips his wrist towards the other man, shouting, “Watch out!”[1]
The object shoots at Meng Zhi at an alarming speed, forcing him to retract his strike halfway. He manages to grab it before it could smash into his face. Delighted to find a red fruit in lieu of a dart, he tosses it into his mouth without a second thought, only to scrunch up his entire face at the sour taste.

“Euughhhhh……”

“Told you to watch out, it’s not a good habit to eat your weapons,” Lin Shu hops down from the tree, putting his dagger back into his sleeve and snickering at the miffed Meng Zhi. “This kind of fruit turns yellow when it’s ripe, the red ones are the most sour.”

“Does that Mei Changsu still come to the capital often these days?” He asks casually.

“...Sometimes,” Meng Zhi chokes from the sudden question. “Why do you ask?”

“I still haven’t met him yet...It is no easy feat to bypass the Imperial Guards to meet with Jingyan in the Eastern Palace, unless he is truly skilled enough in martial arts to avoid everyone’s detection,” Lin Shu pauses, then adds, “but I am sure that Jingyan does have such a strategist by his side, otherwise many things don’t add up. Take the case with Prince Xian, for instance, I believe that he committed all the crimes he was accused of, but the words got out at an exceptionally convenient time. The defense plan on Jiu-An mountain, too. When you showed me the scheme, I knew it did not come from Jingyan’s hand. He and I have such distinctive styles in military strategy, and the defenses on Jiu-An mountain were not in his usual patterns. Whoever devised it took many risky moves, almost in a similar way as I would have done it, but his was far more sophisticated...it must have been Mei Changsu.”

“In these past years, Jingyan has never asked for my assistance, regardless of what hardship he encountered. He should have been one to loathe those scheming strategists the most, for him to trust this Sir Su so...” Lin Shu’s expression darkens, “there must be something extraordinary about him. But lately he has been backing Prince Xian into a dead end. With things the way they are now, as long as Jingyan is still here, the position of Crown Prince would not go to another. Taking such an aggressive stance towards Prince Xian would only incur discontent from some officials in the court. If you see this Sir Su at some point, make sure to remind him to take a step back.”

“Oh...okay,” stutters Meng Zhi.

“Vice Commander,” Zhen Ping approaches them in a hurry. “An unknown palanquin just entered the palace, heading straight to the Yangju Hall. The porters were new servants but they had His Majesty’s special permit, and Eunuch Gao was personally escorting them, so we didn’t have a chance to probe any further.”

Lin Shu and Meng Zhi trade a glance, the latter frowns in confusion but quickly realizes that something is amiss. He asks Lin Shu, “Should we increase the guards around the perimeters?”

Lin Shu shakes his head and says, “No matter who the visitor was, His Majesty clearly did not want the Imperial Guards to intervene, so you and I have to act as if we know nothing. Zhen Ping, go back to the manor and have Li Gang bring Fei Liu to the Eastern Palace.”

Two lists arrive on the emperor’s bedside table along with his usual dose of medicine.

One list comes from the Crown Prince, containing the names of everyone who had participated the revelry at Prince Xian’s manor during the mourning period. The other list is from Xia Chun, who had investigated the case at the emperor’s behest. The contents of the two lists are nearly identical.
Most of the guests were supporters in Prince Xian’s faction, plus a few from the house of Princess Qing He, and the Crown Prince did not omit their names despite their connection to Shen Zhui.

In the beginning, the emperor had gleefully wanted to watch Jingyan stumble and fall. No matter who he is, the sudden responsibility of managing an entire kingdom would be unimaginably daunting—he would falter at the sheer amount of tasks. A novice in the position of power would make the common mistake of becoming too embroiled in the details to miss the heart of the matter.

Like a bumbling child who has been pushed by his father onto a battle horse to lead an army, without first having learned to ride the horse itself.

Yet Jingyan has marched forward with such incredible confidence, he’s even scrupulously avoided or eliminated the obstacles that were placed on his path by the emperor, some by mistake, some on purpose.

The emperor knows that they were not incidental strokes of luck, but rather the assertive measures of a true ruler.

The thought both frightened and relieved him.

He had always believed that of all his children, Jinghuan was the one resembling him the most.

But look at the Crown Prince now-- restructuring the court factions to promote his supporters and exclude his dissenters-- isn’t that exactly what he did immediately after he ascended the throne?

The case with Jingxuan was the same. Although the emperor was angry at Jingyan for his merciless persecution of his own brother--so angry that he hurled a bowl at him-- but he admits that if he were in Jingyan’s position, he would have seized this god-sent opportunity as well.

That is why, throughout it all, the emperor has quietly stood by the side, too tired and ill-disposed to interfere.

Deep inside, he even feels a bit of perverse enjoyment at the way things have unfolded.[4]

*Lin Xie, Yan Que, no one can give you the world you envisioned, not me, not Jingyan either.*

One would inevitably change when he sits on that gilded throne; he would change so much that even he himself cannot recognize the face that stares back from the mirror, in those silent nights interrupted by nightmares.

Fortunately, Jingyan has retained a last bit of mercy towards his brothers: Prince Ning is still in the capital, Jingxuan has not been targeted since moving to his feudal land, even Prince Qi still lives peacefully with his family, far from the capital.

A persistent sense of suspicion nags at the emperor as he watches his seventh son busy himself with all those tasks. Jingyan had genuinely wanted the position as Crown Prince, yet he does not seem to enjoy it. He is mechanically doing everything as if out of sheer obligation.

On the surface, since taking over as the imperial proxy, the things he has accomplished appear unrelated to one another, his intentions seem impartial and righteous, but if there is one thing that unifies them all…

*Prince Qi…*

The emperor recalls the report he heard from Xia Jiang the day before, when the man secretly
entered the palace. He said that there have been signs of Prince Jing’s personal guards around Prince Qi’s manor in the feudal land. He has also compiled a list with names of Prince Qi’s former supporters who have been demoted in the past few years. Many of these officials now hold prominent positions in local offices, some even possess certain military power, and Jingyan is almost always inexplicably connected to their reassignments.

The two pieces of information are no major breakthroughs. Perhaps a few years ago, the emperor would have cared enough to investigate, but now, he is but an old man plagued by illness. When Xia Jiang claimed that Prince Qi and the Crown Prince are plotting a rebellion to seize the throne, he could only dismiss it with a resigned smile.

Xia Jiang is a man who cares about nothing except his life and power, so the only reason for which he risked capture to sneak into the palace is the news that Jingyan detained Xia Chun and Xia Qiu in the Ministry of Justice for questioning a few days prior.

The emperor gave tacit permission to let Xia Jiang stay in a spare room in the palace instead of putting him under arrest.

He sweeps his eyes over the scattered herbs on the table left by Noble Consort Jing, knowing that despite the obvious disarray, they would eventually transform into a bowl of medicated porridge at her talented hands.

A sudden realization hits the emperor.

So that’s how it is.

Jingyan is making all the preparations for the coronation, not his own, but the coronation of Prince Qi.

Though the realization comes too late.

“...Hahahaha! Bwahahahahahah!!” the emperor collapses onto the bed, hands clutching his stomach as the hysterical laughter leaves him.

“Your Majesty!” Eunuch Gao rushes in at the commotion.

“Quick, summon Lin Shu, no, summon Meng Zhi, don’t let anyone else know!”

“Your Majesty…” Eunuch Gao falters, “Commander Meng is not currently in the palace.”

“Not in the palace? Is he off duty today? Where is he then?”

Eunuch Gao hesitates for a moment before bowing, “He’s...in the Xuanjing Bureau.”

Perhaps the words did not reach him, the emperor cracks open one eye and props himself up from the bed, asking, “What?”

“Commander Meng...has sealed the Xuanjing Bureau.”

Befuddled, the emperor queries, “Sealed? But isn’t Xia Chun detained already?”

“It seems that they found evidence of many misdeeds over the years from questioning Xia Chun and Xia Qiu, so...they sealed the Bureau.”

The emperor nearly jumps in outrage; he stumbles off the bed, only to land on the floor, “How dare he?! It is MY Xuanjing Bureau! Who gave him the leave to do so?!”
Eunuch Gao hurries forward to help him back onto the bed and wraps a cape around him, “Please remain calm, Your Majesty, it was per the order of the Crown Prince.”

A long silence follows his words.

Eunuch Gao raises his eyes to steal a glance and finds the emperor staring at his sheathed sword by the bed, apparently lost in thought. He says after a long pause, as if to himself, “…The Crown Prince? That’s right, Jingyan does have the authority now. Summon him here, I need to have a word with him.”

Eunuch Gao bows on his way out, and when he passes by the door, he whispers to one of the Imperial Guards stationed outside, “Tell Vice Commander Lin to come at once.”

------------------------------

Despite the urgent summons, the Crown Prince is told to wait outside the Yangju Hall in the biting cold of early winter well into the evening. It is not until the moon ascends the dark sky does Eunuch Gao finally allow him entrance.

The Crown Prince steps into the hall along with just one attendant. He sees the emperor, who should still be recovering from his illness, sitting formally on the dais, dressed in solemn ebony robes trimmed with gold, a benevolent smile on his face that does not reach his eyes.

Jingyan has prepared himself for this, he has certainly never expected any familial warmth from the man in front of him.

“I apologize to Your Majesty for not having reported the case of the Xuanjing Bureau today in advance,” bows Jingyan.

“Those are trivial matters, Jingyan, come closer,” chuckles the emperor, waving an affectionate hand to bid him forward.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” answers Jingyan, a bit baffled but obeying the command nevertheless.

Everything shifts in that instant.

Xia Jiang flings aside the curtain from behind the emperor and charges at Jingyan with his arm raised to strike. Jingyan twists to the side to evade the attack, but his movements are constrained within the confined space of the room; soon, he is backed into a corner.

When Xia Jiang’s claw is inches away from Jingyan’s heart, the attendant who has been following Jingyan leaps into the air, blocking Xia Jiang’s strike head-on with one of his own. Despite the boy’s youthful appearance, the clash forces Xia Jiang to take three unsteady steps back.

Then, with a few swift movements, the boy has apprehended Xia Jiang on the floor, as Lin Chen’s teaching resonates in his mind: ‘Never kill needlessly, but never let the enemy have any chance to rebound.’ He cocks his head in thought and decides to snap both of Xia Jiang’s wrists for good measure, then proceeds to empty all his hidden pockets and sleeves, tossing an alarming number of poisoned darts onto the floor.

The emperor glares at the wreck in front of him, his face twisting with rage, “Traitor! Traitors! Guards!”

Within the blink of an eye, Lin Shu charges into the hall with a team of Imperial Guards in tow, his unreadable eyes betraying nothing as he takes in the scene in front of him. He commands, “Seize the
traitor!"

Zhen Ping and Li Gang move forward to apprehend the still kneeling Xia Jiang.

“Fugitive Xia Jiang, you have not only not repented for your crimes, but also dared to attempt assassination on His Majesty and His Highness, do you understand the severity of this offense?” demands Lin Shu.

Stunned by this turn of events, the emperor slowly turns his head towards Lin Shu, his eyes glassy with bewilderment. Then, he suddenly gasps in horror, “You…! You too--!!”

Uncontrollable fury seizes him as all rational thought flees his mind. He grabs the hidden dagger from beneath his pillow and lunges at Jingyan with his arm outstretched, “Did you think I wouldn’t kill you?!”

No one anticipated the emperor to have a concealed weapon; both Zhen Ping and Fei Liu rush forward at the sound of his hysterical cry, but they are too far to reach him in time.

Yet the gleaming dagger is stopped a mere centimeter before piercing Jingyan’s chest.

Lin Shu’s left hand is grasped tightly around the blade.

“…Xiaoshu!!”

Blood seeps out from Lin Shu’s fist, making a steady, crimson trail down the blade and landing on the emperor’s robes, its heat scorching through all those layers of fabric.

It has been years since the emperor has personally witnessed bloodshed, his hand shakes and his hold on the dagger slackens. “You…!”

Lin Shu takes the dagger from his lax fingers and sheaths it into his belt, before taking a step back and kneeling, “Your Majesty has been frightened. The fugitive Xia Jiang has been apprehended, and the Imperial Guards have secured the perimeter of the Yangju Hall, please rest assured of your safety.”

In the vast hall, no one pays heed to the furious screeches of the emperor. At the slight nod from the Crown Prince, Li Gang and Zhen Ping quickly silence Xia Jiang, tie him up in chains and leave without saying a word.

Lin Shu exchanges a glance with Jingyan and bows his exit as well.

In the silence of the hall, the emperor notices for the first time that the usual bustling of the servants is absent, leaving just Jingyan and himself.

“How come you are still in the palace at such a late hour?”

“Auntie Jing,” Lin Shu turns and sees Noble Consort Jing approach him with a dish of medicated porridge. He bows in greeting and hides his injured hand behind his back. “Jingyan is inside.”

“…I see,” Noble Consort Jing takes in the retreating group of servants led by Eunuch Gao away from the hall, a vague realization hits her. She dismisses them with a hand and turns to Lin Shu, saying softly, “Jingyan will be fine, you may go as well.”

“That boy will be here,” she points to Fei Liu with a smile, who is standing guard by the doors. “It’s rare to have such an uninterrupted time, let them have a proper conversation as father and son.”
At the same moment, unbeknownst to them, just outside the capital gates, the rasping cry of a battle horse pierces through the quiet night.

Inside the hall, the emperor is crumpled bonelessly in the chair, his gray hair disheveled and all the energy in his frail body converged into his narrowed eyes, bitter resentment almost palpable as he glares at the Crown Prince-- the one he had personally chosen.

“Last month I was ambushed and was able to capture one of the assassins alive. His confession led our investigation to Xia Chun…” begins Jingyan.

“Based on the words of an assassin? You didn’t want Xia Jiang to speak, what were you afraid of?” the emperor cuts him off harshly, his eyes flaming. “You were afraid that he would implicate Jingyu, am I right?”

Since finding out that Xia Jiang had colluded with Prince Yu, Jingyan knew that somehow Xia Jiang had discovered his true intentions towards Prince Qi, and from there, it was easy to deduce that Xia Jiang would entangle Prince Qi in a desperate attempt to preserve his Xuanjing Bureau-- after all, the man had very few bargaining chips left. So the emperor’s question comes as expected. He answers, “The reason for which I did not allow Xia Jiang to speak was so that Your Majesty would not be mislead by a traitor’s lies.”

The emperor scoffs in disbelief.

“Not long ago, I have also apprehended Qin Banruo. Princess Xuanji entrusted to her the epistolary communications between Xie Yu and Xia Jiang, which contain explicit evidence of collusion between the Princess and the two men to frame Commander General Lin Xie and Prince Qi of high treason all those years ago,” Jingyan continues.

“When Princess Xuanji escaped from the Servants Prison, it was Xia Jiang who took her in. Xia Jiang has also abused his position to fabricate false evidence to frame the innocent and extort substantial amount of money from blackmail. There are a few dozen cases alone involving officials from the local provincial level as well as the third-rank and higher. Here are the testimonies of the three witnesses, please accept them for further review, Your Majesty.

“The Xuanjing Bureau has become the perfect channel through which Xia Jiang conducted illicit businesses to further his own agendas. Your Majesty had intended for the institution to become your trusted eyes and ears, yet it only served to obstruct them instead.”

The emperor takes the stack of reports from Jingyan’s outstretched hands and flings them up in the air, the pages falling in disarray around them. “Spare me your perfectly crafted excuses, you sealed the Xuanjing Bureau for the sake of Xiao Jingyu! Because he loathes its existence! Because Xia Jiang had sabotaged him before! Tell me, everything you are doing is per his orders, right? You and he...you are conspiring together to betray me!”

“My doings are my own, Brother Qi does not know anything about it.”

“...Your own? Why? I fail to understand,” the emperor narrows his eyes in suspicion at his son. “If you don’t want the throne, why bother going to such lengths to become the Crown Prince?”

“Because Brother Qi could not have become the Crown Prince,” Jingyan takes a step forward, into an area illuminated by the golden candlelight. “And of the other princes left, no one was fit to be Crown Prince of the Liang Kingdom.”
The emperor sneers, “I’ve known since you were small that you didn’t bow to anyone except Jingyu. Your precious pride, humph, you are the same as Lin Shu! And now? You still bow to no one except your Brother Qi? Do you still consider me the sovereign of this kingdom?”

“Wait…” A spark of realization hits the emperor, his face darkening dangerously and voice trembling with freshly awakened dread as he asks slowly, “You said just now… ‘Prince Qi could not have become the Crown Prince’… have you found out about something?”

“I have captured Qin Banruo, who was the strategist of Prince Yu and the disciple of Princess Xuanji. She confessed to many crimes, including having planted Hua spies in Prince Qi’s manor, one of whom was the nanny that hid the silk pouch in Prince Qi’s study and arranged for its subsequent discovery by Xia Jiang. They knew what that secret meant to Your Majesty, and they were sure that Prince Qi had no way of absolving himself, because Your Majesty would never bring up the topic of such a taboo.

“Throughout the entire affair, Brother Qi had no idea about the existence of that pouch, never mind its contents.”

A strong gust of wind rushes through the windows, as the candlelights flicker menacingly into almost nothing, plunging the room into a brief moment of darkness.

“Then, Jingyan,” the emperor lowers himself gradually to pick up the abandoned sword from earlier. “How did you know about this? Did Jinghuan tell you?”

“Princess Xuanji told me before she died.”

“You killed her?” the emperor frowns, then pats himself on the head in remembrance. “…Right, I do recall. You were in charge of expelling all the Hua people from the capital, and one day you took a team to chase after an escaped woman outside the city gates, that was Princess Xuanji?”

“Yes. In an attempt to bargain for her life, she told me certain things, including the pouch and the secret it contained,” answers Jingyan. “Qin Banruo, Xia Chun and Xia Qiu are all detained in the imperial prison, they can testify that when they searched Prince Qi’s manor per Xia Jiang’s orders, they took the pouch from the exact same spot where Qin Banruo had placed it, and no one had touched it in the meantime.”

“So you are the one who knows everything, while Jingyu is completely ignorant,” the emperor nods. “And you are telling me all this now in the hope that I would summon him back to name him Crown Prince.”

“What about you then?” He points a finger at Jingyan. “While I have my reservations about Jingyu, I know that he would never publicize the secret to preserve my reputation, but you? You are too dangerous, you are someone who can forfeit his own life for the sake of the grander plan. You knew that the discord between me and Jingyu ran deeper than it seemed. You knew that even if you had interfered and testified for Jingyu’s innocence that time, the root of the problem would still exist between us, and you might have been implicated as well. So you waited patiently, for when Jinghuan and Jingxuan have both sealed their own fate, when I can no longer exert any influence on your life, then you divulge everything. It’s been two years since Noble Consort Jing returned, she now has total control over the palace. The Imperial Guards in and around the palace are all at your command, any decree that you disapprove of probably would never make it out of the gates.

“I am curious though, if I were to order your death now and then name Jingyu the heir, do you want that decree, or not?”
The emperor gathers his energy to lift up the sword, taking one step after the next until he stops in front of Jingyan, until the tip of the sword is pressed against Jingyan’s chest. “Many things went according to your plan these past years, but have you ever considered what I would do to you to protect my secret?”

The blade sinks torturously into the crimson formal robes of the Crown Prince, and soon a dark stain begins to saturate the fabric. The emperor quirks his lips up in a curious smile, apparently quite enjoying himself as he twists the sword experimentally, watching the spot of color growing by the second, yet Jingyan’s face remains completely blank.

He scoffs and tosses the sword onto the ground, its tip stained red.

“So close, I almost walked right into your trap! If I had killed you, I would have played along with your clever scheme!

“Jingyan, I lost,” sighs the emperor, grasping tightly onto his son’s sleeve to keep himself upright, “But I have my ways to make sure that you do not win, either.”

“Sealing the Xuanjing Bureau? As you wish. Protecting Jingyu and surrounding the palace with the Imperial Guards? Do as you wish. I will write no more decrees, and you will remain as the eminent Crown Prince. When I pass away, you shall be emperor;” he lets out an embittered laugh. “You see, it’s been an interesting game, one that lost. Yet the entire world, including your Brother Qi will think that you won.”

Contrary to the emperor’s expectations, Jingyan shows no sign of indignation at his words, rather, he meets his father’s eyes as calmly as before, “…Your Majesty has forgotten that I would need to be alive for you to win.”

This time, the emperor is struck speechless.

Jingyan is about to open his mouth again when Lie Zhanying enters the hall in a frenzy, unadulterated panic written all over his face.

“Your Highness, reports from the Eastern, Northern and Southern borders have all reached the capital, news of assault from Northern Yan, the East Sea and the Southern Chu!”

The emperor pales instantly, yet the Crown Prince rapidly composes himself after a fleeting moment of surprise. “…I see. Summon the Minister of Defense, Shen Zhui, Meng Zhi and all the military lords to the Eastern Palace, I will be along shortly.”

“Yes, sir!”

Jingyan turns to leave when he is abruptly caught from behind by the emperor, whose unsteady gaze is filled with puzzlement. He looks at his son as if looking at a stranger.

“…Who exactly are you?”

Chapter End Notes

-----------Footnotes-----------
Here literally Lin Shu is telling Meng Zhi to watch out for 暗器 (an qì), or concealed weapon, which is a general term that refers to small weapons usually hidden in the fighter’s pocket or sleeve, to be used in a surprise attack during close-range combat, where the opponent would have difficulty dodging it. They are usually in the shape of a dart or arrow, smaller in size than a fist. More aggressive versions have poisoned tips.

落井下石 (luò jǐng xià shí): lit. throwing a stone at someone who has fallen into a well, i.e. adding insult to the injury.

养居殿 (yǎng jū diàn): lit. nurturing residence hall, is the name for the bedchambers of the emperor. I believe this is an invention of the canon author/screenwriter, but in many other historical novels, the imperial bedchamber takes on some variation of this name, so usually a native speaker who is at least somewhat familiar with the subculture would be able to infer the purpose of the hall from its name.

幸灾乐祸 (xìng zāi lè huò): taking pleasure in the misfortune of others.

Court officials in Ancient China were ranked 1-9 to show hierarchy, where 一品 (yī pín), or first rank was the highest, often at the Chancellor level, and 八品 (bā pín, ninth rank) was the lowest, like officials in small local offices. This system originates from the late Han Dynasty in the 200s A.D., and has been adapted in different periods until its abolition at the end of the Qing Dynasty in the early 1900s, when the imperialistic system drew to a close. Third rank and up were considered very prominent positions in the Court, and illegal activities involving these men were serious matter.

冠冕堂皇 (guān miǎn táng huáng): lit. the headdress of an emperor or a nobleman looks magnificent. Don’t be fooled by the literal meaning of this idiom, it has a decidedly negative connotation, usually describing a person or his words that appear righteous and impressive, but his actions are sadly the opposite.

Quiz time! This is an idiom that appeared in the footnotes of ch. 29, 冰冻三尺非一日之寒 (three feet of ice were not formed from one winter day), or more plainly, the problem has been brewing for a long time.

恼羞成怒 (nǎo xiū chéng nù): become angry from embarrassment or shame, used in situations where the person is caught red-handed, usually in a public manner, he becomes so flustered with embarrassment that he expresses anger instead.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Who exactly are you?”

At the sight of Jingyan in the open doorway, Lin Shu moves forward to meet him, just in time to hear the incredulous question from the emperor, who has followed on Jingyan’s heels.

“You are Su Zhe! No wonder you’ve never appeared in my dreams! You are that Su Zhe! You are not my Jingyan!!”

Lin Shu takes in the sight of the hysterical emperor, whose hair is in disarray and face contorted manically in rage. He dismisses the words as the mad nonsense of an old man and gestures the guards to close the doors to the hall, before waving Eunuch Gao inside to tend to the emperor.

As the doors swing shut, the delirious laughters of the emperor drift to their ears, “So you are that Sir Su...Sir Su! Hahaha!!”

Sir Su...

The two syllables are like an unexpected bolt of lightening that strikes Lin Shu to the core. He stops on the spot and raises astonished eyes to Jingyan, only to see the other man, white-faced and frozen, his expression full of an unnamed horror that Lin Shu has never witnessed before.

It is not until Lin Shu calls his name repeatedly does Jingyan snap out of his numbness, deep dread and pain still lingering in his eyes as he turns to face the other man.

Lin Shu feels his heart constrict sharply, the ache increasing tenfold at the thought of his friend, soldiering on through all those years, burdened by so much loneliness and anguish.

Jingyan, Meng Zhi and Chengting have all referred to Mei Changsu as “Sir Su,” the same appellation the emperor just used to call “Su Zhe.” Then why would he say that Jingyan was “Su Zhe”? The former may have been a coincidence, and the latter an unconscious slip of his infuriated mind, but what concerns Lin Shu the most is Jingyan’s reaction.

Through all these years, Jingyan has all but perfected the art of an imperturbable facade. Even if he cannot remain completely unaffected by the emperor’s apparent knowledge of Mei Changsu’s existence, his immediate reaction should be one of surprise, not of such unadulterated panic and despair.

Lin Shu rifles through every last detail of what he knows of Mei Changsu, trying to formulate a reasonable explanation, but to zero avail. He lifts his eyes from his reverie to meet the bright lights of the Eastern Palace, and decides to file the thought away for later consideration.

With the emperor plagued by illness and the Crown Prince as the imperial proxy for less than two
years, it is no surprise to find the atmosphere in the Eastern Palace heavy with anxiety, the gathered lords and officials whispering amongst each other with palpable tension on their faces. They look up as the Crown Prince strides into the room, Lin Shu and Meng Zhi following closely behind. His dignified figure exudes his usual composure, instantly quelling the worst of their unease.

“We have three forces pressing on our borders at this very moment: 70,000 men from Northern Yan are approaching Yin Mountain; the navies from the East Sea have nearly occupied all major coastal states; the Southern Chu has already engaged in battle with our troops in the south, their 70,000 infantry and navy have almost reached Qingming Gate. War is upon us, gentlemen, what strategies do you propose?”

The few officials who opposed active warfare in the last lifetime have all been demoted years prior, charged with crimes of annexing the land or illegal auction of battle horses, so the ones left are clever men who are familiar with the unrelenting style of the Crown Prince. He makes his intention for full military confrontation abundantly clear when he opens the discussion with preliminary plans for strategic restructuring of their troops. The officials lower their eyes in resignation and swallow their rehearsed suggestions for peaceful negotiation, instead, they give honest reports for the available provisions to contribute to the efforts. Jingyan gestures for the Minister of Defense to make detailed notes before dismissing them all to begin preparations.

The Minister of Defense steps forward to give the summary of the troops, “Your Highness, we have an additional 70,000 men compared to last year, thanks to increased conscription. In total, there are 120,000 Southern troops, 10,000 border guards and 10,000 in the Xingtai army, and 20,000 more in the West…”

“And the provisions?”

“There is a shortage of ships and arrows in the South and the East Sea, backups are already en route from nearby provinces.” Shen Zhui continues after the Minister of Defense, “Our recent inspection shows that the Xingtai army has new supplies, but there are still about 10,000 new recruits who are waiting for their basic equipments. We can only give them older items from residence troops in the meantime.”

Jingyan nods, “Shen Zhui, draft a plan to secure the necessary funds, there is no need to report back to me, you may proceed accordingly as soon as possible.”

He then turns to the Minister of Defense, “Pass on my command to strengthen the defenses in the north, along our border with Da Yu. Alert me right away if anything changes.”

The minister and Shen Zhui are quietly talking to each other as they make their way to a side room, leaving just Jingyan, Meng Zhi and Lin Shu in the entrance hall.

Meng Zhi says, “The Southern Chu have sent their elite troops in both the infantry and the navy, although Princess Nihuang is a formidable leader, we are still lacking in those who can take command. Mu Qing is still young and has yet to inherit the title as lord, he has neither the reputation nor the experience to lead independently. Our top priority is to send someone trustworthy to aid the Princess against the Southern Chu...How about Nie Duo? I remember that he was quite proficient in the art of naval battles.”

Jingyan’s expression wavers at the mention of Nie Duo’s name. Before he could speak, however, Lin Shu interjects, “I think Nie Duo is already in the South, otherwise they could not have held up their defenses until now. With he and Nihuang both there, they can hold up for the foreseeable future as well.”
“Just to ‘hold up’?”

Jingyan answers in Lin Shu’s stead, “The main reason for which the South Chu has mounted its attack at this time is to reap the benefits of our defeat at the hands of the other kingdoms. If the other forces fail, they would also retreat, we don’t need to actively pursue them.”

Lin Shu continues without a pause, “Plus, the Southern Chu are exceptionally superstitious, we can use this to our advantage to dismantle their morale.”

With that, Lin Shu pulls Jingyan’s sword from its sheath with a fluid movement and points it at Qingming Gate on the map, “Although the battle in the South has persisted for some time, the situation is far from dire. Nihuang can focus on defending this area and leave the naval battles to Nie Duo. It would be sufficient to secure Qingming Gate here. The river downstream is rapid and dangerous, the Southern Chu would have to wait until mid-winter to attempt crossing, when the water flow has abated. So all we need to do for the South is to supply them with food and backup ships from neighboring towns. To cover all our bases, we can send some reinforcements, which could also dampen the Chu’s aggressive tendencies.

“As for the East Sea, the ships can be transported via water routes. The men there are all experienced in naval battles, though their number is modest, their provisions are all sourced locally, we just need to appoint a competent general well-versed in naval battles.”

“Wei Zheng would be a good choice. He accompanied you when you went to the East Sea all those years ago, so the men would be familiar with him already,” suggests Meng Zhi.

“That’s right. Then I will go deal with the Northern Yan.”

“Xiaoshu, you can’t go!” Meng Zhi vetoes the idea almost out of instinct, only to blink at Lin Shu’s surprised face and stutters, “I--I mean, I’ll go, I’m a better fit.”

“It’s true that the Northern Yan fights primarily with cavalry, but the reports indicate that they have infantry reinforcements already on the way. A swift battle would be unlikely in your usual style.” Lin Shu pins his serious eyes on Meng Zhi. “It’s not a question of who is a better fit. You are the Commander of the Imperial Guards, the capital needs you here to stabilize morale.”

“Your Highness…” resigned to a lost verbal battle with Lin Shu, Meng Zhi turns imploring eyes to Jingyan, only to see the other man nod in approval. “But the Yan troops are led with cavalry, while our Xingtai cavalry is barely adequate.”

Jingyan reaches his desk in a few strides and writes on the open parchment, “Lin Shu, I hereby command you: assemble all Chiyan veterans from the Jicheng army, with the 50,000 men from Shangyang army, rebuild the Chiyan army and immediately commence military campaign against the Northern Yan.” He stamps the words with the seal of the Crown Prince as imperial proxy and hands the sheet to Lin Shu.

Lin Shu solemnly accepts the decree, eyes fixed on the words ‘Chiyan army’.

---------------------------------------

After Meng Zhi takes his leave, Lin Shu remains in the hall, his attention still on the map of the Liang Kingdom, eyebrows knitted together in thought.

Jingyan watches the other man from a distance, an image of another man from another lifetime standing in the same spot superimposes itself onto the present. He feels an unseen chill creep up his
spine.

If this war is destined to separate them forever…

“I’m feeling uneasy about one more place, Da Yu.” Lin Shu muses, pointing the sword at the northwestern borders on the map. “Several other kingdoms have attacked at once except Da Yu, that’s a curious coincidence.”

Jingyan recalls that last time, Yeqin also joined with the others in this war, but perhaps they have remained quiescent as a result of Lin Xie’s forbidding presence on the borders.

“Da Yu is embroiled in a civil war, plus the famine in the approaching winter, they have their hands full with domestic issues.”

“Now, all the most talented generals are going to battle on the borders, the defenses of the capital are at their weakest, it would be the perfect opportunity for Da Yu to attack.”

“I know. I’m leaving Meng Zhi and Nie Feng here with 10,000 men. The border guards in the North are no weaklings, either. They can at least win us some time if the Yu mounts an invasion.”

Lin Shu nods in approval, then asks suddenly, “Is Mei Changsu in the capital?”

“...Why do you ask?”

“I have to admit that he is extraordinarily talented in military strategies. Brother Meng is an accomplished warrior and a respected general, but fighting a war requires extensive knowledge of military strategies and a keen ability to grasp the bigger picture. So if Da Yu does strike, it is my hope that Mei Changsu could join the battle as a strategist. On one hand, it is every man’s obligation to protect our kingdom in times of crisis, on the other hand, if he is truly your friend, outstanding performance on the battlefield could earn him a proper position in the Court, so he could stay in the capital...to help you. I imagine he would agree to it.”

“........”

“But you cannot go.” At Jingyan’s averted eyes, Lin Shu takes a step forward, punctuating his words, “The political situation in the capital is far from peaceful; as Crown Prince you cannot go to battle at this juncture, you know your priorities. With such precarious circumstances, His Majesty is also indisposed...Anyway, Fei Liu and Zhanying, you have to keep one of them by your side.”

“Fei Liu will stay in the capital. As for Zhanying, he will be a brilliant general. I have done him a great disservice by keeping him with me all these years, his talents deserve recognition. Going to battle against the Northern Yan is the perfect opportunity for him to prove himself and begin establishing his own footing in the military.”

“I will treat him the same as I do Wei Zheng,” says Lin Shu.

“I know.”

Jingyan does not need to hear the promise from Lin Shu, yet there is so little left to say between them, so few words they can still say to each other.

He has finally returned the Chiyan army to Lin Shu.

Lin Shu is finally the Vice Commander of the Chiyan army again.
The subsequent days are filled with never-ending preparations, from paperworks to finalize military restructuring and allocation of funds to the steady stream of the latest news from the frontiers. Although they are making remarkable progress with the full cooperation of the Ministries of Defense and Revenue, work has left little room for anything else.

Jingyan raises his head from the pile of parchments in front of him, having just finished the reassignments of troops, and realizes with a start that the sky is already dark outside. It’s been five days, and tomorrow will be the day their army departs for battle. With Zhanying already gone to the base, Jingyan takes Fei Liu towards his old manor as Prince Jing. He moved only the essentials to the Eastern Palace when he became the Crown Prince, so the manor is still being maintained by a couple of loyal servants.

When Jingyan steps into the courtyard, Lin Shu has already made himself comfortable with two jugs of quality wine, clearly waiting for his arrival.

Jingyan feels his throat constrict painfully at the sight, and manages to ask, “What are you doing here?”

He knows what the other man is doing here-- he is here to bid his goodbye.

“If I don’t come, you’d be waiting until sunrise,” replies Lin Shu. “I know you want to join me on the battlefield. Though you’ve never said anything, I can easily guess the truth.”

Jingyan sits down without any comment, neither denying nor nodding, instead, he takes a sip of the wine.

“But you know, Jingyan, there are some things that I cannot guess if you don’t tell me.

“I don’t know why you want the throne, why you chose such a difficult path, why you’d rather plow on alone rather than asking for my help,” says Lin Shu. “I also don’t know why you never gave me that pearl you clearly found for me in the East Sea.” Lin Shu chuckles at Jingyan’s stunned face and says, “Don’t you remember that I went to the East Sea in your stead all those years ago? During that time I asked around, and they said you went hunting for a pearl for days on end. When you finally found one you were so ecstatic that you kept it on you at all times, afraid to part with it for even a second. I thought that you’d give it to me when we next met, and over ten years have passed, but you have never mentioned the pearl again. So I suppose you don’t plan to give it to me anymore.”

“Xiaoshu…”

“I call you Buffalo, and you call me Fireball.” Lin Shu dips his forefinger into the wine and writes the letters “Shu” and “Yan” on the table. “You see, there is Fireball in ‘Yan,’ and ‘Buffalo’ in ‘Shu.’ I was teaching the children in the East Sea to write with a branch in the sand, that’s when I noticed...what an amazing coincidence! So I thought, when we go travel the pugilist world together, we’d make our name known with this pseudonym.”

This nonchalant comment said in jest somehow make Jingyan’s heart clench-- he stares at the fading letters on the table with a burning intensity, as if regarding the most precious treasure in the world.

Once upon a time, he also shared the dream of racing through the battlefields and seeing the distant lands with Lin Shu.

Once upon a time, he was naive enough to believe that his dream and Lin Shu’s dream could both
come into fruition.

But in the end, he is only able to preserve Lin Shu and his Chiyan army.

The Xiao Jingyan of today can only live vicariously through Lin Shu’s words.

“You have changed ever since we were nineteen, since you came back from Cliff Mei. It’s as if you suddenly aged so much; we are of the same age, yet you’ve aged so much faster. So I’ve been trying so hard to grow older, to catch up to you...And when I finally think I’ve matched your stride, ten years have passed.

‘I’ve said before that you are not suited for the throne. But I have never once doubted that you would be a great emperor who would love his people, who would bring peace and prosperity to this turbulent kingdom. I believe that those who are willing to support your endeavors would agree with my assessment.

“From now on, no matter how many years pass, no matter what hardships may come, the Chiyan army and Lin Shu will always protect the Liang Kingdom, and will always protect you.” Lin Shu promises in a low but unwavering voice, then adds, “Jingyan, fear not.”

Jingyan nods.

He has never feared death itself, he simply cannot bear the thought of departure.[3]

The two of them make a silent promise to return after they finish the jug of wine. Yet they remain there the whole night, taking one small sip after another, finally draining the modest jug when the first lights of dawn break from the horizon.

Before they part, Lin Shu wraps his own cloak around Jingyan’s shoulders, saying with a tremulous smile, “As the emperor of our Liang Kingdom, you can’t come to Prince Jing’s manor and drink the night away with your general every time he goes to battle anymore, you know?”

The words register slowly in Jingyan’s sluggish mind, he stares blankly for a long moment before nodding softly, voice barely audible when he says, “This is the last time...there won’t be another time.”

--------------------------------------

Merely ten days after the departure of the Liang army, two expedited letters arrive at the capital: one from Wei Zheng in the East Sea that announces their recent victory, and the other one from the Western borders, reporting a sudden revolt, in which Lin Xie was severely injured.

The vassal state Yeqin has combined forces with the Western Li and their 70,000 men are pressing on the Liang borders. The situation grows more dire with Lin Xie’s injury, which has shaken their morale. Fortunately, the troops stationed on the borders are all experienced elites personally trained by Lin Xie, they only need a competent general to assume command and rekindle their spirits.

Per the Crown Prince’s decree, Meng Zhi is appointed general and sets out for the Western borders with 30,000 men as reinforcement, along with several imperial physicians who are under orders to bring Lin Xie back to the capital for recuperation once his condition is stabilized.

On the day of departure, Meng Zhi’s face is filled with concern.

Jingyan knows the reason for his worry. As they feared, three days after Meng Zhi left the capital, they receive news of invasion from Da Yu with a legion of 100,000.
There are no more generals left to fill the role, only the Crown Prince can lead the troops to battle this time.[6]

A decree from the Eastern Palace announces that the Crown Prince would be the commander general, with Nie Feng as his vice commander, and they would take 70,000 to combat against Da Yu.

It is where Mei Changsu is buried.

He should go take a look.

---------------------------------------

The day before they depart, Jingyan visits the Zhiluo Residence with Fei Liu.

Both Noble Consorts Jing and Chen are present. Noble Consort Chen’s eyes are a bit swollen with signs of recent tears, while Noble Consort Jing appears the same as usual, placating the other woman gently before pulling Jingyan inside.

“You are leaving this child with me?” Noble Consort glances at Fei Liu, who is occupied with stuffing pastries into his mouth from the box in his arms. “Jingyan, the battlefield is a perilous place, why don’t you take him with you?”

“The situation on a battlefield is unpredictable, the swords and arrows do not know friend or foe, even the most skilled martial arts expert cannot guarantee his own return. I’ve made a promise to...his family to never leave him in such dangers.”

At the word “dangers,” Noble Consort Jing feels uncontrollable tremors wrack her frame, when Fei Liu runs towards them with an armful of armor, pouting, “Don’t fit!”

Jingyan turns around and shakes the armor open, then chuckles, “It’s my armor, of course it doesn’t fit you.”

“......”

“You are still young, in ten years, you’ll be taller than Lin Chen.” He lifts his hand to gesture the approximate height of the twenty-year-old Fei Liu from his memory, musing, “About this tall.”

Fei Liu waves his arms in agitation, then points at the scurrying servants outside busy with last-minute preparations. “Clothes!”

Realization strikes Jingyan after a moment of incomprehension-- apparently Fei Liu isn’t trying to pack for him. “You want to come with me to the battlefield?”

Fei Liu nods emphatically, “Yeah!”

“You can’t come with me.”

“No!” Fei Liu grabs Jingyan’s hand urgently to make his point, “Lin Chen-gege! No!”

Before Fei Liu could open his mouth to argue his case further, Jingyan interrupts him, “I have a very important task for you instead.

“Lin Chen has asked me for this book, Xiang Di Ji, many years ago, but I’ve never had the chance to give it to him. You will bring it to him. If he doesn’t accompany you on these trips, ask your Lin Shu-
“Enough!” cries Noble Consort Jing when Fei Liu accepts the book with an obedient nod, her suppressed tears finally spilling down her cheeks. She stumbles forward and slaps the book onto the ground, snatching Jingyan’s hands tightly in her own, desperate sobs tearing through her carefully constructed facade.

She knows that her child is leaving her.

After he settles everything that needs to be settled, he will never come back again.

At this moment, she cannot conceal her true emotions anymore, all her composure and restraint, all her wisdom and intellect, crumble into nothing but acute grief and fear as a mother.

“Jingyan...I know that making you promise...promise to come back alive is forcing you to promise something beyond your control....But I still have to implore you to please take care. My only wish is for you to return alive, to finish those things that you have yet to do. Then after that, whether it is heaven or hell, mother will accompany you until the end, do you hear me??”

Yet despite her most desperate entreaties this time, Jingyan remains the silent, kneeling figure on the ground.

Ever since his childhood, he has never lied to her.

Because the promise would be futile, he chooses to say nothing.

At the end, as he kneels in a final bow of farewell to his mother, Jingyan says, “There is one more thing. Please pass a message to Xiaoshu, the pearl he wants...has been kept with Lin Chen at my request.

“That pearl...the person who should give it to him is the nineteen-year-old Xiao Jingyan, not me.”

--- Footnotes ---

1 裂眦嚼齿 (lie zi jiao chi): lit. eyes popping out of their sockets and gnashing one’s teeth, describing a state of extreme fury. [return to text]

2 口不择言 (kou bu ze yan): not having any filters when speaking, usually as a result of extreme distress or anger. [return to text]

3 There are many literal idioms in Chinese to express the idea of “reaping the benefits of something done by someone else,” and here the author uses a phrase with an interesting backstory, 分一杯羹 (fen yi bei geng), which literally means “share a bowl of meat soup.” The phrase first appeared in “Records of a Grand Historian” in 1st century B.C., referring to the story between Xiang Yu and Liu Bang, who were military generals in opposing warring states. Xiang Yu kidnapped Liu Bang’s father to force Liu Bang to
surrender, threatening to kill his father and make soup with his flesh if Liu Bang did not cede. Upon hearing the news, Liu Bang responded by saying, “We were once brothers in spirit, so my father is like your father. If you insist on killing your father, please share a bowl of the soup with me.”

4 Here is an absolutely ingenious wordplay that the author noticed: the 琰 (Yan) in Jingyan’s name has parts that when written separately, are 火人 (huo ren, fiery person), aka Jingyan’s nickname for Lin Shu. While 殊 (Shu) in Lin Shu’s name can be decomposed into 水牛 (shui niu, buffalo). Since the names were already used in the novel canon, the author confesses that she’s not sure if this is a beautiful coincidence, or actually a deliberate design. :)

5 The latter half of this sentence is 只是不舍得, where 舍得 (she de) is a very common verb in Chinese but doesn’t really have a direct translation in English. 舍 (she) means to give up, while 得 (de) means to gain, so literally together they mean “to lose is to gain”. The word is said to have first appeared in buddhist texts to confer the causal relationship between not only the actions of “to lose” and “to gain,” but of everything else in this world. The concept is often explained as 有舍才有得 (you she cai you de), lit. [you can] only gain through losing. In modern usage, however, the verb 舍得 takes on the meaning of “to willingly give,” “to willingly part with.” Example: 我不舍得让你受苦, which roughly means “I can’t bear to see you in any kind of pain.” This verb also doesn’t necessarily need an object, which sometimes is clearly implied, other times, like in this chapter here, is left more to the reader’s interpretation: what can’t Jingyan willingly give up? This life with Lin Shu? Mei Changsu? (You get the point)

6 The term here is 亲征 (qin zheng), literally meaning “go to battle personally.” It’s a very specific word that’s used almost exclusively to mean that the emperor/ruler would personally fight the battle instead of commanding from afar. In non-historical contexts, it may be used metaphorically to convey the rarity of someone doing something that they normally wouldn’t deign to do.
Bonus fanart for ch.39

I bring you no resolution from all the angst, DUH, I bring you MORE angst! :))

Here's another piece of fanart by the same artist 橡树洞, on the best (read: most angsty) scenes in chapter 39. Please go like and support her original work here.
Don't you remember that I went to the East Sea in your stead all those years ago?

During that time I asked around, and...
they said you went hunting for a pearl for days on end.

When you finally found one you were so ecstatic that you kept it on you at all times, afraid to part with it for even a second.

I thought that you'd give it to me when we next met, and over ten years have passed, but you have never mentioned the pearl again. So I suppose you don't plan to give it to me anymore.

Xiaoshu...

I call you Buffalo, you call me Fireball.
You see, there is 'Fireball' in 'Yan,' and 'Buffalo' in 'Shu.'

I was teaching the children in the East Sea to write with a branch in the sand, that's when I noticed...what an amazing coincidence!
So I thought, when we go travel the pugilist world together, we’d make our name known with this pseudonym.

That is... my most treasured yet impossible dream...
As the future emperor of our Liang Kingdom

You can't come to Prince Jing's manor and drink the night away with your
general every time he goes to battle anymore, you know?

This is the last time.

There won't be another time.
There is one more thing. Please pass a message to Xiaoshu.
That pearl...

The person who should give it to him is the nineteen-year-old Xiao Jingyan.
一世真
第三十九章
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the endless days on his sickbed, Xiao Xuan is oblivious to the turbulences in the palace. Yet, his suspicious and wary nature has given him a keen sense of observation, picking up the undercurrent of unease from the subtle changes in demeanor of the people around him.

Today, Noble Consort Jing has not made her routine visit, but sent along freshly prepared medicated porridge nonetheless. The emperor forces the medicine down and takes a few small bites of the food, before fatigue overtakes him.

His day is increasingly occupied by long hours of sleep; during those brief waking moments, he feels only deep exhaustion, even more so than when he spent the whole day hunting with Brother Lin Xie and Yan Que in their prime years.

Xiao Xuan knows that his end is approaching.

Fortunately, sleep has been an entertaining activity in itself. The dreamscape that used to be vague and jumbled has now become so clear that he can make out the faces of everyone in it.

He’s seen everyone he wants to see again, like Jingxuan and Jinghuan.

There’s also Chengting. Yet for some reason, he’s dressed in the rags of a lowly servant, scurrying after Meng Zhi, the usual cheer on his face replaced by a timid wariness as his eyes dart around the surroundings.

Suddenly, the child’s eyes land on someone in the seated crowd, and a gleam lights up those dim orbs for a brief second. Despite his downcast head, Xiao Xuan picks up the momentary change.

It is the same gleam in young Jingyu’s eyes when he looked up at him. It is the same way a child would look at his father, full of admiration, trust and longing.

Xiao Xuan follow’s the boy’s gaze, thinking that he would find Jingyu at the other end-- who has never appeared in those dreams.

Yet he finds Jingyan instead.

It is the first time that he’s seen Jingyan in his dreams. He is dressed in the robes of a second-rank prince, no trace of merriness on his face, and the fingers grasped around the wine goblet bear obvious calluses of a warrior whose life is spent on the battlefield.

He sits there quietly by himself, as if an invisible being in this lively feast that does not include him. Yet he seems rather used to the solitude, sipping slowly at the wine with disinterest.

Su Zhe is seated not too far from him, the usual calculating animosity in his penetrating gaze vanishes and is replaced by warm affection whenever it lands on Jingyan ever so casually.
Xiao Xuan heaves a sigh of relief—**Jingyan is here, then he is not Su Zhe, not that traitor.**

**But where is Lin Shu then?**

**Jingyan used to be inseparable with Lin Shu, when had he become...like this?**

**That’s right, Lin Shu is the Vice Commander of the Imperial Guards, he is as good as a stranger to Jingyan nowadays.**

**Much like Brother Lin Xie and himself actually.**

He remembers that Jingyan and Lin Shu used to play together all the time, they were practically attached at the hips.

He remembers when the young Jingyan picked up his first wooden sword, he proclaimed in that boyish voice of his that he’d always protect Xiaoshu. He remembers how that scene had reminded him of his much younger self, standing by Lin Xie’s side with his sword drawn, facing the wild beast together.

At the time, he had said to Lin Xie that they’d grow old eventually, and wouldn’t be able to shelter the children forever. Then it’d be up to them to support each other in life.

Lin Xie had only smiled, saying that Xiaoshu was blessed to have the seventh prince by his side.

Xiao Xuan knows the meaning of that smile now.

Because in the end, he had betrayed Lin Xie, betrayed Yan Que; as both their lord and friend, he had failed their expectations and betrayed their trust. He was only able to attain the throne with their generous support. But now, despite having the entire kingdom in his possession, he has nothing to repay their debts.

Their aspirations and promises are still resounding in his ears as if it were yesterday, Yan Que and Lin Xie are still true to their vows, while he is irrevocably changed.

How could Lin Xie not begrudge him, how could he not rise up in rebellion?! That’s why he amassed his own troops, that’s why he endorsed Prince Qi, that’s why he colluded with Da Yu!

**Da Yu...**

The dreamscape begins to collapse at those two words.

One face after another flashes across his eyes.

Princess Li Yang kneeling in the center of the Great Hall, arms raised with a scroll of denunciation, voice filled with righteous urgency, “Thirteen years ago, Xie Yu colluded with Xia Jiang to accuse the Commander General of the Chiyan army, Lin Xie, of high treason, and further framed Prince Qi to be the instigator of the rebellion. Their conspiracies have done Commander Lin and Prince Qi a grave injustice, leading to the unfair execution of their entire families.”

Each word is like the terrifying ancient beast of *pu lao*, its roars quaking the very earth itself.

Xiao Xuan suddenly realizes that he is in the Great Hall with all the others, and Jingyan, dressed in crimson robes, is standing firmly in front of Su Zhe.

Jingyan...who has the tip of a sword pressed against his chest. Xiao Xuan lowers his head ever so
slowly and sees the hilt of the sword held in his own hand.

*Clang!*

The sword falls onto the floor.

He points a trembling finger at Su Zhe, rasping, “You are that resurrected traitor!! So you are that--”

It is he who helped Jingyan gain the position as Crown Prince.

He has always been by Jingyan’s side.

Xiao Xuan opens his eyes from the dream, still whispering those names so freshly etched into his mind.

*Princess Jin Yang.*

*Consort Chen.*

*Chiyan.*

*Lin Xie.*

*Jingyu.*

As each name tumbles from his lips, his eyes become more and more lucid.

Those who have never appeared in his dreams...are the ones he has personally condemned to death.

Until the last name leaves his tongue: *Lin Shu*.

The nearby Eunuch Gao hears his voice and approaches the bed, asking in a soft tone, “Your Majesty?”

“Gao Zhan, summon the Crown Prince here.”

Eunuch Gao pauses in brief hesitation and ventures, “Your Majesty, the military situation is currently very tense, His Highness has been working endlessly in the Eastern Palace everyday, I am afraid that…”

“Go and ask him, does he still remember that day during my birthday celebration, we have an unfinished game of go?” At Eunuch Gao’s indecision, the emperor pushes himself from the bed with great difficulty and says, “Just go ahead and ask. Help me change, I cannot see him like this.”

-------------------------------------------

When Jingyan steps into the Yangju Hall, he sees the emperor dressed in his stately imperial robes, leaning against the bed, a game of go beside him.

“We agreed to finish the game after the feast,” the emperor places the pieces one by one on the board, pausing here and there in contemplation. “But then I smashed the board as soon as I returned, do you still remember how the white pieces were arranged?”

“It’s been too long, I do not remember.”

“...True.” The emperor gives up the task and tosses the remaining pieces back into their box,
gesturing for Jingyan to come sit on the bed.

Jingyan moves the board aside and stands in front of the emperor, silent as the other man scrutinizes him as if seeing him for the first time.

“How come I’ve never really looked at your eyes before?” chuckles the emperor, more to himself, “The eyes of those who have sat on that throne have a different quality than others. I should have noticed it much earlier. Since the year with the Qishui incident...no, even earlier, perhaps the year of Cliff Mei, right?

“If I’d remembered earlier, you wouldn’t have wasted so much energy all these years,” the emperor pins a mocking gaze on him, “I would have killed those conniving traitors like Xie Yu and Xia Jiang myself.”

“You would have also killed Commander Lin and Xiaoshu, and everyone who had opposed you in the last life,” says Jingyan calmly. “My mother and I would not have escaped the same fate, either.”

“……” The emperor muses for a long while and then concedes, “That’s correct. You are right. If I had regained my memories a few years ago, I certainly would not have tolerated your existence. Mei Changsu had told me once that I did not understand Jingyu, and even less you...Ha! I’d love to invite him to look at you now, how you’ve changed!

“You’ve become the same conspiring, scheming man, never revealing your true emotions to anyone, you’ve become just like him! What a pity that Lin Shu did not live to witness your transformation. Jingyan, if he had lived till your coronation, you would have treated him like I did Lin Xie...year after year, when he is completely disillusioned, he would betray you.”

“Commander Lin is still guarding the Western borders despite his injuries, Marquis Yan has also returned to the capital. They are both still protecting your Kingdom.”

The emperor’s eyes widen a fraction at the mention of Lin Xie’s injuries, his lips flounder for a few seconds, yet he only manages to ask an unrelated question, “You’ve already allowed Jingyu to return to the capital?”

“No.

“The matter with the heir is far from immutable...if he comes back now, he would bear the condemnation of contending for the throne that is not rightfully his. Hmph, you’ve certainly thought this through for him.” The emperor sneers at the analysis, “But you are the Crown Prince. After I pass away, even if you were to abscond the throne with the support of Lin Xie and Lin Shu, as self-righteous as Jingyu is, he would never accept this charity. What do you plan to do?”

“...I have said before that I would never leave Brother Qi in such a dilemma.”

“You would make yourself disappear from the world. I have no legitimate primogenito, and none of the three princes in the capital you spared has any talent to speak of. So then, whether it is based on seniority or merit, reputation or accomplishments, the best candidate would be Prince Qi, no one would contend it...The machinations of Mei Changsu, you have truly mastered them through and through!” The emperor shakes his fingers at Jingyan in mock disappointment, “But you cannot threaten me. That Qin Banruo feared you so because she believed that you are someone who would relinquish his own life to achieve his goals, never mind those of others. So when you threatened her with the lives of the Hua people and her own, she immediately confessed everything.

“But that was because she did not truly know you. For you, there are many things greater than life
itself...and there are too many people you care about to die so casually. Death is but your last move in a stalemate.”

The emperor raises a gnarled hand and points at Jingyan, almost sighing, “But you miscalculated one thing, Jingyan.

“As emperor, I loathe all of your machinations, but as a father...I want to spare your life.” The emperor’s lips are trembling uncontrollably, as if speaking these words has drained all his energy. “I will write a decree to revoke your title as Crown Prince, and name Jingyu the next emperor. But the Crown Prince is the heir apparent, lord of the Eastern Palace, he cannot be easily replaced except in cases of severe transgressions. Tell me, what crimes have you fabricated for yourself?”

“Injury upon an elder brother.”

The emperor snaps his head up, “What did you do to Jingxuan?”

Jingyan smiles faintly at the accusation-- he no longer balks at such misunderstandings these days.

“Concubine Yue sabotaged Brother Yu. The carriage he rode to his exile was tampered with by her. I have remained silent to her crimes.”

The words give the emperor pause, he nods mechanically and admits, “True, with Jingxuan’s personality, he wouldn’t be able to recover from his utter defeat without external help. As upright as you are, you wouldn’t bother with him after his expulsion. I see...it really was her who killed Jinghuan...”

“......” Jingyan decides against revealing the other facts he discovered during the investigation: like the hidden needle deeply embedded in the horse’s leg that fell down the cliff, while Prince Yu had ridden in his wife’s carriage after his own was damaged by the rocky roads.

Concubine Yue’s crimes were true, and Qin Banruo is already dead, it is no longer important whether or not the emperor knows the full truth.

“I know her too well. She was malicious but not smart enough, often forgetting to save herself in a scheme to sabotage others. You are the same. Have you considered all implications of this? Omission of a crime can be tried as collusion; even if your life is spared, you can never return to the capital again. I know Jingyu’s personality well; although he is benevolent, he would never forgive you for such a grave crime of betrayal between brothers.

“When Prince Qi ascends the throne, his supporters would never tolerate your presence as someone who used to be the heir. Even Lin Shu...even he would have his own political stance, unlikely to help you. Lin Xie and Jingyu, and Lin Shu, they are all men with lofty ideals, you have long carved a divergent path from them with everything you’ve done...Do you understand all this?”

“.....Yes.”

The emperor bursts out in hysterical laughter, only to end in terrible coughs that wrack his entire frame.

“All those years ago, I placed my faith in traitors, wronged Jingyu, wronged Lin Shu and Lin Xie...There was too little I could do in the last life as recompense. This time, I’ll give the throne back to him, give them a virtuous and merciful ruler, a peaceful kingdom without strife...this shall be my atonement.

“I’ve fulfilled everyone else’s wishes, what about yours?” The emperor’s voice gains a sudden
tremor as he says in a whisper, “Jingyan, can you forgive your Father?”

Jingyan looks at the aged man in his resplendent imperial robes— he does not need them, even without those robes, in Jingyan’s eyes, Xiao Xuan has always been the emperor.

Yet the paternal part of him is too far away from Jingyan, far before his entire world came crashing down more than a lifetime ago.

Xiao Xuan would probably never understand: a child who had never been touched by conspiracy or death, never been polluted by political schemes and machinations, suddenly found his world upended, his dearest friend and most respected brother killed; and the Father he used to depend on...was the orchestrator of every tragedy! His persistence and struggles gained him nothing but eleven years of exile and alienation.

Jingyan kneels onto the floor, with a brief moment of hesitation, he reaches out to take those cold, wizened hands in his own.

He says softly, “My wish is also fulfilled.”

The emperor startles at the response, saying nothing for a long while before heaving a deep sigh, “You may go...I still have things to arrange with Gao Zhan.”

-------------------------------------------------

The emperor pens two new decrees. On the one to revoke the Crown Prince’s title, his hand freezes above the freshly inked words “familial betrayal.” He crushes the parchment in his fist and tosses it into the burning brazier, starting anew with a blank page.

Along with the decrees, he’s also written a long letter, towards the end of which his pen is trembling so much that only with Eunuch Gao’s steadying hand is he able to finish the last lines.

“Gao Zhan, give these two decrees to Jingyan...As for this letter, you must keep it with you at all times. After Jingyu ascends the throne, give it to him at an opportune time.”

After watching the old eunuch tuck away the letter carefully in Jingyan’s robes with silent tears running down his face, the emperor lies back to the bed with a relieved sigh.

In both lifetimes, he has done very little for this son of his, they have long been estranged as father and son.

At the very end of everything, he has come to realize that after shedding his imperial robes, as a father, there are so few things he can still do for his son.

He whispers in a final semblance of a vow, “Jingyan, I’ll give you back your Brother.

“This is everything your Father can do for you...”

---------------------------------

Jingyan takes the two scrolls from Eunuch Gao and only opens the one to appoint Prince Qi as the next emperor. He scans it briefly before saying to the eunuch, “There is no need to report my departure to battle and any related news from the frontlines. I do not wish to disturb His Majesty’s recuperating health.”

Eunuch Gao glances at the other unopened decree in Jingyan’s hands and bows respectfully in reply,
“Your humble servant shall do as commanded. Please rest assured, Your Highness.”

The night before leaving for battle, the Crown Prince traverses through the darkened streets alone on horseback and knocks on the heavy gates of Marquis Yan’s home. Both Yujin and Jingrui have left for the Northern Yan with Lin Shu’s fleet, the rustling sound of withered leaves in this late autumn month adding to the lonesome atmosphere of the manor.

As expected, Marquis Yan is home. He is dressed in black, a steaming pot of tea next to him, perhaps for himself or for the anticipated guest.

“Madame Han just came by. She brought her son to the capital to settle matters with Xia Jiang, then sent him away to the battlefield. She was finally relieved,[5] but her mind remains preoccupied with untied ends. No matter who you are, as long as you possess a heart, you can put ‘physical matters’ to an end, but not ‘emotional entanglements.’

“I have anticipated Your Highness’ arrival, but I cannot foresee the nature of your visit. Is it about ‘physical matters’ or ‘emotional entanglements’?” As he utters these words, Marquis Yan runs his measuring eyes down the future ruler of the Liang Kingdom.

He does not believe that physical proximity would construct a more lucid picture of one’s inherent nature, yet he cannot help but scrutinize the man in front of him. If he were to liken his image to something, Xiao Jingyan is an unfathomable pond-- everyone thinks that its opacity is from excess impurities, but if one approaches the pond and scoop up a handful of water, he would be astounded to find its absolute transparency.

The young man in front him has lived no more than three decades in this mortal world. As an imperial prince, his life has not been a smooth sail but not extremely turbulent, either. So what is it that has molded him into the inscrutable person of today?

Take tonight-- Marquis Yan has foreseen his arrival, but he does not know what the Crown Prince would demand from him. In the capital, there is an ailing emperor and three incompetent princes. The state of the Court is like an interrupted game of go-- the more unsalvageable the quandary seems, the more crucial each step becomes.

He and Jingyan both know that asking Yan Que to use his influence to stabilize the volatile political scene is a necessary move, but at this moment, even Yan Que himself is at a loss as for whether it is the right one.

“What is Your Highness afraid of? If it is the chance of a coup, although I am no military commander, but with 5,000 men, I can guarantee peace in the capital. If it is disturbances in Court operations, all six ministers are extraordinarily competent men hand-picked by Your Highness, they will keep things running smoothly.

“Or perhaps,” pauses Yan Que, resting his inquisitive eyes on Jingyan to gauge his reaction, “You are afraid that the Eastern Palace will be taken by another in your absence?”

“It is as they say, Marquis Yan is exceptionally sharp at reading a man’s nature by judging his motives, experiences and aspirations.[6] I am here today merely to ask the Marquis a question.” Jingyan does not answer Yan Que’s inquiries, posing one of his own instead.

He stands there with his back straight like a plum tree that does not bend in the worst of storms, poised and tenacious. “Prince Qi and I, who is better fit to bear the imperial mantle?”[7]
Yan Que is silent for a long time.

Years ago, when he was the sole ambassador tasked with the arduous duty to sever the alliance between three kingdoms, each word he uttered was a sharpened sword that chipped at their bonds. He knows that now, whichever name that falls from his lips would carry the same weight, if not more.

“If your positions were reversed, Prince Qi would not have asked the same question. As a ruler, one should engage in constant self-reflection, not self-flagellation. With every decree, one might think that he is infallible, another would dread the very possibility of a mistake. With every failure, one might treat it as a lesson learned, another would count it as a personal defect.”

Yan Que does not know what reaction awaits his long answer. He fixes his gaze on the Crown Prince, not missing any minute changes in his expression. Yet those dark eyes are as unfathomable as ever, as if he already knew Yan Que’s reply and was merely waiting for him to verbalize it.

Jingyan takes out a silk box from his robes and places it in front of Yan Que solemnly.

“I will leave this decree in Marquis Yan’s trustworthy hands.”

Yan Que lets out an incredulous laugh, “Your Highness knows that my inclinations lie with Prince Qi, yet you are asking me to safeguard the decree...it would be better kept with the Noble Consort Jing…” At this, Yan Que stops abruptly as a realization strikes him. Stunned, he stutters, “Wait, unless this…”

Jingyan gestures for Yan Que to open the box and check its contents. “This is a decree to name Brother Qi the next emperor, penned by His Majesty himself.”

It is not until his eyes rest on the phrase “naming the eldest prince, Xiao Jingyu, as heir to the throne” does Yan Que truly believe this unexpected turn of events.

As a man of his intellect, he immediately understands the intentions of the Crown Prince for him to keep the decree at this critical juncture.

Revoking Jingyan’s title as Crown Prince would have to take place first, but in such turbulent times fraught with outside threats, they cannot risk affecting military morale with any mention of shifting the imperial authority. So everything would have to wait until the war has concluded.

Yan Que also understands the unsaid implications— the emperor’s health may not allow him to wait until peacetime.

“With this battle, my return date is unpredictable. If His Majesty...here is another decree to revoke my position as Crown Prince. When the time comes, I leave everything in your hands. If His Majesty is still in good health when I return, we will proceed with naming another Crown Prince first. Whatever the situation may be, the decrees will be safer in Marquis Yan’s possession than in the palace.”

Yan Que nods, then another thought comes to him. “Your Highness, when the time comes, I can initiate the impeachment against you as an unfit candidate for the throne.” Yan Que takes a step forward and says, “Although I do not know what Your Highness has planned, but a crime severe enough to challenge your position in the Eastern Palace is no trivial matter. Perhaps it would be better if I were to direct the efforts.

“It would be better to have fought valiantly and lost, than passively accepting the impeachment and be forced to cede.” Yan Que adds when Jingyan shows no sign of assent, “For both you and Prince
Unmoved by the other man’s earnest proposal, Jingyan says instead, “I would like to ask one more thing of Marquis. Under no circumstances can Brother Qi return to the capital while I am away.”

Yan Que nods in comprehension—Jingyan would publicize the decree to reappoint a Crown Prince upon his return from the battlefield, having Prince Qi in the capital at that time would inevitably draw suspicion upon his ulterior motives.

“I understand.”

“I am entrusting everything to you, Marquis.”

Yan Que bends at the waist in a deep bow to Jingyan, voice solemn as he pledges, “Your humble subject will do everything in his power to fulfill your wishes, Your Highness.”

-------------------------------

In late autumn of the year of Yuanyou, the Crown Prince leads a total of 120,000 men, comprised of 70,000 reserve troops and 50,000 resident troops, into battle against Da Yu.

In the roster of generals, there inked in black letters on white parchment, is the name of official strategist for the military, Mei Changsu.

When the first gust of biting wind hits his face on Cliff Mei, Jingyan feels that it is even colder than he remembered.

He had come here when he was nineteen-years-old, one man and one horse rushing to prevent a certain tragedy.

In the blink of an eye, another twelve years have passed, and he stands here again.

This is where Mei Changsu began and ended.

His blood and flesh shall be redeemed by two lifetimes of annihilation of Da Yu.

Sir Su, please help me along this one last journey.

Spring of next year, when news of victory from both the Northern Yan and the Western borders reaches the capital, the Liang troops gains a decisive win over Da Yu by decimating 70,000 enemy forces. During the battle, the severely injured Crown Prince Xiao Jingyan has fallen from a cliff, his whereabouts unknown.

Noble Consort Jing bids Eunuch Gao to pass on the news to the emperor.

While consumed by grief, the emperor recognizes that the Eastern Palace cannot remain unoccupied, so he issues a summons for Prince Qi to return to the capital.

Chapter End Notes

I've worked on this chapter for so many hours that the angst doesn't faze me anymore. What heart? I left it at chapter 1 of this fic.
蒲牢 (pu lao) is the name of the fourth offspring of the ancient dragon in Chinese mythology. It’s known for having a very loud roar. [return to text]

自命清高 (zi ming qing gao): [referring to a person] having a holier-than-thou attitude, with a self-proclaimed moral high ground. Definitely has a negative connotation. [return to text]

不悌 (bu ti): lit. not respecting one’s elder brother. 悌 is a highly regarded virtue similar to 孝 (xiao), which is filial piety to one’s parents. Both reflect the cultural emphasis on familial obedience towards one’s elders, especially males. [return to text]

In this final conversation between Jingyan and the emperor, the latter has used the common term for “Father”, 父亲, to refer to himself, rather than the more standard appellation 父皇 (imperial father). With the strict hierarchy in ancient China, Jingyan would first revere Xiao Xuan as his lord (君), only then would he see him as a father (父). [return to text]

释然 (shi ran) is another difficult-to-translate phrase. The equivalent meaning would be “relieved” or “at ease,” but literally 释 means to give up, and 然 is an adjective that describes the state of something, here that of having given up [something]. This is the kind of relief that comes after a long period of being burdened by unresolved stress. It usually implies a voluntary action to let go of these issues and finally come to terms with the situation. [return to text]

The first direct quote from Confucius in this fic! The original here is 观其所以，观其所由，察其所安 (guan qi suo yi, guan qi suo you, cha qi suo an). This is the Confucian method to judge one’s character, talents and ability: first assess his motivations and goals, then his experiences, and what he would be happy doing. In Confucius’ opinion, this is a comprehensive technique to truly know a man. Of course, by citing the venerated philosopher, Jingyan is giving Marquis Yan a great compliment. [return to text]

Originally: 堪大任 (kan da re), where 堪 means “able to,” “can,” but its modern usage is mostly in compound words and literary situations, one does not use this verb in trivial matters like “I can swim.” 大任 literally means “great task,” or “great responsibility.” Again, it’s a fairly formal word, often referring to public duties on a grand scale. [return to text]
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Second-to-last chapter! Prepare yourselves for the grand finale! :D

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

Lin Shu receives the news from Nie Feng. He opens the brief missive on the eve of a decisive battle against the Northern Yan, eyes fixed on its glaring words, “...was ambushed after being severely injured, then forced onto a cliff with no outlets. Following his fall, extensive search was conducted to no avail.”

After having suffered three consecutive defeats, the Northern Yan has amassed all remaining troops on a nearby hill in preparation for the last strike.

Lin Shu summons Zhen Ping and Li Gang into the tent and hands them the letter. Li Gang’s face pales immediately, and even the usually collected Zhen Ping is struck speechless by the news.

The two of them have been with Lin Shu the longest, more so than Nie Feng and the others, they know what Xiao Jingyan means to him. The situation this time differs vastly from the assassination during the Autumn Hunt-- things were perilous last time, but it cannot compare to the terrible implications of a fall from the cliffs during combat, and the agonizing uncertainty after more than a fortnight of searching. They are both seasoned warriors, they know that even in the best circumstances, one out of a hundred missing men from the battlefield might survive, but in a vast, desolate mountain covered in snow…

Naturally, Lin Shu is well aware of the facts, too. Despite their familiarity, the two men cannot begin to divine his reaction to the news.

After a tense pause, Li Gang clenches his fist and ventures, “Vice Commander, what do you plan to do?”

“Vice Commander, please allow me to take a team to...aid the search efforts,” Zhen Ping forces the words from his mouth, despite knowing that Nie Feng must have done a thorough search already. If days of work yielded nothing, then it would be futile to send anyone else.

Lin Shu would definitely go, despite the odds.

Yet as a their commander, he cannot leave at this critical juncture.

Lin Shu vetoes Zhen Ping’s idea, saying instead, “Send a messenger to the capital first. Relay my message that after the battle concludes with the Northern Yan, I will head directly to Da Yu with 5,000 men to join forces with Nie Feng.

“By this point, Prince Qi will have been summoned back to the capital.” A chilling calm settles around Lin Shu as he continues, “He wouldn’t disagree with my proposal. Tell Lie Zhanying to come here at once. Give him 5,000 cavalry and have them head to this place.” Lin Shu flips open the map, nearly knocking over the flaming candle with the movement. “To the top of this mountain.
Have each person bring fifty arrows and oil grease. Fire all the arrows and retreat immediately via the west route down the mountain, then proceed at once towards Da Yu. I will catch up to them after the battle here is done. Zhen Ping will stay with me, Li Gang will take care of the aftermath here.”

“Vice Commander, you are planning to…”

Right now, Lin Shu is the very picture of composure, yet just a moment ago, he seemed completely oblivious to the drop of hot wax on his hand when he righted the candle.

“My original plan was to seize more horses and provisions from the enemy. But we are out of time. We will attack directly with fire.” Lin Shu points to the flickering lights in the distance from the base of Northern Yan, “They are deluding themselves with an impenetrable defense on the isolated hill,[1] I will burn them down with this western wind!”

This time, the Northern Yan commander is not Tuoba Hao,[2] whose position in the Yan court plummeted since his chosen prince had been condemned of wrongdoing a year prior. Instead, his replacement is a man who has more than enough brute strength but no brain for intricate military strategies.

So from the beginning, Lin Shu has drawn out a series of small attacks, successfully draining the opponent’s energy and morale.[3]

Now the Yan soldiers have congregated all their remaining forces on this hill, quite gleeful at the news that the Crown Prince of the Liang Kingdom has left the capital for battle. Convinced that the Liang morale must be vacillating, they are planning an attack on the undefended capital. However, before the commander’s finger could even point in that direction, hundreds of thousands of flaming arrows are falling upon them like meteors through the dark sky.

The rain of fire comes with the force of a tempest that soon ceases, but the countless sparks on the grass quickly coalesce into a sea of inferno.

The fiery flames slowly illuminate the night sky.

With the gust of the west wind, the fire quickly spreads up the hill, mercilessly chasing out the Yan forces that have been biding their time. At the foot of the hill is a thick forest ideal for ambush. The Northern Yan troops rush into the woods, only to be intercepted by more flaming arrows from an opposite hill. Once they are stopped, a sweeping line of flame cuts right through their middle, separating one half of the men from the other. Apparently, a row of trees have been splashed with oil beforehand and instantly burst into flames when the arrows hit them.

Behind the wall of fire separating them from their comrades, the Northern Yan soldiers can only hear vague clashes of battle through the violent cackling of the flames. They cannot even find their own footing in the chaos, never mind assembling an offensive formation.

All at once, the battlefield is filled with screams of men, honks of horns and hoarse cries of generals. When half of the men finally arrange themselves back into formation and step around the wall of fire, the sight that greets them is one of slain bodies of their friends and the orderly Chiyan army, calmly waiting for their arrival.

The last thing that the Northern Yan commander sees before his head is severed is a crimson horse trotting through the blazes, a figure on its back is clad in silver armors that are tinted red with the fire, like an almighty god rising from the flames.

When dawn breaks, 30,000 bodies of the Northern Yan forces litter across the battlefield. Their
morale completely decimated, the Northern Yan submits a petition for peace.

Early next morning, Lin Shu leaves Northern Yan with Zhen Ping and some hundred cavalrmen, meeting Lie Zhanying and his 5,000 men along the way, and sprints at full speed towards Cliff Mei.

When it was confirmed that Cliff Mei was the site of Jingyan’s disappearance, Lin Shu felt an intense chill freeze his entire body, as if he was the one forsaken in a world of infinite ice and snow, with no means of escape or rescue.

Although Da Yu took a terrible blow in the last battle, they show no sign of capitulation and continues to engage in a standoff with Nie Feng’s forces around Cliff Mei.

Nie Feng gives Lin Shu a detailed narrative of what had transpired. “Everything was running smoothly in the beginning, until the Yu reinforcements came along with their strategist. To our complete surprise, they relinquished the chance to save 50,000 of their men as well as their prince, instead ambushed His Highness’ troops. His Highness was battling with General Zuo from Da Yu when he was attacked by their reinforcements. So he moved southwards and ended up on Cliff Mei……

“I took a team of men and we searched for ten whole days, but the frontlines were in the west, I could not spare any more time away, so…”

Lin Shu tallies 5,000 men and heads north to Cliff Mei.

They spend an entire month, upturning every single rock on Cliff Mei.

The cliff is shrouded in a mind-numbing silence.

Zhen Ping accompanies Lin Shu through his every effort, watching him teeter on the brink of insanity.

He searches and searches, through every forest and every snow dune. He has never feared the dead, whether it be in the pugilist world or on the battlefield; but now, every corpse he sees is like vice grip around his heart, pumping despair into his veins.

Lin Shu refuses to have anyone else accompany him as he goes, alone, to uncover the identity of each body.

Every time, Zhen Ping prays that it is not Prince Jing, but a part of him cannot help but wish for this torment to end soon.

After upending all of Cliff Mei, Lin Shu leads the 5,000 men straight up north. He is like a crazed lone wolf, attacking one of the Yu bases at night along the border, then going further north to intercept their provision supply, exterminating more than 5,000 men responsible for their transport. After that, he traces the route of the supply crew back hundreds of miles, and torches all of the stored crops in a valley.

Thus he has completely cut off the provisions for the east legion of Da Yu.

The perennial snow is saturated with blood of thousands of slaughtered men that day. Lin Shu and his horse are also bathed in crimson.

After their victory, the Chiyan men who are cleaning up the battlefield remember hearing their
commander’s desperate howls, one after the next, as if venting years of misery, or perhaps calling someone’s name.

His cries resonate in the valley, carried by the wind across those frozen bodies of the dead.

In this desolate and icy place, who can hear him except the endless snow and the wandering spirits of those who have perished here?

In the end, the Chiyan soldiers gather all the deceased in a pile and set them ablaze.

Lin Shu stares at the reddened sky from the flames and suddenly turns his head to Zhen Ping, asking in a lost voice full of bewilderment, “Say, where did Jingyan go?”

Zhen Ping’s lips flounder desperately before he manages, “Vice Commander, let’s go home.”

Lin Shu’s answer drifts towards him amidst the crackling of the flames after a long pause.

“Ok, I’ll come again by myself.”

-------------------------------------------

Since hearing the grievous tidings regarding the Crown Prince, the emperor has fallen into a fevered coma. The dark and somber atmosphere in the palace intensifies as hope slowly leaves the imperial physicians’ eyes.

When he finally wakes, the emperor stands shakily on his feet with the support of Yan Que and Prince Ji, summons all first-ranked officials to his chamber and pronounces the decree to pass the throne to the eldest prince, Xiao Jingyu.

After the brief announcement, he bids Gao Zhan to wake him when Jingyu arrives before slipping back to a fatigued sleep.

It is almost dusk, and the ravens begin croaking outside on the barren branches, when his visitor finally arrives.

“Your Majesty,” Gao Zhan calls softly in the emperor’s ear, “His Highness is here.”

The emperor blinks open his eyes and sees his child, the future sovereign of the Liang Kingdom. They have not seen one another in many years, yet their reunion is their goodbye.

There were many things he wanted to say to his son.

Oh how he begrudges him.

So clean...Xiao Jingyu’s throne…

So many were fighting for it; one died, one exiled. So many schemes and strategists wasted, so much blood shed in vain, only to end with a final winner whose throne is pristine to a fault, without a single blemish on him.

When he himself was contending for the throne, Xiao Xuan emerged stained with blood and reeked of notoriety.

His son has Xiao Jingyan-- the dutiful younger brother who bore all the blame and shouldered all the squalid dealings for his elder brother until the very end, when he gave every drop of his blood on the
battlefield against Da Yu, not a speck of which staining the imperial robes of the new emperor.

Both Yan Que and Lin Xie would be happy.

He is true to his name as the benevolent prince, true to his own conscience and his people.

As for Jingyan, if Xiao Xuan remains silent, Jingyu would never know anything.

Before Prince Qi’s arrival tonight, Xiao Xuan was determined to tell him the entire truth. And then he would look at him with a mocking smile and say, ‘So much for your so-called mercy! Think of Jingyan-- you have not even spared your own brother, what right do you have to bestow mercy on others?’

But now, his son is kneeling by his sickbed, eyes red and face haggard in a state of distress that he has never seen before, Xiao Xuan feels a sudden pang of pity.

Despite their years of separation, he has been the Father for two lifetimes and knows very well what kind of person his son is.

...Yet he is incapable of trusting him.

He reaches out an unsteady hand and tucks a stray strand of hair by his son’s temples behind his ear.

_Do you know how much I envy you?

_You have the grace of a lord and the magnanimity of a ruler.

_You have the reverence of your people, support of your followers, and the utterly selfless assistance of your brother.

_You are also the repository for hope and aspirations of Brother Lin Xie and Yan Que.

Of all these things, some Xiao Xuan has never had, others he has once possessed but has long since lost.

Xiao Xuan says nothing more. He gathers his remaining strength and shifts his head to rest on Jingyu.

He takes his last breath in the arms of the son he used to love the most.

---------------------------------------

When the knells of the emperor’s passing reverberates through the city, Lin Xie’s carriage passes through the capital gates.

Lin Xie lifts the flap of the carriage, eyes fixed on the setting sun in the distance.

Many years ago, he and Xiao Xuan used to leave this very city on horseback, galloping towards the horizon.

---------------------------------------

When Lin Shu returns to the capital, the Liang Kingdom has already inaugurated a new ruler.

After the imperial funeral, Xiao Tingsheng hears the news of Lin Shu’s arrival and sprints outside, abandoning his assignment with little care.
Everything dawns on him as soon as his eyes land on Lin Shu.

His father is never coming back.

Gao Zhan, who has been bestowed by Consort Dowager Jing the privilege of spending the rest of his days peacefully in the palace, upon hearing of Lin Shu’s return, passes on the long letter to the emperor.

“Your Majesty, the late emperor has penned a personal letter for the perusal of Your Majesty and Vice Commander Lin.”

“Father’s letter…to me and Xiaoshu?”

“Yes...regarding His Highness Prince Jing,” replies Gao Zhan. “The late emperor has specifically instructed that no one is to be privy of its contents except Your Majesty and Vice Commander Lin.”

At that, he gestures for all servants to exit the hall with him. Before turning to leave, he glances at the eldest prince still standing in the room. The eleven-year-old makes no move to leave. In fact, he has not moved an inch since Lin Shu’s entrance.

Gao Zhan shuts the doors to the hall after a second of hesitation, and retreats to a distance with the rest of the servants outside.

Within a few moments, cries of deep anguish are heard from behind those closed doors.

----------------------------------------

The young prince exits the hall soon afterwards.

He has known the truth years ago. His grief was also born long before today, it would be pointless for him to wail his loss now.

These past years, he has watched his father finish this journey one step after another.

He has known that it is a road that leads to nothing but wretched ruination, but he was powerless to stop him, because in the last life, he had accompanied Xiao Jingyan until the very end.

Xiao Jingyan has always been a person with few desires. When he does set his eyes on something, however, he would pursue it with all his might, burning all his fervor in that single gamble.

Xiao Tingsheng does not have the heart to stop him.

But before Lin Shu’s return, Tingsheng had harbored one last shred of hope. In the end, he is let down.

He knows that Jingyan must have wanted to live-- someone with a heart as kind as his would not have wanted his loved ones to grieve for his death.

It only makes Tingsheng resent himself more, for not being by his father’s side when the man must have fought through the worst battles, fought for every chance to live, only to meet his end in a barren land far from home, his body uncollected and his grave unmarked.

Just now, he read the letter from the emperor’s trembling hands.

Xiao Xuan explained everything with great accuracy except two details: Mei Changsu’s true identity, and Tingsheng’s story.
The former was probably omitted out of consideration for his seventh son’s wishes, and the latter was most likely unknown to Xiao Xuan himself.

Tingsheng walks aimlessly through the palace. At his glacial expression, the servants bow to him with slight wariness before retreating quickly out of his way.

Compared to the news of Prince Jing’s death, they feel more elation at another victory of the Chiyan army, and great relief at the prospect of decades of peace with Da Yu’s surrender.

They know not the emperor’s grief and are even more blind to the young prince’s pain.

As Xiao Chengting, he is expected to grieve for his beloved grandfather’s passing, but has no reason to shed tears for an uncle’s death.

In this life, his father has given him everything that he did not have in the past, except a place for him to properly howl his loss.

His feet carry him forward mindlessly, until he finds himself in front of the residence of the Commander of the Imperial Guards.

It has been a fortnight since Meng Zhi came back from the Western borders. At Tingsheng’s unexpected arrival, he startles from his meeting with some others to discuss the reassignment of guards after the funeral. Everyone scrambles to their feet in a hurried greeting to the prince.

“All of you, leave us...leave the courtyard. I need a private word with Commander Meng.”

The young prince bites his lips in restraint and shuts the door after making sure everyone else has left the vicinity.

“Your Highness, what’s--” Before Meng Zhi could finish his puzzled inquiry, he finds himself an armful of a sobbing child, who is clutching to his robes as if it were his lifeline.

“Father...is never coming back again…”

Lin Shu stays in the palace for another few hours, then returns to the Lin Manor after visiting the Consort Dowager Jing.

Lin Xie and Princess Jin Yang are already waiting for him at home.

“Father, Mother, I would like to ask your permission for one thing,” Lin Shu says in a low but uncompromising voice. “I plan to request to head to the Northern borders in guard duty, and will not return to the capital again.”

“Xiaoshu…!” Not knowing what has transpired, Princess Jin Yang is stunned by the steel conviction in her son’s voice. “What are you going to do? What are you going to the North for?”

“I...will go look for Jingyan.”

“You already did! You came back because you couldn’t find him!!” Princess Jin Yang pulls her son into an embrace, only to find his entire body alarmingly cold. As a mother, she feels her son’s anguish so acutely that involuntary tears slid down her face in shared pain. “There are still some remaining insurgents in the North, plus it will already be another six months when you go back there, where are you going to look for him?!”
“Even if I cannot find him, I need to stay by him.”

“What about His Majesty? Do you forget that the person you are supposed to support has just ascended the throne?!”

“I made a promise to Jingyan to safeguard the kingdom...to also safeguard him.”

“Xiaoshu!!”

“Xiaoshu,” says Lin Xie in a stern voice, breaking his silence. “The situation in the north is still capricious. Are you ready to shoulder the responsibility to stabilize the borders and provide for the people?”

“Yes.”

“As a subject, surely you know that you would have ample opportunities for a successful career here in the Court, while the role of a border guard can be filled by many. You still insist on going?”

“Yes.”

“Even if Prince Jing is still alive, he could be anywhere besides the North.” Lin Xie pauses, “And with his honorable disposition, if he had been captured, he would have committed suicide without a doubt. You would be going to guard nothing but the barren mountains and forgotten souls.”

“.....”

“Xiaoshu, I understand that your friendship with Jingyan runs deep since childhood. Even so, Jingyan would not have wanted you to…”

“Mother.” Lin Shu interrupts her, raising his head to meet her eyes.

“I love Jingyan.”

This simple proclamation is the only answer needed for all the persuasion and questions before.

Lin Shu kneels on the floor and repeats his words, misery lacing his voice in a childlike lament. [4]

“I love Jingyan.”

-----------------------------------

“Is Lin Shu here?”

“Is Lin Shu here?”

Two boyish voices from outside the door interrupt the discussion. In a few moments, Li Gang comes in and reports, “There are two children outside, claiming to be the servants of Langya Hall, here to deliver something to the Vice Commander.”

Lin Xie is caught off guard. “Langya Hall?”

“Let them in.”

Two identical boys enter the room, bowing slightly to Lin Xie and the Princess as greeting. In their hands is an intricate locked box, etched with the distinct emblem of the Langya Hall.
Everyone who has been named on the Langya List has a box like this in the Hall, which contains all their pertinent information, catalogued to every detail. It is rumored that those who are nominated often can have a box so heavy that it would take two adult men to lift it. Although Mei Changsu has never topped the list, his name has always been included in the past few years, yet his box is no more than a couple of inches wide.

The two boys insert two delicate keys simultaneously into slits on both sides, then turn the thrice-locked top, and the box cracks open. They offer the box to Lin Shu with a respectful bow.

Inside lies a white silk handkerchief, on it is a brief poem written in flowy script: “From afar, his silhouette is like the untainted snow from the heavens to the mortal realm, like the fleeting fragrance of flowers, like a beautiful melody sailing along the river. Of all the heroes in the world, I bow to none other than Sir Mei of Jiangzuo.”[5]

Along with it is a pearl as big as a pigeon’s egg.

From the emperor’s letter he just read in the palace, Lin Shu vaguely remembers a brief comment of Mei Changsu being Jingyan’s strategist in the last life, but does not exist in this life. At the time, he was so overwhelmed with grief that he did not spare the energy to scrutinize why the emperor had written with such finality that “Thus there is no Sir Mei in this world,” when Mei Changsu’s name is clearly recorded on the Langya List.

His eyes land on the pearl inside the box—now everything makes sense.

Because Lin Shu still exists.

“There was never a Mei Changsu after all…”

All those years, the person who has kept him company was someone who has never truly existed. He has always been so alone, walking down this arduous path all by himself.

“Young Master said that if Lin Shu comes asking about it, give him this box.”

“Young Master said that if Prince Jing dies, give Lin Shu this box.”

“The pearl was given to the Young Master for safekeeping by Prince Jing.”

“Young Master told us to put it in this box and show it to Lin Shu.”

“Young Master said that of this whole affair, he should not divulge anything, and does not wish to.”

“But Lin Shu needs to know the truth.”

The twins deliver the information one after another, and bow to the adults once more, before turning to leave.

From the moment he sees the pearl, Lin Shu understands everything: why his strategy and Mei Changsu’s naval plan were so strikingly similar; why Jingyan’s expression would always soften whenever Mei Changsu’s name came up; why Jingyan called for Sir Su in his injured state, his voice filled with the helpless despair of a drowning man; why the handwritten notes in Xiang Di Ji mirrored his own experiences—‘There is unexpected marvel on this mountain, climb to the top and behold the glorious sight of the waterfall like a dragon plunging into the river from the East.’

[An extraordinary man came to the capital, called Sir Mei of Jiangzuo. He was involved in the
Chiyan case, his real name unknown, he used the pseudonym ‘Su Zhe’ in the city."

‘He is the son of my mother’s acquaintance, his name is Mei Changsu.’

[He secretly aided Jingyan in his bid for the throne, helped him to disclose the injustice of the Chiyan case, eventually securing the position in the Eastern Palace for him.]

‘Jingyan, you are not suited for the throne.’

[In this life, much of Jingyan’s doing bears the imprint of Mei Changsu’s footsteps.]

‘That Mei Changsu is pushing Jingyan over the precipice!’

[In this life, Chiyan still exists, so there will be no Sir Mei.]

‘Battle with the Yu is going as predicted. Sir Su presides over all decisions, providing ingenious strategies. Thousands of miles separate us, too far for our gazes to meet, but please worry not for me, as I shall pray for your safety.’

There was never a Mei Changsu. All those years, he has spent them alone.

[This time you are going to the East Sea, I heard it's known for the pearls, bring some back for me to play with, won’t you?]

‘That pearl...the person who should give it to him is the nineteen-year-old Xiao Jingyan, not me.’

Lin Shu clenches the pearl in his palm as if molding it into his flesh. He bursts out in hysterical laughter, rivulets of tears running down his face.

“...So it was me…”

----------------------------------

The funeral of Xiao Jingyan, seventh brother of His Majesty, takes place in September of the fifth year of Yuanyou. Entombed in an empty sepulchre with his belongings,[6] his memorial is set in the Manor of Prince Jing. The rites are handled by the emperor himself, who places a wooden bow inside the coffin. Autumn of the same year, Vice Commander of the Chiyan army, Lin Shu, sets out to the Northern borders.

(Again, endnotes so long that they exceeded word limits...)

N.B. This last part with the [...] and the ‘...’ is consistent with the style in the original Chinese, where [...] is from the emperor’s letter to Prince Jing. The ‘...’ part is a mix of things Lin Shu and Jingyan said in the past, and then Jingyan’s letter to Lin Shu from the Northern Yu battlefield. Hopefully it isn’t too confusing, most of it is contextual anyway. :)

Chapter End Notes

1据险而守 (ju xian er shou): a defense method relying on perilous or isolated terrain, in
such a way that the natural barrier would deter the enemy’s approach. This type of strategy is often used as a last resort, since their own troops are essentially backed into a corner, with little means of retreat if the enemy manages to break through. [return to text]

2 拓跋昊 (Tuoba Hao) was briefly mentioned in the drama as the man ranked just after Meng Zhi on the Langya List of martial arts masters. Mei Changsu had expressed relief that they didn’t have to deal with him as one of the contenders for the Princess’ hand in the tournament. “Tuoba” is one of those uncommon double-syllable surnames in Chinese. It seems to have origins in modern-day Mongolia. [return to text]

3 一鼓作气，再而衰，三而竭 (yi gu zuo qi, zai er shuai, san er jie) is a phrase from the records of war by a military philosopher Cao Gui in the 600s B.C.. In ancient warfare, generals commanded troops by beating the drums. Literally the sentence means “The first beat of the drum raises [men’s] courage, which weans by the second drumbeat, and completely exhausts by the third.” In modern usage, the first part, 一鼓作气, is a well-known idiom that means “gather your strengths all at once” and complete the task in one go, since the more drawn-out it is, the less motivated you will be. [return to text]

4 Original here is 委屈 (wei qu), which is another commonly used word with no direct English equivalent. 委 (wei) means “to appoint/entrust”, while 屈 (qu) means “bent/to bend.” Together they take on the meaning of “feeling of sadness at being wronged or misunderstood.” It is usually used in context of a close personal relationship where the unjust treatment causes one to feel 委屈. This type of emotional distress is often silently endured and seldom verbalized, because very little can be done to rectify the source of the distress. Here the original Chinese says that Lin Shu is 委屈 like a child, most likely because 1) no one else could understand the depth of his feelings for Jingyan, 2) he can’t actually act on those feelings since Jingyan is gone. Another example: in canon, when Mei Changsu chased and yelled and knelt to beg Jingyan not to rescue Wei Zheng, only to have the other man doubt his motives, I imagine he was feeling very much 委屈. XD [return to text]

5 Original: 遥映人间冰雪样,暗香幽浮曲临江,遍识天下英雄路,俯首江左有梅郎。In canon, these two sentences were first said by a well-respected pugilist leader after he met with Mei Changsu and was completely awed by his charisma. He is praising Mei Changsu’s integrity of character, alacrity of the mind, and magnitude of his talent. The metaphors of snow, hidden fragrance and melody may seem too effeminate to an English reader, but in Ancient Chinese culture, the Confucian standard of being a gentleman was one of inner beauty rather than physical strength: intellectual cultivation, self-restraint, and genuine kindness. So this description of Mei Changsu was a great compliment indeed. The plum, 梅, which incidentally is Mei Changsu’s surname, is a particularly highly-regarded metaphor for one’s persistence and virtue, because its flowers bloom during the winter despite the harshest cold. The second part of the poem proceeds to say that after seeing many heroes from different walks of life, the only one he would willingly bow his head to is Sir Mei of Jiangzuo. It is implied in canon that circulation of this poem was what really helped to spread Mei Changsu’s reputation as a man of extraordinary talents, leading naturally to the Liang princes fighting to secure his assistance. You can find the lyrical version of the poem here, sung by none other than Tong Lu, one of Mei Changsu’s informants who fell in love with the woman Qin Banruo planted by his side, but then sacrificed his life to help get word out of Prince Yu’s coup. [return to text]
衣冠冢 (yi guan zhong) is a type of tomb with only the personal effects of the deceased, not the body. Usually this was done for people whose bodies could not be found or were entombed elsewhere, and the empty tomb would serve as a memorial. 衣 (yi) means “clothes,” and 冠 (guan) means “hat,” 冢 (zhong) is an archaic and literary word for “grave.”
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

DUN-DUN-DUN-DUNNNNN Here comes the final chapter!!

Disclaimers in chapter 1, Mandarin original here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the fifth year of Yuanyou, new emperor Xiao Jingyu is officially coronated, naming the new era “Changjing,”[1] with prayers for peace along the borders, prosperity for the kingdom and welfare for the people.

The second year of Changjing opens with an abundance of rain in the early spring, bringing a flourishing season for the crops and an auspicious start of the agricultural season.

Another excellent piece of news reaches the capital in the beginning of the year: the crushing defeat suffered by Da Yu in the battle with the Liang had exacerbated their domestic strifes, leading to inability to pay the fiscal agreements in the truce treaty. Combined with the unrelenting pressure from both the Liang ambassadors and the border guards, they have settled to cede territory as recompense. The borders of the Liang Kingdom have been expanded almost overnight by hundreds of miles in the north.

Yan Que is enjoying a quiet day at home, tea in hand, when he hears a knock at the door.

Ever since the inauguration of the new emperor, the head astrologist at the Taichang Temple[2] has been living under an intense anticipation of doom-- he was the one who predicted major rainfall at Qishui that year, leading to the demotion and subsequent exile of the then Prince Qi. When the imperial summons reached his door earlier today, he could practically taste his own demise; so he rushed to beg his old acquaintance, Yan Que, to enter the palace with him, in a desperate hope to preserve himself.

Yan Que knows well that the current emperor would not summon the man merely to air old grievances, but he is also hesitant to trust an astrologist. At this juncture, a messenger arrives from the palace with a summons for him as well.

With the exception of urgent matters, the emperor would usually stop by Yan Que’s residence for a private discussion on his way to Prince Jing’s manor. Yan Que accepts the summons and sets out to the palace after tidying his clothes.

Their carriage passes by Prince Jing’s manor, which remains under careful maintenance by the prince’s old followers. Several branches of plum blossoms poke through the walls, still blooming cheerfully in the lingering winter.

There are children scampering through the streets on their bamboo horses, singing childish tunes, some of which Yan Que had once sung himself when he was young, others he had heard from the young Jingyan and Lin Shu, when he and Xiao Xuan sat together to watch the boys.

The passage of time has a curious ability to filter out the painful spikes from memories, leaving only
the gentle and pleasant parts that he could slowly savor with his eyes closed.

He arrives at the palace through the beautiful signs of spring, and yet another sight greets him.

He has not seen the emperor smile in a very long time. Struck by the sudden loss of both his father and younger brother, the soft-hearted and elegant man rarely smiled in the past year and half, but his face now is filled with unbridled joy.

Yan Que sees a letter clutched in one of his hands and a snowy pigeon resting on the window sill. The last pigeon of such extraordinary beauty he saw was the one Prince Jing sent to him, asking him to save Brother Lin Xie from trouble.

It is the messenger pigeon of the Langya Hall.

The astrologist had prostrated himself onto the floor as soon as he entered, not even daring to glance at the emperor. So it is to his complete befuddlement when he hears the command to choose an auspicious date. He raises his head in confusion and asks, “What is the auspicious date for?”

“Father, I heard that--” the doors to the Yangju Hall are suddenly banged open by an unusually flustered young prince, who almost stumbles in his haste.

Yan Que casts a look at the poor, dazed astrologist, and a smile stretches on his face.

-----------------------------------------

Inside the Langya Hall, the Young Master leisurely strolls up the stone steps to the highest part of the mountain.

An emaciated man in ebony robes sits in the middle of the room. Injuries and illness have robbed him of good health.

A year ago, when he was brought back along with Fei Liu from Da Yu, the man was covered in cuts and lacerations, some of which already black from poison, his left leg broken in the fall. Fei Liu had managed to hide them both in snow dunes for several days.

Despite the pills Fei Liu fed him to keep him alive, Lin Chen, as a physician, could easily imagine his perilous state.

It would take no more than a sigh of fatigue and closing of his eyes, and he would never wake again. To be able to survive under those circumstances was entirely due to his iron will and his subconscious desire to keep breathing.

Even with the man sitting within an arm’s reach to him now, Lin Chen cannot help but feel that they have come in a full circle with these two lifetimes.

A servant boy passes Lin Chen with a bowl of fresh medicine in hand and stops in front of the other man’s bed, raising the bowl respectfully to help him drink.

The patient, however, takes the bowl in his still mobile left hand, gulps the content in one go.

Lin Chen chuckles at the sight. “For someone who has been the emperor there and back, how can you be so unaccustomed to servants?”

At Lin Chen’s voice, the man turns his body with great difficulty to face him. “It was always like this since my days in the military...I’m used to it. And I still have use of my left hand.”
Lin Chen closes the distance and examines the injured right hand, saying, “There would be some more time before this hand could wield a sword again. By the way, those in the capital should have received the letter, though I’m not sure if your Brother liked me imitating your handwriting.”

In the missive, he wrote that Jingyan was trapped in a valley near Da Yu borders after his fall. After being rescued, he was invited on a trip to the pugilist world with the Young Master of the Langya Hall, and would return to the capital in a few months.

There was no mention of his injuries.

Lin Chen asks with a laugh, “Do you suppose your Brother and the others would believe it? Then again, I had thought that you’d become a recluse in the farthest part of the pugilist world, and wouldn’t tell them that you are alive for at least a few years.

“I still have the Jiangzuo Alliance, you know. You’ve ruled a kingdom before, a measly little pugilist organization would be-- “

“I’m going back to the capital.”

The smile disappears from Lin Chen’s face. He asks, “You want to go back or need to go back?”

“...It’s the same thing.”

“It’s not. You are going back out of concern that if news of your survival reaches the capital but your person is not there, the populace might begin to have misgivings about the emperor. You are not sure whether they would genuinely wish to see you again, or if you even wish to see them. It is the rational part of your mind that is telling you to go back.

“Everything is settled already, everyone has a happy ending like you wanted. It is utter stupidity for you to live your remaining decades for the opinions of others!”

Jingyan shakes his head, “...I am intimately familiar with the anguish of losing a loved one. It is more painful than any battle wound could bestow...and it is endless.”

“You think I don’t understand? One time was enough, and I nearly had a second time.” At Jingyan’s raised eyes, Lin Chen inches closer and adds with a smirk, “I mean Fei Liu.”

“I know you mean Fei Liu.”

Lin Chen is struck speechless by the serious response, finally he manages, “...You...are so absolutely dull!”

A year ago, when Jingyan fell from the cliff, he had grabbed onto the sharp rocks on precipice to slow the force of his descent, barely alive when he reached the bottom. Fei Liu, who had been surreptitiously following him the whole way, was the one to eventually find him after taking a circuitous path down the cliff himself.

The way from which they came was still blocked by remaining Da Yu soldiers, so Fei Liu took the unconscious Jingyan in the northwest direction, stumbling across the Yu borders in their haste. Their unintentional entry into enemy terrain had fortuitously helped them evade their pursuers. For more than a fortnight, they were on the move constantly from one snow dune to the next within the valley.

Fortunately, heavy snowfall had quickly covered their tracks and blood stains.

One day, all the Da Yu forces suddenly headed to the East. Fei Liu took Jingyan in the same
direction, and when they were about to be devoured by wolves that flocked to the smell of blood on the flatlands, Lin Chen arrived.

Jingyan’s unstable condition did not allow for further traveling, Fei Liu was also exhausted, so Lin Chen settled themselves in a nearby valley, where Physician Yan used to frequent to collect rare herbs. Inside the valley, they had mild weather and an abundance of medicinal herbs, but the only exit was blocked by heavy snow that only melted in early summer. The three of them sustained themselves in the valley for eight months, until the spring of the following year.

For several months, Jingyan remained in a deep coma due to the severity of his injuries. Although Fei Liu had just a few scratches, the physical exertion and days in the snow had taken a toll on him--the normally healthy boy fell ill immediately. Lin Chen was constantly tormented by his worry for Fei Liu and the responsibility of healing a battered man; his days were consumed with the repetitive tasks of chopping, brewing and feeding medicine to his incapacitated companions.

Whenever he is reminded of those months, Lin Chen’s expression would invariably darken with lingering annoyance, but Jingyan remembers when he finally woke from his coma, the way Lin Chen’s face lit up with a relieved smile.

Lin Chen finishes changing the bandages around Jingyan’s injuries and shifts the freshly prepared plate of snacks to the man’s left side, before asking, “This letter was sufficient for those in the capital, what about Lin Shu?”

“......”

“This past year, he has been stationed as guard on the border with Da Yu. From time to time, he would send search teams into the Yu territory. After a year of “guarding,” the Liang borders have been expanded northwards for more than a hundred miles. If you keep the truth from him for another few years, he’s going to guard all the way to the gates of the Yu capital!”

“Do you have paper and a pen?”

“You are going to write it yourself?” Lin Chen casts a dubious eye at his still bandaged right hand, passing him the stationary nonetheless.

On the parchment, Jingyan uses his left hand to slowly trace out two misshapen characters: “Yan” and “Shu.”

He hands Lin Chen the letter.

“Lin Shu should recognize your writing with left hand, and the message would be delivered with Langya Hall’s pigeon. Knowing that you are still alive and seeing the symbol of Langya Hall, no more words are needed in the actual letter.”

Fei Liu skips into the room at this moment and looks over Lin Chen’s shoulder at the piece of paper in the man’s hands. The boy has extensive experience with pigeon-catching and letter-reading, so he immediately announces, “Not right.”

Lin Chen ruffles Fei Liu’s hair affectionately and says, “He means that the names of the sender and recipient seem to have been reversed. But no matter, you can give it to him personally later.”

At Jingyan’s obvious puzzlement, Lin Chen clarifies, “Last month, he found something during his search in the North-- your crimson bow.”

“...!”
Although the bow had lost its full functionality after being severed once, Jingyan has always kept it on his person until he fell from the cliff.

“Fei Liu knew how much you treasure it so he brought it along the whole time you were fleeing from the Yu. When I found you both, the bow was too much hassle so I tossed it by mistake,” Lin Chen pauses for dramatic effect, then adds with a smirk, “tied together with my fan ornament.”

“......”

“Lin Shu has never seen my fan ornament, but he could probably deduce that only I would go to the Yu battlefields in the middle of winter with a fan. So he must have rushed here without a moment’s pause.”

Fei Liu chimes in, rather well-timed, “Su-gege, foot of the mountain.”

The journey from the North to Langya Hall would take an ordinary man on horseback at least twenty days, but Lin Shu made it in less than ten.

Lin Chen snickers at Jingyan’s growing discomfort, “Oh come on, for someone who’s died twice, what are you afraid of?

“Spill it, if you truly don’t want to see Lin Shu, I can easily make him go in circles in the mountain for a week. Don’t be fooled by the beautiful serenity of this place, it can transform into precarious terrain if needed.”

“...I just don’t know how to apologize to him.”

“He lied to you once, you also withheld truth from him, the debts cancel out, you are a match made in heaven!”

“If I did not ask Nie Duo to help Nihuang in the Southern battles, Nihuang would not have reneged on her betrothal promise to Lin Shu...I robbed him of his happiness.”

Lin Chen has always prided himself of his brilliant mind, able to divine the next ten sentences out of a man’s mouth from his first one. Now, he finds his self-confidence shattered to pieces as he is struck completely speechless by Jingyan’s response.

“...You! Xiao Jingyan...”

He points at the injured man resting on the bed, lips floundering helplessly for words. Eventually he sighs, “Listen, at Lin Shu’s speed, he’d be here in a couple of hours, don’t you dare repeat those words to him.”

“Why not?”

Lin Chen straightens himself in his seat, saying with complete seriousness, “I’m concerned that he’d be really pissed but would never lay a fist on you, so he’d vent on me instead. But I am forewarning you, if he hits me, I am most definitely hitting him back.”

----------------------------------------

Lin Shu arrives in less than an hour. He is led by a servant boy straight into Jingyan’s rooms.

Outside the room, Lin Chen stands with a bowl of medicine in hand, fully expecting an onslaught of dramatic wails and angry questions, yet the two men inside merely sit across from one another,
having a peaceful conversation.

“I heard that Marquis Yan was not the ambassador to negotiate with Da Yu regarding details of their truce agreement.”

“Yujin was sent instead to reassert our dominance. He truly lived up to the name of the Yan family, his talent with words rivals that of his elders in their prime days.[3] But the Yu strategist remains a threat. I’ve been turning over the details of the battle in my head these past few days, his moves were completely unexpected. No matter what, the Yu forces should not have abandoned Nie Feng’s legion and attacked you instead. Even though you were the Crown Prince at the time, sacrificing the lives of 50,000 soldiers and two highly competent generals was too high a price to pay. There is only one explanation: they must have believed that you posed a threat greater than simply being a Crown Prince.”

“That strategist remembers certain things from the last life.”

There is no more need to conceal things from Lin Shu, since Jingyan heard from Lin Chen that he and Brother Qi already found out everything from the emperor’s letter. “When I...was emperor, I initiated warfare against Da Yu several times, even arriving right at the gates of their capital. Perhaps he has a vague recollection and so was especially wary of me.”

Da Yu would never have mercy on the emperor who almost annihilated their kingdom.

During those twenty years on the throne, Xiao Jingyan had pulled the Liang Kingdom out of chaos and slowly restored prosperity, while Da Yu suffered from a series of natural disasters and domestic woes, in addition to the constant threat of the Northern Yan, they eventually yielded to the Liang’s dominance.

However, Xiao Jingyan refused the proposal of a marriage union with Da Yu. All three wars during his rule were waged against the Yu, during which the Liang Kingdom suffered almost no losses, while the Yu were forced to cede their independence and five provinces to plead for peace.

The reasons behind such aggressive measures certainly included the Yu’s constant raids on the Liang borders, their greedy intentions only increasing over time. Although Jingyan has not divulged the other reasons, Lin Shu understands.

In two separate battles with Da Yu, Jingyan had lost both Lin Shu and Mei Changsu.

Lin Shu says, “That man is too dangerous, he must be eliminated.”

“He is already dead. That day, when he forced me onto the cliff, I hurled my sword at him. Although the strike did not kill him right away, he sustained significant injuries.” Jingyan’s expression never wavers as he speaks of events of that day, yet the much of the horror of those moments remain unsaid.

“As long as I do not take the throne, his prophecy would be moot. The Yu are not overly suspicious anyway, he was only useful to them as a military strategist. They had already prepared for the one last strike in this battle, only to end in a crushing defeat and the death of two talented generals. He was summoned back their kingdom as a convict, but he died of his injuries on the road.”

“Second dose of today,” Lin Chen sighs from his place as an observer and steps into the room. Lin Shu takes the bowl without a pause into his own hands, removing the spoon from the liquid and then places the bowl in Jingyan’s left hand. Jingyan mutters a thanks and drinks the medicine in one gulp.
“You certainly know him well.”

Lin Shu smiles and says, “He doesn’t like bitter things.”

Lin Chen drawls a long ‘Ohhhh’ in mock understanding.

Lin Shu says to him, “Thank you for saving Jingyan.”

Lin Chen shakes his head, “Not me, Fei Liu saved him.”

“Fei Liu too…”

“I have never commanded Fei Liu one way or another,” Lin Chen says. “I just told him to take care of himself first, and protect Xiao Jingyan at his convenience.

“I told him to use his heart to decide on other matters,” Lin Chen pinches Fei Liu’s cheeks, hard, who is busy peeling an orange, “it was entirely his own idea to secretly follow your Xiao Jingyan to the North.

“I did not ask Fei Liu to save him, it was Fei Liu who wanted to save him.”

Fei Liu knows that Lin Chen is talking about him, but the man’s face is unusually somber, apparently speaking about real business. He doesn’t understand their serious talks, so he turns his attention back to the orange. After eating the whole thing, he shows the handful of peels to Lin Chen, “Finished!”

Lin Shu places the largest orange into his hand, moving so that he is sitting formally in front of Fei Liu, eyes locked with the clear, bright orbs of the boy.

“You might not understand all of what we are saying, but you should know that you saved many, many people.”

Fei Liu cocks his head and points at Jingyan, “One.”

“No, many more people, including me,” Lin Shu says. “Thank you for bringing him back.”

Never having been thanked so formally before, Fei Liu grabs Lin Shu’s hand and turns his head to Lin Chen with unsuppressed pleasure on his face, “Su-gege!”

Lin Chen glances at Lin Shu before crouching down to say to the boy, “Right, your Su-gege is complimenting you, you are amazing.”

-------------------------------------

After the departure of Lin Chen and Fei Liu, the room falls back to silence.

A gust of fresh wind from the mountains breezes past them, shuffling the pages on the table, one of which flutters into the air and is snatched by Lin Shu’s hand.

It’s the “letter” Jingyan just wrote to Lin Shu.

A letter of two words.

“Shu” as in Buffalo and “Yan” as in Fireball.

Crumpling the parchment tightly in his hand, Lin Shu slams his fist into the ground, his long-suppressed frustration finally unleashed.
“I made a vow to never spare anyone that dares to harm you...But in the end, we are the ones who have hurt you the most, and you are the one who’s been your own most merciless enemy.”

In this past year, Lin Shu spent every minute in the frozen terrains of the north, contemplating on how Jingyan has changed since he was nineteen-years-old.

Every little thing, every single word.

“How could someone be so utterly ruthless to himself?” He queries softly, perhaps to himself or to Jingyan. “One misstep and there would never have been a Xiao Jingyan in this world again.”

“Xiaoshu,” Jingyan cuts him off. “You are all well, and that is enough.”

Such a casual response delivered so airily lands on Lin Shu’s heart like a barbed sword, shredding the organ into pieces.

*In this life, everyone is well.*

He asks in a trembling voice, “...What about you?”

At that, Xiao Jingyan falls silent in obvious contemplation, as if he has never seriously considered this matter before.

The scene today bears an eerie resemblance to that day when he stood in front of a calm Mei Changsu, eyes red and voice strained, demanding why he was unwilling to regain his identity as Lin Shu.

Their roles seem to have been reversed: he is now as serene as the flowing stream in the mountains, while Lin Shu’s eyes are so red that he seems to be on the brink of tears.

In Jingyan’s memory, the man who has commanded 10,000 men into battle and the most brilliant youth in the capital is not one to shed tears lightly.

So he curls his lips into a smile, placating in a soft voice, “I’ll be fine. I’ll go back to the capital after a bit more recuperation.”

“Why would you go back?!”

Jingyan looks up at the unexpected outburst, eyes wide with befuddlement.

“After you are well enough, you should go.” Lin Shu lowers his voice and says, “Go wherever you want, I’ll accompany you.”

“But I’ve lived through this so I could go back. Mother and Brother...and you are all in the capital, where else are you telling me to go?”

“Then stay here. Lin Chen is a good man, he wouldn’t hurt you...like how we have hurt you.”

“Xiaoshu...there are many things you don’t know.” Jingyan turns his eyes to the outside, to the green mountains surrounded by undulating mist— the same scenery that greeted Lin Shu’s eyes when he was here all those years ago.

That man had suffered through pain many times his own.

“When our roles were reversed in the past, I made many mistakes, yet you never blamed me for any of it. What I have done are all things that I’ve wanted to do and must do,” says Jingyan. “Just as
some men live for power, others for money, I am no different. I have been doing everything of my own volition, living of my own volition.

“To be able to trade my life for your happiness and still be blessed to see you standing in front of me, healthy and spirited as always...you have no idea how happy that makes me feel.” Jingyan places his hand gently on Lin Shu’s, emphasizing the sincerity of his words, “Really, Xiaoshu.”

The hand that rests on Lin Shu’s left hand is so emaciated that the blue veins are clearly visible, it is no longer the strong hand that can wield a sword and shoot an arrow.

Lin Shu fixes his gaze on that hand, trying to imagine all the pain and hardships the man has endured through all those years, pain that Jingyan would never share with him.

In the past, Jingyan would at least cry when the pain became intolerable.

Now he has even lost the ability to cry.

“The injury in your right hand goes deep to the bone. I remember reading that the South has a special herb with extraordinary healing properties for this kind of injury, I’ll go get it for you. Wait for me.”

Jingyan’s expression dims at the mention of the South.

For a man who can talk casually about his deplorable health with barely a frown, Lin Shu cannot fathom what could make him show such obvious regret.

“Xiaoshu, I’m sorry. Nihuang and Nie Duo are getting married.”

”......”

Jingyan averts his eyes and says, “They were barely acquaintances in the last life, since you sent Wei Zheng to help Nihuang in the naval battle. This time Wei Zheng was still serving under you when the Southern battle happened, I had no choice but to send Nie Duo instead. Nihuang had told me afterwards that Nie Duo would go to the South to help her train the navy, but I didn’t anticipate that...she would fall in love with him.

“I knew that a person could change...but I didn’t think that she would change too.”

He was the one who robbed Lin Shu of his happiness, of the woman with whom he had promised to see the world together in the next life.

He cannot even begin to imagine Lin Shu’s anguish.

“Jingyan,” Lin Shu interrupts him. “You love me.”

It is his deepest secret that he has never even thought of verbalizing, a secret that had been interred in the imperial mausoleum along with his body in the last life, far underground, far from exposure.

Yet Lin Shu has so cleanly unearthed it, laying it open in the sunlight.

Lin Shu lays a hand behind Jingyan’s skeletal back to prevent his involuntary retreat, “You know many things that I do not, so now I am going to tell you something that you’ve never known.”

He inches closer, placing a chaste kiss on those bloodless lips, meeting Jingyan’s unfathomable eyes.

“I’ve loved you since before you were nineteen. My feelings for you have not changed even if my body was transformed into another, and my name unrecognizable. You believe that only the
nineteen-year-old Xiao Jingyan could love Lin Shu, but you forget that you are the very reason for which I can stand in front of you as I am now.” Lin Shu takes Jingyan’s hand and flattens it against his own chest, the rhythmic beating of his heart and the warmth of his body flush against those fingertips.

The sound of the heartbeat is strong and steady, unlike the irregular tremors of an ailing man plagued by rare poison. Yet the hand on the chest is pale beyond belief, without the calluses from years of wielding a sword.

As the last word falls from his mouth, Lin Shu trails a gentle kiss on each of Jingyan’s eyelids.

The warmth from those lips is like a flame that suddenly melts the barrier of ice in his eyes, releasing all the memories that he thought he had put behind, memories that he thought did not hurt anymore.

*When he lost Xiaoshu and went to the desolate borders by himself.*

*When he received news of Mei Changsu's death, and the subsequent endless days of reconstructing the Liang Kingdom on his own.*

*When he broke the crimson bow in half; when he opened the blank letter from Brother Qi.*

*When he held his dying Father's hands in his own.*

*When he bid his goodbyes to his Mother.*

These memories suddenly begin to hurt.

He feels as if the breath is knocked out of him, as if his frozen body is abruptly thawed in front of Lin Shu, its imprisoned contents spilling out uncontrollably.

When the first tear escapes from his eyes, he can feel the ice chains that he had bound himself with since the last life begin to shatter.

As the tears land on Lin Shu’s hand clasped in his own, Jingyan senses a ball of warmth slowly permeating from his chest to his entire body.

It is in this moment that he has truly begun to live.

Nie Feng is stationed in the North, freeing Lin Shu to remain in the Langya Hall.

Lin Chen has given him a few tasks for him to do as payment of his stay, since the man claims that Lin Shu is neither a guest nor a patient. So Lin Shu would occasionally leave the mountains to settle some matters, taking advantage of his anonymity in the pugilist world.

Most of his time, however, is spent in Jingyan’s rooms.

Langya Hall in the summer is a prosperous world of greenery, where the only sound is the constant showers beating on the succulent leaves in the mountains.

Days of rains has exacerbated Jingyan’s discomfort with the healing injuries, so Lin Shu has taken to sit with him on the porch, watching the rainfall and chatting about anything and everything.

He would recount interesting anecdotes that happened during his years on the borders. No matter what story it is, be it bizarre, strange or suspenseful, Lin Shu has a way of storytelling that imparts his
own compelling touch to it.

Lin Shu mentions that of the chance encounters he has had in the pugilist world, once he had learned of an unique sword formation.

Jingyan is reminded of the sword formation that Tingsheng and other two boys employed to defeat Warrior Bai Liqi. He asks Lin Shu if two people could make it work.

Lin Shu mulls over the question and replies that the fundamentals of the formation would be the same, it would just be less variable with two people. He takes a piece of paper and draws the basic diagram on it, he and Jingyan begin acting out the steps with their fingertips.

Jingyan misses a move and their fingers become intertwined with each other.

Lin Shu’s palm has the scar from grabbing the emperor’s dagger, and Jingyan’s fingers bear the cuts from when he held onto the sharp rocks of the cliff.

Fingers intimately entangled, neither makes a move to let go.

Come autumn, news reaches them from the capital that the eldest prince, Xiao Chengting, has been named Crown Prince.

Word has it that the Dowager Consort Jing had been the one to suggest it, and the formal request was initiated by Marquis Yan. Since Jingyan had once been the Master of the Eastern Palace, when he returns so soon after the new ruler’s ascension to the throne, the emperor must have a contingency plan to anticipate any insidious plots involving Prince Jing’s past role in the Court. Thus, naming the Crown Prince now serves to both stabilize the political scene as well as to protect Jingyan.

Jingyan is well aware of the good intentions behind the carefully orchestrated plan, his expression brightens with unadulterated happiness and relief at the news.

After the formal ceremony to present the Crown Prince to the imperial ancestors, the emperor sets out to inspect the harvest season in the fourteen provinces of Jiangzuo.

On his way back to the capital, the emperor has specifically changed his carriage into an understated one, taking a circuitous route to the foot of the Langya Mountain. He raises his eyes to look towards the peak behind the clouds.

How could he not have deduced that Jingyan’s delayed return is due to debilitating injuries, rather than some excuse to travel the pugilist world, as he claimed in the letter?

Every time he was hurt when he was a child, he would hide in the Lin Manor, afraid to have his Brother and Mother see the injuries at home.

He has not changed one bit.

Thankfully Lin Shu is still with him.

As for him...it is the greatest blessing to simply know that his closest family is still alive and well.

Xiao Jingyu will always remember that blank letter he sent to Jingyan.

As emperor, he can reflect on his decisions with a clear conscience, but as a brother, he has done so
poorly.

Xiao Jingyu stands like a statue for about four hours at the foot of the mountain, before finally returning to the carriage, watching as the Langya Mountain fade into the dark night.

Before the horses could go far, however, he hears two consecutive clanks!

Two pebbles have dropped onto the top of his carriage.

Followed by two more.

Jingyu orders the carriage to stop and looks up again into the mountain. Two shadows on horseback trot through the darkened paths.

Jingyu descends the carriage and hurries towards the figures.

As Jingyan dismounts the horse, Lin Shu extends a supporting hand behind his back quite naturally.

In the dim lights of dusk, Xiao Jingyu pretends not to notice the knife scars on his brother’s wrist and the right hand that still appears unable to hold the reins, he only smiles warmly and reconfirms a return date to the capital in a month.

Xiao Jingyu takes Jingyan’s horse before departure, saying, “The view along the way is quite nice, I’d like to return on horseback. Xiaoshu, take Jingyan on your horse back to Langya Hall, be careful on the slippery paths in the mountains.”

Then, he cannot help but add to Jingyan, “Don’t move around too much while your injuries are still healing. You are most definitely forbidden from riding by yourself.”

Xiao Jingyu takes a few steps to leave before pausing abruptly, as if remembering something. He turns around to face them.

“Who threw the pebbles on the carriage just now?”

Lin Shu replies immediately without even batting an eyelash, “Not me.”

Jingyan shoots Lin Shu a glance, “...It was me.”

Xiao Jingyu looks at the two before him, finally a laugh breaks free from his chest.

It is October when Langya Hall sees the first snowfall.

The first snow of the season is barely perceptible, the tiny snowflakes still carrying the lingering fragrance of autumn leaves, melting before they meet the ground. Only after an entire night would the courtyard be covered in an endless white.

The Langya Hall has gained a lively atmosphere with Lin Shu’s presence, silence has become a luxury only in early mornings, the sole sound being the soft footsteps of the servant boys treading through the stone steps covered in snow.

Tomorrow they would go back to the capital. This night, Lin Chen has invited Lin Shu to the peak with a jug of wine.

The two drink well into the night when Lin Chen says, “I went to Dong Ying[5] to look for some
herbs for Fei Liu, hoping to alleviate some of the poisons he ingested during childhood. There was an accident with the ship so I was delayed for half a year. When I returned, the two of them had already gone to Da Yu.

“Thank goodness I found them…” Lin Chen stares at Lin Shu, but he seems to be looking at someone else, “He has always called you ‘Su-gege’... perhaps in his mind, you really are the same person.”

The next morning, Jingyan has everything packed and the servants have brought out the horses to the gate.

They are going back.

Lin Shu returns the fan ornament to Lin Chen, who immediately puts it back on his fan and proceeds to fan himself experimentally, the cold gust of wind startling Fei Liu from his nap by Lin Chen’s side.

Lin Shu makes a sloppy snow ball and hurls it at Fei Liu. The boy is quickly engaged in the game, tossing the snow ball back to Lin Shu.

Lin Chen trots closer to Jingyan with both arms nestled in his sleeves, whispering, “I’m going to ambush Lin Shu later, you are forbidden to help.”

Jingyan raises a challenging eyebrow at him, and Lin Chen’s expression darkens, “You are forbidden to play with snow, physician’s orders!”

Completely unbeknownst to him, the two in the snow fight turn in unison towards Lin Chen, firing two giant snow balls simultaneously at him with amazing accuracy.

“Hey you traitor! I fed you three sweet melons yesterday, how dare you betray me today?! Lin Shu, if not for me, you’d be a widower by now!”

“.....” Jingyan crouches down to make a snow ball with his left hand. As soon as Lin Chen ducks behind a tree to evade Lin Shu's attack, Jingyan aims the snow ball at the top of the tree.

A blanket of snow tumbles down from the tree at the impact. The person standing below it is instantly covered in white.

“Another traitor. It’s only been a few months and you are already in his camp.” Lin Chen shakes the snow from himself, turning to Fei Liu to ask with mock seriousness, “Your Su-gege is going back to the capital. What are you going to do?”

“Go,” Fei Liu responds.

Lin Chen’s lips curl up in a bitter smile, “I knew that you--”

“To see him off.” Fei Liu finishes, then blinks at Lin Chen’s momentary stupor, “Not ok?”

October of the second year of Changjing, the Seventh Brother of His Imperial Majesty, Xiao Jingyan, returns to the capital from the North, the emperor leads all court officials to welcome him home at the capital gates.
Spring of the fourth year of Changjing, the emperor and his entourage march towards Jiu-An mountain.

The year when Mu Qing reached his majority coincided with another invasion from the Southern Chu, both he and Nihuang have been occupied with affairs in the South, and have not been able to come to the capital. Now that the three-year mourning period has passed, he came to the capital with his sister, where they have organized for the formal ceremony for him to inherit the lordship and the House of Mu.

This Spring Hunt is the first of its kind after the mourning period, the younger ones have been looking forward to it for months. So when the ceremonial arrow is fired to signal the beginning of the Hunt, their whole lot gallop eagerly into the woods with bows raised.

The fifteen-year-old Crown Prince, Xiao Chengting, has already reached an impressive height for his age. He is the top of his generation in both horseback riding and archery; he catches a deer shortly after the Hunt began.

As per tradition, the Crown Prince should present his first prey to the emperor as a show of filial piety.

Jingyu accepts the deer head and bids the Crown Prince to distribute the remaining parts of the deer to other elders of the imperial family.

Tingsheng takes a deer leg and cleans it personally, before giving the rest of the animal to the servants. He figures that he’d go catch some more hares and roast them all together for Jingyan.

When he returns, however, he is startled by the sight that the emperor is already done roasting the deer leg.

And managed to burn it.

Jingyan, Lin Shu and Nihuang have had a bountiful hunt in the morning, Jingyan has even shot a deer himself. The three of them have tied the animals to the back of the horses like they used to in their youth, slowly strolling along the river towards the base, reins held loosely in hand.

A wild goose crows above them. Jingyan reacts in a flash, pulling an arrow and placing it on the bow aimed at the bird, but as he’s drawn the bow taut, the movement seems to tug painfully at the freshly healed wound on his chest. He hisses in pain, brows knitting together.

In the blink of an eye, Lin Shu steps behind Jingyan, putting his right hand on Jingyan’s to maintain the drawn bow. The moment when their arrow locks onto its target, they release the arrow simultaneously.

The arrow soars through the air with a whoosh, taking the wild goose from the sky.

Nihuang cheers at the success, and Lin Shu turns to her, smiling, “I know a recipe for wild goose soup, let’s go clean it up in the river, and I’ll make soup for you two!”

“My marriage is set for this autumn. Your Highness, may I have your permission this time?”
Nihuang asks with a stony face, before breaking into a laugh, “When the time comes, Lin Shu-gege and Jing-gege, you owe me double the gifts, and I expect both of you to be there too!”

“Of course, eight carriages full of gifts, including your favorite candied figures!”

“Then I’ll hold you to your promise. If you don’t come, I’ll put two giant buffalos outside the gates, with red strings wrapped around their horns.” Nihuang extends a hand, “Let’s clap to seal the vow.”

Yujin still remembers that Lin Shu once said he wanted to catch a sable to use its fur to make a cape for Prince Jing. So he’s dragged Jingrui along into the woods, and much to their surprise, they manage to catch one.

Watching amusedly as the small white sable struggles in Yujin’s hands, Jingrui chuckles in exasperation, “It’s so small that it doesn’t even have enough fur to trim a sleeve, never mind a cape collar! Only you have the guts to give it as a gift.” Then he mutters that his younger sister had just come back to the Xie Manor with her children and Brother Qingyao, their mother is immensely grateful for the help Prince Jing provided all those years ago. Jingrui muses that he should perhaps prepare a thoughtful gift as well.

“Hey, I have an idea.” Yujin’s eyes glimmer with mischief, “I’ll give him the sable alive. Right now the weather is mild in the spring, come winter this little guy will be bigger, he’d be a natural heat source whether wrapped around the neck or curled up on the lap. And he’s so small that it doesn’t take much effort nor space to keep him, look at his little beady eyes, so cute!”

Jingrui sighs, speechless at his friend’s simplicity. Yujin skips with the sable in hand in front of Jingyan, offering, “I found it when we were walking around the woods, perhaps Your Highness would like it?”

Jingyan has occupied himself with roasting the meat since coming back to the base. He glances back at the small sable dangled in Yujin’s hands, stabbing the knife onto his roast and shakes his head, “I don’t know, never had it before.”

Before Yujin could register his words, Lin Shu and Lie Zhanying both step closer, saying, “That’s simple, you gotta give it a try.”

In the end, after a vicious struggle, Yujin succeeds in regaining ownership of the sable from Lie Zhanying’s claws. He brings it back home and keeps it as a pet, naming it quite aptly, *Unpalatable*.

Mu Qing has a vague recollection of his time spent in the capital when he was small. He was too young to remember much, only that Yan Yujin-gege had teased him to no end, and Lin Shu-gege took them out to eat, from there catalyzing a whole chain of events.

Regarding Prince Jing, he has only heard occasional comments from his sister, never more than a few words, so he has always harbored childish curiosity towards the man.

‘This prince seems so serious, he probably doesn’t like sweets.’ Mu Qing muses, then his eyes light up as he remembers something in his pocket.

“Oh yeah, Your Highness, I have a letter here that Lin Shu-gege wrote to my sister, do you want to read it?”
Although Lin Shu has been engaged in conversation with Nihuang, his eyes have never left Jingyan. When he sees Mu Qing fish out a piece of paper from his robes with a smirk, he snaps, pointing a finger at Mu Qing, “Fei Liu, toss it over!”

Lin Shu means the letter, but Fei Liu hurls Mu Qing over instead.

The nineteen-year-old Lord Mu is still in a blissful state when he is suddenly flung in the air, still holding the letter used as a candy wrapper, and lands rather hard onto his soon-to-be brother-in-law, who has hurried over to catch him. He and Nie Duo end in a tangled mess on the ground.

The flurry of activities finally quiets down by sunset.

Yan Que had told Yujin to pass a message to Jingyan, saying that he has something to give to him by a sand dune along the river.

The sun has set and Lin Shu insists on accompanying Jingyan.

Along the way, they run into Lin Chen, who is struggling to keep a hold of a reluctant Fei Liu. The boy had originally escaped to the capital to flee from Lin Chen’s bitter medicine. Now the man has found him and quite determined to bring him back to continue treatment.

As for the actual efficacy of the herbs Lin Chen had gone through many troubles to find, even he cannot say.

“Of course it’s impossible for him to become as smart as I am, but maybe enough for him to realize that ‘Pretty Boy’ is not such a nice name.”

“ ‘S nice!” Fei Liu wheezes out the words as he continues to struggle.

Fei Liu and Lin Shu have already made an pact to go fishing together in the summer, and Lin Shu promised to teach him to use intricate traps to catch fish. Now is but a temporary parting. Lin Chen throws Fei Liu onto his shoulders and waves a hand at the two in goodbye.

At the foot of the Jiu-An mountain, there is an unnamed empty grave. Inside is a set of clothes of Prince Yu that Qin Banruo had buried. After the battle on Jiu-An mountain, she made her way back here even after her escape.

She said that this was the place closest to what Xiao Jinghuan had strived for.

Yan Que stands there and stares at the barren dune across the small stream.

He hands a box to Jingyan. “This is the decree to revoke your title as Crown Prince, given to me by the late emperor before his death. He made Gao Zhan burn the original one. Although this one is now null, I felt that Your Highness should see it.”

Of the two decrees the emperor gave Jingyan, he had never opened the one to revoke his title on the grounds of brotherly betrayal.

He opens the box, the decree that greets his eyes says, “The Crown Prince is want of virtues, incapable of perceiving my imperial wishes, insistent upon personally going to battle and willfully endangering the future of the throne. This shall be his divine warning.”

“ ‘In want of virtues and aptitude,’ though they are words of censure, they are his way of protecting
“As a ruler, a friend and a husband, he was far from faultless, but as a father, at least in the end he tried to fulfill your wish.”

Jingyan’s eyes are fixed on each trembling stroke of the words on the decree, scanning the text over and over, until he feels his hand being grabbed. He raises his head in a daze and meets Lin Shu’s concerned eyes.

He is not used to sharing any of his feelings.

Without Lin Shu, there was no one else with whom he’d wanted to share.

But Lin Shu is here now, whether he says anything or not, he would understand.

“Xiaoshu…”

“Yeah.”

“He...until his death...he’s always wanted to save me.”

This whole time, in Jingyan’s memory, this was the Father that killed Brother Qi and accused Lin Shu of being an insidious traitor in front of him. He only remembers that he ordered him to discard every single one of Lin Shu’s belongings after his death, only remembers his cold negligence towards Mother, and merciless detachment for Princess Qi’s death.

But he has forgotten that it was the same man who took him horseback riding, who held his small hand in his big one to teach him to write. It was the same man who held tightly onto Jingyan before sending him to Prince Qi’s manor, murmuring that he could not bear to part with his little one...

Lin Shu says softly, “Remember when we used to get into fights when we were young? In front of others he always chastised you and sided with me, but when everyone left, he would pinch my nose hard and say, ‘Don’t you dare bully Jingyan, or I’ll pinch your nose off.’

“When I was the Vice Commander of the Imperial Guards, I’d visit Great Granny often, and see him there sometimes. Once he said to me, ‘Today during the Court session, I heard Jingyan cough a few times, I wonder if he’s ill.’”

At that, Jingyan’s suppressed tears finally spill onto his cheeks. Desperately trying to muffle the sound, he clutches onto Lin Shu’s robes, like a drowning man latching onto his only chance at survival, his voice breaking, “Next life, in an ordinary home, he would be a good father.”

The two of them remain by the stream for some more time. The last lights of the dusk are slowly fading, and bonfires are already lit in the base. In the warm breeze of the spring evening, people have congregated around the fires outside, where the low tables are laden with roasted meat and various homemade items.

Nihuang and Xia Dong are having a drinking contest, neither Nie Duo nor Nie Feng can get a word in edgewise.

Yujin is still playing with his newly acquired sable, only to see that little animal zoom into Mu Qing’s clothes, making the younger man squeal in fright.
Looking at the scene of happy festivity, Jingyan cannot help but feel that he has seen the same thing before in his dreams.

Back then, he was standing like he is now on a sand dune, watching them from afar.

The man beside him in the dream had asked, ‘In this life, have you fulfilled your wishes?’

Yes.

“Jingyan, Auntie Jing and Jingyu-gege are waiting for us.” Lin Shu walks over and takes his hand, “Let’s go back.”

Jingyan nods, “Okay.”

-Fin-

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so so SO MUCH for staying with me until this point!! This project has taken more than four months to complete, but it’s been such an incredibly eye-opening and rewarding experience. I cannot thank you all enough for your continuous support-- all your feedback and encouragements have kept me going till now! :D

Hope you all enjoyed reading the translation as much as I did doing it!! ^O^ There WILL be two epilogues following the main story, which will be coming soon.

-----------Footnotes-----------

1 长靖 (chang jing), lit. enduring peace, is the name of the new era with the new emperor Xiao Jingyu. The tradition for the ruling sovereign to give his era a name dates back to the Han dynasty in the 1st century B.C.. Since then, each emperor would bestow his chosen name for the new era in history, sometimes changing the era name more than once during his reign. The method for recording dates was something like “in the third year of Changjing.” It’s worth noting that the 靖 (jing) in the name is the same character as in “Prince Jing,” meaning peace and quietude. 元祐 (Yuanyou) is the era name for the late emperor, Xiao Xuan. [return to text]

2 太常寺 (tai-chang temple): one of the imperial institutions in Ancient China. Its name dates back to the Han Dynasty, and its roles are mainly to organize and oversee sacrificial rites, astrological predictions for imperial needs. [return to text]

3 There is a double entendre when Lin Shu says that Yujin lives up to his family name, both in the sense that the Yan family is known to produce illustrious scholars, and in the literal sense, where the 言 (Yan) name means “word,” or “speak.” [return to text]

4 Lin Shu draws a 八卦图 (ba gua tu) on the paper, lit. picture of eight-diagrams, which is a picture guide for ancient divination originating from the 1000s B.C.. The diagram has the black/white wheel of ying-yang in the middle, and eight directions surrounding
it, each one representing a natural state or phenomenon: sky, earth, thunder, wind, water, fire, mountain, ocean. Ancient Chinese often used different combinations of these eight elements for divination purposes. It is also believed that sophisticated strategies such as martial arts formations can be explained with permutations of these eight elements. Interestingly, in contemporary language, 八卦 has gained the meaning of “gossip,” as in celebrity gossip or to gossip about one’s love interest. [return to text]

5 东瀛 (dong ying): lit. East Sea, Ancient name for Japan, where supposedly Lin Chen found Fei Liu, who was being cultivated in the ways of ninja, and was forced to ingest substances that enhanced his physical ability but permanently hampered his mental growth. [return to text]

6 苦心 (ku xin): lit. bitter heart, i.e. pouring a lot of efforts into doing something, painstakingly. Used here and in many other contexts, it means that the work behind the apparent result is often unseen, and the good intentions unlikely to be appreciated. [return to text]
Epilogue 1: New Year's Eve

Chapter Notes

An epilogue so sweet that it totally redeems all the angst before! :)

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

According to the decree of His Majesty, no festivities are to be held in in the palace during the three-year mourning period for the late emperor, and the corresponding funds would be reappropriated for charity in the city.

In the early morning of New Year’s Eve, Jingyan enters the palace to visit his Mother.

Jingyu arrives around midday, after performing in the traditional series of ceremonies. He has a light lunch with the Dowager Consort Jing and Jingyan, and says, “If not for the bitter cold and slippery roads at night, I would have liked to keep you in the palace to observe the turn of the New Year. [1]

“When Jingyan was living in my Manor as a child, we’d always promise to stay up for New Year’s together, but he would eventually end up falling asleep on my lap.” Thoughts of the past stirs up bittersweet memories as Jingyu reaches out to grab Jingyan’s hand, “This year you should stay in the palace. There are plenty of guest rooms for the imperial family anyway.”

“Jingyan, have you made other arrangements already?” Dowager Consort Jing asks at the slight hesitation on Jingyan’s face.

Jingyan replies honestly, “Xiaoshu invited me a few days ago to the Lin Manor for New Year’s Eve. But if Brother and Mother wish for me to say, I will of course oblige.”

Jingyu is well aware of the friendship Jingyan shares with Lin Shu since childhood. He had once thought that the two were estranged, but judging from Lin Shu’s reaction to the news of Jingyan’s fall and his subsequent year-long companionship in Langya Hall, he realizes that their closeness has not diminished. After coming back to the capital, Lin Shu has been practically attached to Jingyan, Jingyu can usually run into the man whenever he visits Prince Jing’s Manor.

As a brother, he feels genuine happiness for Jingyan and his friendship with Lin Shu, so he chuckles good-naturedly, “Seems like my invitation came too late this time. No matter, it was good of him to invite you to the Lin Manor, fearing that your own place would be deserted. You should go have fun.”

“We are still in the mourning period, it is somewhat unorthodox for you to remain in the palace anyway. You two brothers will have many other chances to spend New Year’s Eve together, don’t worry about this year then.” Dowager Consort Jing also adds, “The Grand Princess is your elder as well, it is only right for you to go greet her in the Lin Manor.”

“But Jingyan…” She begins and then pauses, struggling to formulate her next words.

“Mother?”
“No, nothing.” Dowager Consort Jing shakes her head and says instead, “The Grand Princess and Commander Lin are both relaxed in demeanor, you will do fine to accord them with appropriate etiquettes as a minor.”

Jingyan frowns in slight confusion; of all the times he has visited Lin Shu’s home in his youth, he thought he had always acted with proper decorum. His mother continues, “I mean no accusation. I know that you have always been mature, I’m just telling you again. You know, as I age, I can’t help but nag.”

Jingyu says by way of defending his brother, “The Lin family is like a second home to Jingyan, it would be excessive to abide strictly by the rules. And Jingyan has never been the flippant one when it comes to manners.”

Dowager Consort Jing shakes her head in exasperation at the utter naivete of the two brothers, resigns herself to a lost cause and returns to her task of sorting out the herbs on the table, a smile lingering on her face.

-----------------------------------

In the light snowfall of the evening, Lin Shu comes into the palace to pick up Jingyan after having finished worshipping the ancestors at home. His mother’s words still resounding in his ears, Jingyan dithers, “It will have passed the customary time to eat dumplings, wouldn’t I be intruding at such a late hour?” Then he adds, “I’ve always had a great time celebrating the New Year’s in my manor with my men.”

He realizes belatedly that in order to protect them from being implicated in his plans, he’d already reassigned them to various other branches in the military. Since then, they have all made a name for themselves in their new bases, and are no longer in his manor.

In the battles against the Northern Yan and Da Yu, Zhanying has accomplished extraordinary feats, leading to his promotion as the Vice Commander of the Imperial Guards.

Despite Jingyan’s earnest encouragements for him to remain in the Imperial Guards on multiple occasions, Zhanying has made his intention clear that he would return to Prince Jing’s side as a general when a suitable replacement is found for his position as Vice Commander.

The Manor has few people left, though in the past three months, Lin Shu comes nearly every day, both Brother Qi and Tingsheng visit quite frequently, their presence bringing life to the vast space. Though he is rather used to the quietude anyway.

Lin Shu catches the fleeting shadow of melancholy in Jingyan’s eyes and says with a smile, “I just ran into Vice Commander Lie earlier, he said he was going to come back to the Manor tonight, but since he heard that you’d spend the eve in my place, he made plans with the other guys for a reunion on the third instead.”

Jingyan feels a ball of warmth blooming in his chest, lowering his head slightly and smiles. Jingyan rarely smiles, so when he does, the whole world is lit up, as if illuminated by a thousand festive lanterns.

Lin Shu’s heart skips a beat and he hurries to say, “Father and Mother must be waiting impatiently, let’s head back soon.”

-----------------------------------
Their carriage stops in front of the Lin Manor. Neither Lin Xie nor Princess Jin Yang is in the reception hall, so Lin Shu drags Jingyan directly into the inner rooms.

Without the formal etiquettes of receiving a guest of his stature, the implied closeness sends a jolt of happiness to Jingyan’s heart— they see him as almost family.

As soon as he is seated, a maid hands him a steaming cup of ginger tea and a servant places a freshly prepared brazier by his left leg. The heat radiating from the coals quickly dissipates the throbbing ache from the outside chill, tendrils of warmth wrapping around him.

The cook goes over to Lin Shu and whispers under his breath, “Don’t worry, I’ve folded double layers in the dumpling that has the auspicious coin, it’ll be really obvious, you can’t miss it.”

After Lin Shu sits down, Jingyan asks, “What was that?”

“Nothing, our cook usually makes dumplings for three people, and since there is one more this year, he was making sure that he made enough.”

Princess Jin Yang cannot suppress a chuckle, “You’ve always taken Jingyan’s things since you were little, and he’d let you have your way. Even if there aren’t enough dumplings, you wouldn’t be the one going hungry anyway.”

“......” Lin Shu ducks his head, knowing that he cannot argue with his Mother.

As the conversation flows, steaming dumplings are served on the table. Lin Shu and Jingyan are seated right next to each other, and Lin Shu recognizes the marked dumpling right away. He nudges the plate nonchalantly towards Jingyan, saying, “Jingyan, eat more.”

Jingyan nods; he has always loved the dumplings from Lin Manor, and there is no need to be bound by strict etiquettes in front of Lin Xie and Princess Jin Yang, who practically saw him growing up. Relaxed, he tucks into the dumplings in his bowl.

Lin Shu internally cheers as Jingyan puts the double-folded dumpling into his mouth, yet just when he is about to pronounce Jingyan’s good luck, the other man swallows the dumpling after barely a few chews.

“How can you eat it without chewing it first?!?” Lin Shu shoots up from his seat in agitation, “Quick, spit it out!!”

“??!” Jingyan blinks with utter incomprehension, staring wide-eyed at Lin Shu, “...I did chew it.”

Witnessing this entire exchange, Princess Jin Yang frowns lightly and chastises her son for behaving so rashly, “Xiaoshu, Jingyan is not a child, he would have noticed a big coin in the dumpling.”

Lin Shu shuts his mouth with an audible click, flustered at having his intentions spelt out. “.....”

“Though Jingyan has truly lost weight,” the Princess runs an assessing eye down Jingyan-- even clad in the many layers of winter clothing, Jingyan’s face and hands are all visibly emaciated. “Didn’t you say that your injuries were not serious? Or is the food at home not to your taste?”

Lin Shu glances at Lin Xie-- he has only divulged the full extent of Jingyan’s injuries to his father in a letter for fear of making his mother worry. He settles for the simple truth, “Mother, please do not worry. The physicians have said that suddenly increasing his food intake would be
counterproductive, we should take small steps.”

Princess Jin Yang looks at Jingyan, whose head is bowed low and has not offered a word, an idea forming in her mind.

All this time, Xiaoshu had never mentioned an interest in marriage. A vague guess had taken shape in her mind, which had only solidified in the years Xiaoshu spent in the capital.

So when Lin Shu knelt on the floor, proclaiming his love for Jingyan, she felt bitter sadness grip her heart. She knew her own son too well-- once he has made up his mind about someone, neither life nor death could sway his decision.

So it were tears of happiness that she shed at the news of Jingyan’s miraculous survival.

Eyes fixed on the child who grew up by her side, Princess Jin Yang feels her heart clench at the thought that he must have sustained significant injuries, yet has remained silent as to not worry his family. She bids, “You need to follow a proper treatment plan even if you take it slowly. Besides the usual meals, I will have someone bring medicated tonics to you every morning and evening.”

Before Jingyan could protest, the Princess cuts him off with a raised hand, “Your Mother is in the palace, it would be an inconvenience for her send you medicine. Xiaoshu doesn’t know the first thing when it comes to taking care of someone. I should have thought much earlier to send these things along, though I cannot match your Mother’s culinary skills.”

“No worries, Jingyan isn’t picky.” Lin Shu says with an easy smile, “Right...? Ow!”

His teeth suddenly bite onto something hard. Spitting it out, Lin Shu recognizes the auspicious coin that he’s been looking for all night.

Quite conveniently, the cook enters the room at this moment to serve a fresh round of dumplings. Lin Shu pulls the man to a side to demand for an explanation.

“Vice Commander, I was tied up and asked some maids to help me in the kitchen. She made several double-folded ones. I only found out just now too!”

The cook’s boisterous voice projects throughout the room, reaching all of its occupants. Jingyan casts an amused glance at the embarrassed Lin Shu and goes back to his bowl of dumplings, snickering under his breath.

Even Lin Xie cannot hide his amusement, he laughs, “I’m glad you found it. Next time, remember to use a more distinct mark.”

Face red from all the teasing, Lin Shu rolls his eyes at the cook in mock annoyance, the coin still held between his teeth.

As per tradition, everyone needs to touch the person with the auspicious coin to share his luck. Lin Shu gets up to kneel obediently in front of his parents, his mother ruffling his hair affectionately and Lin Xie patting his back.

Lin Shu returns to his seat, spreading his arms wide, eyes glittering as he looks at Jingyan expectantly, “Your turn!”

Wary of showing anything conspicuous in Lin Xie’s presence, Jingyan pats Lin Shu’s shoulder briefly.
Lin Shu’s arms slump down in obvious disappointment, he mutters, “Whatever, you get to touch me all over when we get back anyway.”

Jingyan is so startled by the sudden statement that a barely chewed dumpling slides down his throat in shock. He chokes and coughs, sending the clueless Princess Jin Yang into another fit of merry laughter.

“Jingyan.” After the meal, the normally taciturn Lin Xie begins, “I heard from Xiaoshu that the injury in your leg still persists.”

Jingyan had broken his left leg when he fell from the cliff, and the subsequent days of ceaseless flight in the snow had delayed treatment. The chill has remained in his bones, causing the leg to ache particularly during the cold and rainy months.

Caught off-guard by Commander Lin’s direct inquiry, Jingyan replies, “The injury was minor, I have already regained full faculty of the leg.”

“Though the breakage heals easily, the ache tends to flare up when it rains,” Lin Xie has a servant bring up a parcel, its medicated smell filling the air. “When I was stationed in the West, I obtained this medicine by chance. Spread it evenly on the affected area for a month, if it’s any good, I’ll have them make more.”

He turns to Lin Shu to say, “Remember to massage these pressure points regularly after applying the balm.”

He then proceeds to demonstrate on his own leg, pointing out all the proper points to Lin Shu.

Lin Shu watches with undivided attention and nods eagerly. “Got it.”

“You’ll need to keep using the balm. You might experience mild stinging sensation in the first few days, but you must endure it,” Lin Xie adds to Jingyan, only to notice that the other man’s face is flushed red all the way to his ear tips. He blinks in confusion at the reaction. His wife, however, has already grasped the root of Jingyan’s embarrassment; she lowers her head and covers her mouth to hide her chuckles.

After the two younger men have left, Princess Jin Yang explains to Lin Xie, “You telling Xiaoshu to do such things is like broadcasting the fact that you know about their relationship!”

"Isn’t it normal among men of the army?” Lin Xie asks, still befuddled, “When I was traveling the pugilist world, Brother Yan used to give me those massages too.”

“......”

When they step into Prince Jing’s manor, Auntie Ji approaches them with a welcoming smile. “Your Highness, Vice Commander, welcome back. Just in time for the dumplings!”

“Thank you, Auntie Ji,” Lin Shu takes the steaming bowl, delighted by the food. His manor had never had a large entourage of servants and little attention was devoted to the actual quality of the food. Then during Jingyan’s year of absence, many of the servants have gradually left. With his recent return, the emperor gifted him with a new group of servants, many hand-picked by Dowager Consort Jing herself. Though they had forgotten to include a cook.
So Lin Shu invited Auntie Ji to the manor to be Jingyan’s personal cook, tailoring every meal to his
taste.

Jingyan eyes the gargantuan bowl, he frowns slightly and says quietly to Lin Shu, “Xiaoshu...I can’t
eat much more.”

“I know you are full.” Lin Shu slides the bowl in front of Jingyan, coaxing, “There is also an
auspicious coin in here, just eat one more, see if you can get it.”

Unable to resist Lin Shu’s enthusiastic plea, Jingyan takes the bowl, only to see that there is just one
dumpling lying inside, stuffed to the point of bursting, wisps of steam still rising from it.

Lin Shu turns expectant eyes to him, grinning happily, “If you get the coin, you’ll have to share the
luck!”

They would need to go to the palace first thing in the morning to pay New Year’s respects to their
elders, so they prepare for bed without further ado.

Jingyan has never found the winter chill to be unbearable before, and his manor has never had the
need for braziers. Now, however, the leg wound seems to throb with increasing intensity during the
cold nights. Out of sheer necessity, he had a brazier placed in his bed chamber, which was seen by a
visiting Xiao Jingyu one day. The man had fixed his gaze on the burning brazier for several silent
moments, sorrow and regret written plainly on his face.

Since that incident, Jingyan has never kept a brazier in the room, though he feels no chill anymore.
Because Lin Shu is there. The two of them would sleep with their limbs tightly wound around each
other, so warm inside their cocoon that the biting cold outside seems like an illusion.

“Jingyan, you got the auspicious coin, it’s only right to share some of your luck with me.”

Jingyan’s eyes are already drifting closed, tired from the day’s activities. He nods absentmindedly at
Lin Shu’s words, mumbling, “...Whatever’s mine is also yours.”

Lin Shu chuckles at the response-- it’s the same thing Jingyan used to say when they were young.

For much of his life this time, Xiao Jingyan seems to have been living the continuation of the last
lifetime. It was not until he saw Lin Shu again that day in Langya Hall did he finally begin to live in
this lifetime.

In front of everyone else, he is still the same Prince Jing, poised and strong-willed.

But in front of his close family, he is learning to slowly shed the layers of impenetrable armor he’s
built around himself, to go back to being his simple, younger self.

He had endured unimaginable pain to metamorphosize into the Xiao Jingyan of today, it would be
no easy task to discard the protective armor that he has carried for two lifetimes.

Lin Shu knows that Jingyan has his pride, so he’s merely taken the role of a silent companion,
watching patiently as the other man makes his way, step by step, back to the life that Xiao Jingyan
should have had.

“Those are your own words,” says Lin Shu. His idea of “touching” is more like plastering himself
entirely over Jingyan, wrapping his arms tightly around the other man from behind. Huff’s of hot
breath tickle at Jingyan’s neck teasingly, causing the man to move away from the source and ends up rolling over instead.

He now lies face to face with Lin Shu, his eyes wide and glaring, “Stop it.”

“Whatsoever you say.”

Lin Shu wiggles closer, nestling his head comfortably in the crook of Jingyan’s neck, his voice muffled as he says, “Jingyan, I’ll give you all of my luck.”

“......” Jingyan’s heart gives a lurch, he lowers his eyes and replies, “I got it tonight already in the dumpling.”

“Not enough.” Lin Shu pronounces, then reaches up to plant a quick kiss on Jingyan’s lips, “I’ll give you my share too.”

Chapter End Notes

-------------------Footnotes-------------------

1. 守岁 (shou sui) is a tradition for Chinese New Year, when the entire family gathers together on New Year’s Eve to watch the night pass into the next year. After the dawn of the new day, the younger generations would first give New Year’s greetings to their parents, then go around to greet other branches of family members. [return to text]

2. 交子之时 (jiao zi zhi shi), lit. the hour of alternating (seasons/times), refers to the last hour of the night, 子时 (zi shi), on New Year’s Eve, when families would eat dumplings to herald the New Year. The play on words dates back to the Qing Dynasty, where eating 饺子 (jiao zi, dumplings) at the 子 (zi) hour sounded like 交子 (jiao zi), at the turning point of the one year to the next. [return to text]
Epilogue 2: Plum Passage

Chapter Notes

Last epilogue, the perfect ending to the story!

Disclaimers in the first chapter, Mandarin original here.

Surprise bonus at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As per tradition, the Crown Prince should pay his respects to the Empress Dowager every three days. Today, sounds of chatter and soft laughter reach Tingsheng’s ears before he even opens the doors.

“Chengting, there you are,” beckons the Empress Dowager with a smile. “Come and help us look through those portraits, we can’t even begin to choose.”

“Greetings, Grandmother, Dowager Consort,” bows Tingsheng obediently before stepping closer and seeing more than a dozen portraits scattered across the table. An vague idea materializes in his mind, but he still queries, “What are these?”

“Picking a Consort for your seventh uncle! This matter has long been neglected for all those years, and now with his weakened health, he needs someone to take proper care of him.”

“Jiejie, I don’t think there is any rush.” [1]

“No rush! You being his mother, how can you be so nonchalant about this? Jingyan is past the age thirty, Jingting already has two children yet Jingyan doesn’t even have a concubine in his manor.” The Empress Dowager pauses, “Now I think about it, odd things do come in pairs; Xiaoshu still remains unmarried. Last time when I asked my sister-in-law, she also said there was no rush.

“Xiaoshu has always been a picky child. If we line them up, a queue of his female admirers would wind around the street, more than enough to fill a harem if he wanted. But the strange thing is, how come he shows no interest in any of the beauties in the capital? Though given his family’s esteem and his own merits and attributes, everything added together, it is truly hard to find a suitable match short of a princess.”

Dowager Consort Jing chuckles lightly, “So wouldn’t it be nice if Yujin were a girl?” [2]

“Actually, if Jingyan were a princess, he might be the best match for that imp. Just look at all those years of friendship, they are closer than some true brothers.” Laughs the Empress Dowager to herself, not noticing the slightly odd expressions on both the Crown Prince and Dowager Consort Jing’s face. “Compared to a well-bred damsel who knows nothing but embroidery, perhaps Xiaoshu likes a confident and suave girl who matches him in martial arts. How come he isn’t interested in Nihuang either? That child has standards as high as the sky, but it’s not like we can actually find him the top beauty of the pugilist world!”

Dowager Consort Jing has held her silence long enough, she soothes, “…The children are all grown, they have their own ideas, just let them choose for themselves.”
“Well, then we must provide them with enough choices to choose from,” declares the Empress Dowager promptly. She picks up the portraits and leafs them through once more, “Despite his young age, Chengting has a sharp eye for many things, let him weigh in for us.”

Tingsheng approaches the table, his eyes giving a cursory sweep of the portraits and he pronounces, “These are all good, but none good enough for my Uncle Jingyan.”

The two women share an amused glance, laughing, “Speaking truly like someone who lives in Jingyan’s manor, no one will be good enough for his Uncle!”

“Chengting has always been an obedient child but never too affectionate for his age. I was a bit anxious when Jingyu sent him to Prince Jing’s Manor-- both uncle and nephew are stubborn as an ox, they wouldn’t give an inch in an argument. Now it seems that my worries were unfounded. Just look at him, the groom has yet to give his opinion, he’s sent all the prospects away already!” Lin Yueyao takes a breath to calm herself and pulls out one of the portraits from the pile, asking casually, “Well then, tell me, how is this girl ill-suited for your uncle?”

“She is dressed in ostentatious clothing, excessively ornamented, even the objects in the background are all rare collectibles. She lacks the virtue of frugality.”

“What about this one?”

“Her eyes are dull and appear disinterested, indicative of a boring disposition.”

“This one looks more peppy.”

“Perhaps overly so. There are mostly loud men of the army in Prince Jing’s Manor, they spend hours in vigorous exercises, she may be frightened of all the ruckus.”

Dowager Consort Jing nods approvingly as he voices his opinion on several portraits, satisfied that despite the blunt remarks, he does not judge the girls based on the stature of their families.

“And this one?”

“......”

“What’s wrong, no comment? What do you think of the granddaughter of Chancellor Liu Cheng?”

“I’ve met this girl once,” says Dowager Consort Jing. “Seems poised and gentle-hearted, content with quietude. She is also rather learned, fairly accomplished in the scholarly arts and well-mannered, too.”

“Jingyan needs someone who can take good care of him. Look at his manor, it’s full of unrefined soldiers whose entire life is the battlefield. The only reliable one, Lie Zhanying, has also moved on to the Imperial Guards as Vice Commander. Although you are a considerate child, you cannot stay by his side all the time…”

“......”

Tingsheng knows that as soon as he gives his reply, he would never see his younger brother again in this life.

A maelstrom of emotions swirls inside Tingsheng at the thought of that innocent child: envy, jealousy, affection and longing all warring for dominance. He was the legitimate son of Father, his childish features bearing a great resemblance to the man. He would trail behind Tingsheng ever since
he learned to walk, calling him in that sweet baby voice, ‘Tingsheng-gege.’

He recalls when that child was first born, how he had envied his status, envied the fact that he could legitimately call Jingyan “Father” in front of everyone, envied the expectations and attention he received from the moment of his birth. But all those dark thoughts were summarily soothed by Jingyan.

‘Tingsheng, you are an elder brother now.

A long time ago, I had an elder brother too. Those times with him by my side, protecting me and guiding me, were the happiest days of my life.

And I hope this child can be as fortunate as I was.’

“Chengting?”

Tingsheng gives a slight cough to cover his momentary lapse in attention.

A man’s life is filled with gains and losses. If Tingsheng was one of the “gains” in Jingyan’s last life amidst his many losses, then this child would be a loss in Jingyan’s present life.

Tingsheng knows who should rightly stand by his Father’s side. His hesitation is nothing but a gesture of goodbye.

“This Lady Liu had written a poem some years ago illustrating her resistance towards marrying into nobility, it had once gained overwhelming popularity amongst the female circles.”

“It was no more than a poem written in jest, not to be taken seriously.” The Empress Dowager glances at him in slight surprise, “You are not usually one to pay much heed to such gossips...did Yujin say something to you again? That man...already a grown adult yet never ceases to cause trouble! Now polluting young minds too!”

“...The poem mentioned Qishui.”

The Empress Dowager and Dowager Consort Jing have only a hazy knowledge of what had transpired that year regarding Qishui. They later heard from Jingyu that Jingyan had many unspoken difficulties in his position at the time, though many years have passed since then, they cannot reasonably reopen the case to prove Jingyan’s innocence. So whenever the subject of Qishui comes up, Jingyu’s expression would invariably darken with much more displeasure than Jingyan himself; if he found out that this Lady Liu has held a wrongly placed grudge for so long, he would be extraordinarily unhappy. The Empress Dowager heaves a reluctant sigh, “If that’s the case...then it really would be unwise to mention her to Jingyan.”

“Actually, I’ve suggested Lady Liu to Jingyan once before, he rejected the idea right away. He said that he feels inexorable guilt towards her for having taken her nanny during the expulsion of the Hua from the capital.” Dowager Consort Jing placates softly, “Jiejie, please don’t dwell on this matter. For me, I would be more than happy as long as Jingyan is safe and healthy.”

“I heard from my Brother that he sent some herbs from Western Li to Jingyan, supposedly quite efficacious for healing the bone. These children, no matter how much they grow up, we’d always worry for them.” The Empress Dowager grabs the Crown Prince’s hand and pats it affectionately, “Now we have one more to worry about. Already so picky at this young age, you are all taking after Xiaoshu and Yujin!”

Tingsheng ducks his head in obedient acquiescence, smiling and pouring a fresh cup of tea for both
women, and steers the conversation to another topic.

Xiao Jingyu sits on the imperial throne, a smile curling up his lips when he opens the next report.

The handwriting tapered and strong, the argument logical and succinct, he recognizes Jingyan’s handiwork at once.

The two brothers still have their disagreements on political matters, but Jingyan would always articulate his opinions directly to him. Like this time, with the recruitment of new officials, his has pointed out in his report the issue of ambiguous stipulations regarding using talent from lower births, his reasoning impeccable and his recommendations precise.

Jingyan has poured all his energy into helping him govern the kingdom, yet he, as elder brother, has no means of recompense. If they were any ordinary lord and subject, it would be enough to award gold or property, antique collectibles, rare books or weaponry—whatever his subject fancies.

But Jingyan doesn’t truly desire any of these things, they would only collect dust in his manor.

As a brother, he can give Jingyan love and affection; as a ruler, he can give him unparalleled trust. Yet none of this can hold a candle to the sacrifices Jingyan has made for him.

Although to everyone else, he has already elevated Jingyan to an unsurmountable height, but compared to what the man deserves, it is far from enough.

Whenever Jingyan comes into the palace, Xiao Jingyu can only ask him to wear more layers, to take care of himself. Now he truly finds himself in a predicament: he wishes more than anything to give Jingyan more, but Jingyan needs nothing else.

When it comes to clothing, Jingyan is not particular and pays little attention to accessories. Perhaps as a result of military training in his early years, he is never picky about food, either; the only things he favors a bit more are commonplace desserts like hazelnut cookies.

When it comes to his residence, Jingyan still lives in the same manor as before, next to Lin Shu’s place. Though a few months ago, the latter had purchased the house next door as well, busy with rebuilding the space for a while.

When it comes to travel, Jingyan’s injury on his left leg is still not fully healed, so Jingyu has forbidden him to come to the palace during inclement weather.

He knows well that Jingyan truly wants for nothing else, but this very realization saddens him immensely.

At this moment, Vice Commander Lie Zhanying enters to deliver his report on some recent military matters. The man is detailed and reliable, Jingyu nods in satisfaction at his work.

A muffled rumble of thunder interrupts their conversation. Jingyu raises his head and sees a steady blanket of rain beginning to pour from the sky.

Lie Zhanying turns his attention to the outside as well and sighs, “The clouds are coming from the east, the rain will persist for a while. We are already in late autumn, this kind of chilly rain is most unbearable.”

Something occurs to Jingyu and he asks, “Where is Jingyan right now? I recall that he and Lin Shu
left the capital yesterday to evaluate some war horses donated by several lords. Is he on his way back now?"

“The gates have just sent word that His Highness is already back.”

“The mansion he visited was to the east of the city, he must have gotten wet on his way back.”

Jingyu frowns in worry, “I'll go pay him a visit.”

Jingyan’s manor has always had very few servants, he does not need people tending to him, even on his sickbed. The few additional maids and servants bestowed to him by Dowager Consort Jing after his return to the capital all work in the outer rooms.

“His Highness encountered a storm, several people of his entourage have fallen ill from the cold. His Highness is also a bit under the weather, he might have already gone to rest.”

“I see, I will go see him briefly.”

The emperor’s visit to Prince Jing’s manor is already a frequent occurrence, the servants know not to ask much. They bow their retreat after leading him to the entrance of the inner chambers.

Jingyu approaches Jingyan’s bedroom and sees a single lamp still lit inside, indicating its occupant is still awake. He opens his mouth to call out, only to hear whispered voices coming from inside.

Upon closer examination, he recognizes Lin Shu’s voice.

Through the slightly unlatched window, he sees the two men squeezed together on the same bed, each with a book in hand.

Jingyu notices an empty medicine bowl on the low nightstand, the bitter scent of herbs still lingering in the air. Lin Shu is wrapped tightly in a thick blanket, his face slightly flushed as he gives a few light coughs. So it is Lin Shu who’s caught the cold.

Lin Shu and Jingyan have always been very close since their youth, and they’ve often slept in the same tent during military excursions. Jingyu has long since known their intimacy, yet the scene in front of him strikes him as odd.

Lin Shu is holding the book with his left hand, his right hand clasped tightly with Jingyan’s left one, fingers laced together. Jingyan seems rather accustomed to the gesture; despite the difficulty of flipping the page with just one hand, he makes no move to extract his hand from Lin Shu's.

Jingyu is suddenly reminded of when he first taught the two boys *The Book of Songs*, when they heard the stanza “Take thy hand and with thee I age”[3], how Lin Shu had immediately gone to grab Jingyan’s hand.

“So we’d never be apart.”

Silence stretches in the room when Jingyan frowns, guilt written all over his face, “If you hadn’t lent me your cape, you wouldn’t have fallen ill.”

“Nah, there are some servants in my manor that got sick a few days ago, I caught it from them. Besides, I’ve never gotten sick when I was in the North, which was so much colder than here.” Lin Shu coughs again, whining, “But I think I’m burning up.”
He reaches up to rub his forehead shamelessly against Jingyan’s head, then proceeds to plant a soft kiss on Jingyan’s lips.

Jingyu stumbles back, his boots stepping into a shallow water puddle, the crisp splash! resounds in the quiet night.

At the sight of Xiao Jingyu outside the window, Jingyan and the usually unflappable Lin Shu are both frozen in shock.

“You…” Xiao Jingyu feels the blazing ball of anger deflate into nothingness as the first word leaves his mouth.

He’s always known that the two were close, but he’s never once divined their relationship in that fashion. On his way here, he was still preoccupied with Jingyan’s health, thinking that he must personally pick a Consort for him by next year. He’d already made a mental catalogue of all the suitable girls in the noble circles, but they struck him either as too prudish or too immodest, none was good enough for Jingyan.

His head still whirling with such thoughts, he suddenly finds the candidate for his sister-in-law already decided in front of him.

As the elder brother, he is understandably furious at the blatant display of immorality from two of his dearest brothers, yet the rebuke dies in his throat after the first word.

The scene he had just witnessed was indisputably clear-- it was no frivolous flirting, but the natural intimacy from deeply ingrained affection.

Seeing that Lin Shu only has a light robe on, Jingyu takes a step backwards and waits in the courtyard.

Lin Shu feels worry gnawing at him. Although Jingyu is a man that respects tradition and moral codes, he is far from being inflexible. But Jingyan means so much to the man that his judgment would inevitably be clouded by his feelings.

Lin Shu’s original plan was that in a few years, after the political landscape has stabilized and Jingyan’s health much improved, they would go travel together and inform Jingyu via letter. By that time they will have stayed in the pugilist world for two or three years, with Auntie Jing and his mother’s persuasive tactics, even if he is still mad, Jingyu-gege might slap him around a bit, but he wouldn’t blame Jingyan anymore.

But now they are practically caught red-handed, Lin Shu worries that Jingyu would give Jingyan a harsh reprimand.

Sensing Lin Shu’s distress, Jingyan soothes him, “When we go outside, you stay quiet, I’ll admit to everything.”

Lin Shu feels a sharp spike of anger at Jingyan’s gross misunderstanding and his ridiculous intention to shoulder all the blame, he snaps, “I’m still here, where do you think you are going by yourself?”

“Don’t worry, Brother wouldn’t actually punish me...you should go back home.” Jingyan says calmly, “Whatever happens, I won’t let harm come to you.”
Lin Shu’s heart melts at the words, yet he cannot help but feel exasperated at the Buffalo’s sheer stubbornness. He settles for grabbing the man closer and bites on his ear tip, half in admonition and half in jest, saying, “You should do well to remember that we will always stay together, through life and death.”

Jingyan walks outside with Lin Shu beside him. At one glance of Jingyu’s stormy expression, he knows that his Brother, honorable and principled to a fault, would never tolerate such flagrant disrespect of moral propriety. He begins, “Xiaoshu has nothing to do with the incident today, I will accept any punishment Brother sees fit to dole out.”

He then proceeds to lower himself into a kneel.

Before his knees could touch the ground, however, he is forcibly grabbed by Jingyu’s hand.

“...Brother?”

“Nonsense! The ground is freezing, do you want to ruin your legs?!” Jingyu scolds, his brows knitted together in displeasure.

The night has completely fallen, the ground is covered in a thin layer of ice, how can Jingyan’s injured legs withstand such chill?

“...We’ll talk inside.”

The three of them go back into the room. Lin Shu helps Jingyan settle into a plush chair, and Jingyu tosses a cape to Lin Shu, who wraps it around himself.

After everyone is comfortable, the previous tense atmosphere has also dissipated.

Though Lin Shu is the ill one, Jingyan’s face is lined with obvious fatigue as well. Jingyu sweeps his eyes across the half-finished scrolls on the desk, his mind wandering back to everything that has happened; he heaves a sigh, all criticisms vanishing from his mind.

He remembers the aftermath of the news of Jingyan’s fall, how Lin Shu had rushed to Langya Hall to keep Jingyan company at the first word of his survival. He remembers that when Jingyan came back to the capital, how Lin Shu had mobilized all his resources to search for medicinal herbs, how when he heard that hot springs were beneficial to the healing process, he had pleaded and begged for Prince Ji to give him a resort, where he would take Jingyan every month.

Jingyu would often think, it is truly a blessing of a lifetime that Lin Shu and Jingyan met and became friends in their youth, grew up in each other’s company, and have stayed so faithfully by the other’s side through the most difficult times, being the sword and shield for each other’s back.

Jingyu himself has his share of close friends too, but their relationships have never strayed beyond gentlemanly interactions. They would share a pot of tea or a jug of wine, conversing about various refined topics, yet a part of him would always feel the sharp tug of envy at the sight of Lin Shu and Jingyan, always together with palpable intimacy between them.

Now Jingyu realizes that their intimacy goes far beyond friendship.

He realizes that his decision now would dictate Jingyan and Lin Shu’s future.

Yet he doesn’t really have a choice, does he?
If he disapproves, the two would be forced apart, and he cannot bear to see his younger brother unhappy.

Jingyan has never wanted for much, now all he wants is Lin Shu.

If he denies him that wish, Jingyan will truly be alone.

He remembers that when they were young, Jingyan was his most carefree self with Lin Shu around.

If it’s with Lin Shu, perhaps Jingyan will finally be happy in his life.

He glances at the two before him, heaving a long sigh of resignation, and says, “...I will talk to Auntie Jing and the Lin family.”

Both Jingyan and Lin Shu are stunned into silence once again by the unexpected rejoinder.

Lin Shu has already drafted a detailed plea in his mind. No matter what, they have finally come together after all the hardships in this life, he would never let go of Jingyan’s hand.

Yet before he could verbalize any of his supplication, Jingyu has cut him off. Even the clever Vice Commander of the Chiyan army has moments of utter bewilderment; he lets out several involuntary coughs before asking, “Say what?”

“You, come with me,” Jingyu points at Lin Shu, “I'll tell you what I mean.”

“...O-okay.”

Time seems to stretch on as Jingyu and Lin Shu stand in the courtyard, facing one another.

Jingyu considers the young man before him: since he was a child, the precocious and clever Lin Shu has never dimmed his own brilliance even in front of imperial princes like Jingxuan, while Jingyan was born with an unrelenting sense of dignity; it was quite a miracle to see those two bond as the closest of friends. Jingyu’s head is still reeling from the recent revelation, yet a part of him is hardly surprised by the development.

What does he still need to tell Lin Shu?

Lin Shu already knows everything he would say.

Does he need to extract some kind of vow from Lin Shu?

But Lin Shu would never change anyway.

After much deliberation, Xiao Jingyu settles for saying, “You are Jingyan’s only close friend. If you become lovers, he would lose a friend.”

Lin Shu’s face blossoms into a smile, “We were inseparable friends first before we became intimate lovers, nothing will change.”

Jingyu savors Lin Shu’s words for a few moments; he does not have any friend of this kind, but he is immensely grateful that fate has brought Lin Shu and Jingyan together.
He reaches out to draw Lin Shu’s cape closer, assuring him, “Don’t worry, I will make certain that everything will be fine.”

When the Empress Dowager and Dowager Consort Jing hear that the emperor has requested their audience after his late-night visit to Prince Jing’s manor, they hurry outside to greet him despite matching expressions of puzzled surprise.

The emperor flips aside his robes and falls into a formal kneel in front of them, startling both women into action. “Jingyu! What is this for?!” “Please rise at once! Be seated and we shall talk.”

Jingyu refuses their earnest objections and remains kneeling, recounting with great care Lin Shu and Jingyan’s story.

“Jingyan lost almost everything for my sake. As his elder brother, I cannot bear to also take Lin Shu away from him.”

As he finishes, he touches his forehead to the ground with solemnity, “Jingyu begs Aunt Jing and Mother for your gracious approval.”

After receiving the blessing from the Empress Dowager and Dowager Consort Jing, Jingyan should pay a formal visit to the Lin family, as tradition dictates.

Jingyu’s concern flares up again and he insists on accompanying him.

Dowager Consort Jing pulls Jingyu aside and bids with a smile, “There is no need for you to go to the Lin Manor. Let Xiaoshu and Jingyan go by themselves tomorrow.”

“Aunt Jing, why not?” Jingyu cannot ignore the nagging worry and repeats, “Xiaoshu is the only child of Commander Lin. He carries extraordinary expectations...if Commander Lin is incensed by the situation, my presence there should offer some protection.”

“You have always looked out for Jingyan since he was young; I understand your anxiety. But since Jingyan’s return, judging by the way Commander Lin and Princess Jin Yang have treated him, they should have already perceived the truth long ago.”

“But Jingyan told me that they still don’t know--” Jingyu stops himself mid-sentence, realization hitting him. A chuckle escapes him-- so it seems that the entire Lin family have been clued in, his silly brother is the only one left in the dark.

“They both hold prominent positions and are both male. Neither cares for the superficial show of a marriage ceremony anyway. As their elders, it is enough to give them our blessings without drawing unwanted attention.”

Jingyu nods in understanding, he takes a few steps forward before turning back, “There is still one thing I would like to do for them.”

The night before going to the Lin Manor, Jingyan spends the whole evening awake, Lin Shu naturally ends up in a similar state with him.
So before Princess Jin Yang could voice a single word, an amused chortle escapes her at the sight of dark bags under both men’s eyes. After a brief tea ceremony, she summarily sends them back to get some proper rest. [4]

Jingyan has never imagined that his relationship with Xiaoshu would be accepted by their closest families; he spends the next few days in a complete daze, before remembering to harass Lin Shu for not telling him that Lin Xie and Princess Jin Yang had been aware of their liaison this whole time.

Then, Lin Shu’s manor catches on fire.

It is no major catastrophe-- only a storage room is burnt to ashes, though the flames have lit up the entire street.

Worried about Lin Shu’s safety, all irritation flees Jingyan’s mind as he hurries over to help him clean up the aftermath with a dozen of men. Yet within a fortnight, a woodshed catches on fire again.

The next day, the head astrologer reports that the Red Phoenix [5] is gaining strength in the Southern sky, heralding a period of fire. He urges for stronger vigilance against conflagrations in the city.

Words on the street quickly connect the dots together between the prediction and the recent fires at Lin Shu’s manor.

Today, the Crown Prince leads a taoist priest to Lin Shu’s place to evaluate the reason behind the persistent fires. The priest concludes that the Vice Commander of the Chiyan army is born with fire, yet named with wood. [6] Wood mutates in the presence of fire, the only recourse would be to build a passage in his manor that would draw water to the household, bringing balance to fire.

Jingyan eyes Lin Shu’s enthusiastic expression with mild suspicion as they listen to the priest’s ramble, “They are going to tinker around your house, why are you so excited?”

“The Blue Dragon represents water, ‘Jing’ means peace, it even has the character ‘blue’, and the Master of the House is the rightful descendent of the dragon-- where would my passage go to get water, don’t you see, Your Highness?” [7]

Jingyan chokes on his water and is consumed by a coughing fit.

“Nonsense!”

He moves to stand up to put an end to this madness, only to be caught by Lin Shu, who shoves him back to his chair and says, “It’s His Majesty’s idea. What if I’m too old to climb over walls in fifty years?”

He continues, “Her Highnesses have already named the passage, too.”

“You command more than 50,000 men and I am a Prince of the first rank. What would people think if we have our houses connected?!“

“Jingyu-gege is different from the late emperor,” says Lin Shu. “As for others, our conscience is clear with regards to the heavens, the kingdom and our families, that will be enough.”

“...I need to see Brother to ask him to rescind the decree.”

“Too late,” Lin Shu blinks innocently. “Your walls have already been torn down.”

“......”
The Empress Dowager and Dowager Consort Jing have collectively named the passage: Qushui.

The hidden troughs on the side have also been cleaned and filled with fresh soil. Lin Shu favors the plum flower, so they’ve planted the sides full of plum trees from the blossoming ones in Prince Jing’s manor.

Within a year, the new plum trees are flourishing with beautiful flowers.

Lin Shu loves the sight; he would drag Jingyan to the pavilion at the end of the passage to spend hours there, sipping on wine and enjoying the scenery. Sometimes Yujin would join them with Jingrui to see the flowers too.

Today, Mu Qing is also present. The group of men are sitting around the table, drinking the Zhao Dian Hong wine courtesy of Jingrui, as Yujin says, “When I passed by Mei Lang today, I saw the plum flowers at the peak of their beauty! You could tell that those were personally planted by Lin Shu-gege, now Mei Lang is quite a sight to behold!”

Jingrui nods, “I think that the white plums are the most exceptional; they bloom in the harshest weather, not fearing even the coldest snow!”

Lin Shu chokes on his wine, “What Mei Lang, what the hell is Mei Lang?!“ [8]

Yan Yujin ducks his head in terror at the outburst, while Mu Qing, who has never tasted Lin Shu’s iron fist, replies nonchalantly, “Oh, it’s that passage connecting your two houses! Since it’s lined on both side with plum blossoms, everyone calls it ‘Mei Lang’ now.”

“What do you mean, ‘everyone’?! Her Highness named it!”

“It’s a good name alright, just too hard to say,” Mu Qing sticks out his tongue for good measure.

“When I went to visit Her Highnesses yesterday in the palace, they both said that they’d like to come to your manors someday, to see ‘Mei Lang’. Oi, Lin Shu-gege, why the long face?”

Later, since more and more people have taken to the nickname, the emperor himself has penned the words “Mei Lang” on a framed board, which is then placed above the passage connecting the two manors.

But that’s a story for another time.

Chapter End Notes

Last but not least, here are two wonderfully crafted fanvids for the fic, watch them here and here. To get rid of the floating comments across the screen, click on the speech bubble icon at the bottom right corner. I’m afraid that I can't help with their translations; I know nothing about video-editing, Photoshop is my limit. XD

---------Footnotes---------

1 姐姐 (jie jie): endearing honorific for an older female, can be used alone or attached as a suffix after names, like 宸妃姐姐 (chen fei jiejie), lit. Sister Consort Chen.[return to text]

2 It was mentioned at the end of the drama (and perhaps more explicitly in the novel),
where Prince Ji casually said that Yujin was promised in marriage to another family when his mother was pregnant with him. But once he was born and turned out to be a boy, the betrothal was dropped since the gender didn’t work out. Yujin never found out who his supposed “husband” was, but it was implied that it was Lin Shu.

The original here is 执子之手，与子偕老 (zhi zi zhi shou, yu zi xie lao), a very well-known stanza as part of a longer poem in the anthology 诗经 (shi jing), The Book of Songs, the first collection of poems of its kind, encompassing poetry and rhymes from 11th century to 6th century B.C. The original poem is called 击鼓 (beating drums), which expresses the lament of soldiers far from home in an extended military excursion with no return in sight. The full stanza reads: 死生契阔，与子成说；执子之手，与子偕老, lit. “Whether life or death, I’ve made this promise with you; [I will] take your hand and grow old with you.” In ancient times, when warfare was a long and unpredictable process, parting between soldiers from one battle to the next could mean permanent farewell. This poem describes the ardent wish of the speaker to stay with his friend on this lonely journey, even if they may never return to their hometowns. In modern reference, however, this last half quoted here has taken on a distinctly romantic connotation to mean essentially “ ‘til death do us apart.”

The practice of 敬茶 (jing cha, offering tea) is an important part of traditional Chinese wedding ceremony, still commonly used today. All four parents of the newlyweds would be presiding over the ceremony, where the groom first offers tea to his father-in-law, then his mother-in-law, followed by the bride performing the same to her in-laws. This is also the first official meeting of the parents to the new addition to their families, and where the couple formally change their address of both pairs of parents to “mother” and “father.” Sources suggest that since the Song Dynasty in the 12th century C.E, tea has been considered a symbol of permanence and fidelity for the fact that tea trees could not survive transfers once they were unearthed.

朱雀 (zhu que), lit. red bird, is one of the four mythological creatures in Chinese folklore, along with 青龙 (blue dragon), 白虎 (white tiger) and 玄武 (black turtle). In later Taoist practices and astrological diagrams, each of the creatures would preside over one of the four cardinal directions: Red Phoenix in the South, Blue Dragon in the East, White Tiger in the West, and Black Turtle in the North.

Lin Shu’s “Lin” is written as 林 (forest), which is composed of two 木, meaning wood.

靖 (jing) as in Prince Jing contains the character 青, which means blue, the same as in 青龙 (blue dragon). The emperor is considered to be the earthly personification of the Dragon, so naturally all his children are descendants of the dragon.

People are calling the plum passage quite literally 梅廊 for convenience, but Lin Shu mistakes it for its homonym 梅郎, which is Sir Mei, as in Sir Mei of Jiangzuo. XD
Afterword: On translation

Chapter Notes

Some post-translation drabble. :)

Thank you all for accompanying me on this very long but very satisfying journey!! I’ve said it several times before but I will reiterate here: if not for your continuous support, this translation would have been abandoned early on, the drafts rotting away in my cloud drive and never seeing the sun again. So THANK YOU!!

This being my very first translation project in any genre ever, I’ve learned many things along the way, both about the languages themselves and the nitty-gritty nuances of the translation process. So I’d like to share with you some of my insights and please share your thoughts with me too! Feel free to comment on any of the points, or about the fic in general, i.e. if you think the translation has evolved through the chapters, etc.

(Disclaimer: These are all opinions of a somewhat-informed amateur, who’s merely an end-user of the languages and by no means an expert of their intricacies.)

1. Linguistic structure

In the beginning, I had a very simplistic view of the translation difficulty, thinking that it wouldn’t be too hard since Chinese and English grammar wasn’t all that different. Then I discovered how misled I was. On the surface, the two languages seemed to have high correspondence in terms of sentence structure: the basic syntax is an SVO form, or subject-verb-object, e.g. “I eat fish” would have the exactly the same word order translated into Chinese. However, as I delved into the project, obvious differences began to emerge.

- Chinese sentences are LOOOOOONG
  - Unlike English, where dependent clauses within a sentence are often separated by commas and marked by prepositions like “which,” “whose” and “that”, Chinese doesn’t have such markers, which leads to sentences becoming absurdly long before a punctuation is even used. You can have multiple embellishments on multiple objects within the same clause, e.g. “Jingyan, frozen in shock by the development, glances at the man who used to be the most brilliant prodigy in the capital, his face now white with distress, his composure gone, who has never imagined that one day things would spiral into this madness that would consume everything he has strived for in this life.” Take out all the punctuations and the prepositions, flip some clauses around, that’s how the original Chinese would read.

- Chinese can also be super succinct
Though the SVO basic structure holds in most Chinese sentences, the rule is a lot more plastic than in English, i.e. words can be shifted around with more flexibility. The subject can often be eliminated for the sake of brevity, especially in more antiquated writing. Many things are also implied or contextual, where a direct translation wouldn’t make sense.

As you may have noticed from the footnotes of the translation, Chinese, especially written literary Chinese, makes ample use of four-word idioms so packed with meaning that they convey so much information in a very short phrase. This makes translation doubly challenging since I have to make sure to not only compose a grammatically correct English sentence to get the basic meaning across, but also try to mimic the tone and the historical context of the prose. (And that’s when I realized that I couldn’t possibly invent all the English counterparts for those idioms, so I started writing footnotes.)

2. Cultural differences

Language and culture have a codependent relationship, so it is not surprising that there are certain Chinese words derived from very Chinese cultural values that do not have English equivalents. *Nirvana in Fire* is a work that reflects many core values of Confucian and Taoist China, as well as some concepts commonly found in the wu-xia (pugilist) fiction genre. It was nearly impossible to find equivalents in English, so in the translation I focused more on the overall coherence of the narrative rather than belaboring the semantic details, which were better explained in the footnotes. Some of the main values are:

- **Restraint**
  - The ability to exercise restraint is a highly desired attribute in the traditional idea of a gentleman. The phrase “君子报仇，十年不晚” (a gentleman’s revenge does not come late in a decade, or revenge is a dish best served cold) very much rings true in NiF. Hence there’s always the struggle between doing what’s morally sound and what’s immediately gratifying.

- **义气 (yi qi)** came up a few times in the fic to describe Lin Shu. The closest translation would be “loyalty,” but more specifically, loyalty amongst close male friends in a brother-like bond. It’s commonly found in wu-xia stories. This kind of loyalty implies unconditional trust and complete willingness to do whatever to help the friend in need.

- **Chinese heroism:**
  - Mei Changsu would probably be considered as a hero in canon, while Jingyan would be the hero in this fic. Chinese heroism differs from the Western version featuring Superman and Batman in that the former celebrates more unsung heroes of the past who have made unimaginable sacrifices for the greater good, while the latter lauds individuals with incredible technologies of the future, performing public feats of strength. In short, collective good is far more important than personal desires.

3. Translating fiction
Compared to nonfiction, I think translating fiction is all about personal preferences. It is essentially presenting my interpretation of the story in my choice of words in English. As long as there are no grammatical mistakes, I don’t believe there is a “correct” way to translate a work of fiction— it’s as much a creative process as a technical one. For me, the main focus was to tell a compelling story across language barriers, where the words themselves were the medium not the essence, which meant 1) composing the English sentences as naturally as a native writer would, 2) not agonizing over the untranslatability of certain terminologies, phrases or concepts; paraphrase as needed to make for a more smooth reading experience.

As an amateur translator, I struggled a lot with setting the right tone for the work. Thankfully, the original prose in Chinese isn’t overly archaic, though much of the dialogue has the distinct “historical” feel. The way this translation stands now is fairly similar to my own writing style, since I do lack the experience of doing multiple translations to be able to call upon a certain style best suited for a fic. Of course, the primary objective of any translation is to get the point across, but I do hope that I did a decent job to elevate the work beyond this basic standard and made it an enjoyable read in itself. :)

Again, thank you all for your support!! If this translation has sparked your interest in the Chinese language or culture, please share your thoughts with me!

**Bonus Q&A:**

**Q:** Favorite part of the translation?

**A:** The footnotes, of course!! Can’t believe it took me 10+ chapters to start properly doing it since I later derived so much enjoyment from them. I loved digging deeper into the meanings of the words, idioms and traditions.

**Q:** Least favorite part of the translation?

**A:** The action scenes...Thank the translation gods that they were few and far in between. I absolutely dreaded those big chunks of “he kicked, stabbed, hooked his arm, wound his legs” blah blah… I found them more challenging than all the political scheming to translate. D:

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archive.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!