Chapter 16

Big Ten Bestows Favor on the Han Family
Moon Pearl Encounters a Potent Demon

Teacher Li told them about the Academy, one evening just before the Spring Festival vacation, when they were all assembled for dance class.

"The Academy of Dance will reopen in the fall," she said. "They'll be taking applications after Spring Festival."

The remark did not register with Yuezhu at first but Baoyu picked up on it right away. He jumped to his feet, face all alight.

"How do we enter? Is there an examination?"

"Of course not. In revolutionary China we have no more examinations, you all know that. Big Ten abolished them."

Big Ten was the Tenth Party Congress, which had met the previous summer, the summer of '73. The publicity had been terrific, and the students of Number 14 had spent weeks going over the resolutions in class. On the top landing of the stairs that led up from the main entrance lobby of the school there was still a huge wall poster exhorting the students and faculty to STUDY BIG TEN!

For all the publicity, Yuezhu would not, in the normal course of things, have given a moment's thought to Big Ten, other than what was required of her in class. People nowadays—certainly it was true of her fellow-students at Number 14—paid no more attention to public affairs than they were obliged to. There was supposed to be a movement going on, in fact: the "Criticize Confucius, Criticize Lin Biao" movement, but

nobody seemed to know what it was all about and nobody paid it any attention, other than to go through the necessary motions at Political Study sessions. Everybody was just tired of movements. Yuezhu knew now, without being quite ready to say it to herself in words yet, that Mustache had been right: they were just games played by leaders, with the common people as pawns.

Big Ten, however had had some rather direct effects on Yuezhu's life. For one thing, the faction favored by Father's chief had strengthened its position. Everyone associated with that faction had benefited. Father himself was now a Brigadier, and the family had the right to use a part-time maid, so that Mother would no longer have to cook. There had been a big fight about the maid, Father saying it was a Bourgeois Thing, that an officer of the People's Liberation Army shouldn't employ menials, Mother responding that menial work was just as honorable as any other kind, that (as by this time they all knew) the Party leaders all had lots of servants, and that she was tired of cooking. Father won the argument, of course, so they did without the maid, but it put Mother in a bad mood for weeks.

Big Ten had made balancing concessions to the other, more revolutionary, faction in the national leadership. One of them was the abolition of all school examinations. This had come about in the following way. A student in the northeast had handed in a blank examination paper. The school authorities had marked him at zero, of course; but he had protested to his local Revolutionary Committee, arguing that paper examinations could not measure revolutionary spirit, which was the only really important thing. The Committee had upheld him, and someone in the national leadership, one of the revolutionary faction, had got to hear of the matter. This person praised the student for a correct revolutionary attitude, and so the policy had been pushed through. This was the policy Teacher Li was referring to when she gave them the news about the Dance Academy.

"I expect they will look for some physical ability," she continued. "But of course, the main thing will be to have a correct attitude to dancing."

"I have a correct attitude!" Baoyu struck an exaggerated pose. "I dance to serve the people!" He pirouetted, ending with a graceful bow. All the students laughed and applauded.

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"Where is this Academy?" asked Yuezhu.

"In the Conservatory of Music. It's all part of the Fine Arts Institute. The Conservatory has been closed these last seven years, so that the teachers and students could get some revolutionary experience in the countryside. Now, after Big Ten, I guess the leaders feel they have had enough revolutionary experience, so they are fit to teach their music in a proper revolutionary way."

It was said with no inflection of irony, but several pupils giggled. This was still, well into her third year in the capital, somewhat shocking to Yuezhu. The Beijing people were so irreverent and cynical. Everyone said the right things, of course; but they had a way of saying them that always seemed to be making a sly joke. *Jingyouzi* was Father's expression for this: "capital oil", meaning that the people of Beijing were slippery and smooth. *Ba mian linglong* was another phrase he used: smooth and polished on all sides, meaning that the people here always showed the appropriate face to everyone, without any sincerity. The Beijing people had seen so many invaders come and go—Manchus, Europeans, warlords, Japanese, Nationalists—they had learned to bend with the wind.

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At Spring Festival Yuezhu told Father about the Dance Academy. "I want to apply, she told him the first evening of the vacation. I want to be a dancer, Daddy. It's the thing I want most in the world."

"Well, if it's what you want, of course it's what we want for you. Do you have the ability to get in, do you think?"

"I don't know. Teacher Li said it's our attitude that counts. And I guess . . . of course, our class background."

"No problem there," said Father. "But from what I remember of Big Ten, they'll be allowed to give you an ability test, even if not a full examination. That's how things are being done, anyway."

At this point Yuezhu did not have the nerve to put it to Father frankly that a word from him, a senior military man, might make all the difference to her application. She knew Father's feelings about those indirect methods of doing things.

She found out where the Conservatory of Music was from Teacher Li, and went there with Baoyu. They went twice: the first time right after the actual festival, while they were still on vacation from school. On that occasion the Conservatory was closed, and no amount of hammering on the gate or calling out could raise anyone inside.

They went again at the beginning of the summer semester. The Conservatory was in an old Japanese-style building over in the Haidian district, near the University. It had a high brick wall with a wooden gate in it. This time the gate was open. There was a courtyard beyond, and the main building, its entrance doors also open. From the door, down the steps and halfway back across the courtyard was a line of people, waiting.

"To get an application form for the Dance Academy," said the scholarly-looking man at the end of the line. "For my niece in Tianjin. She's dance crazy."

The woman in front of him nodded. "My daughter, too. They all want to be dancers, since this revolutionary ballet came up."

Yuezhu experienced the first risings of that resentful irritation we feel when we discover that our most cherished private dreams are in fact commonplace. "I wanted to be a dancer long before the revolutionary ballets came out," she said to Baoyu—loud enough, she hoped, for the woman to hear.

"Me, too, elder sister.

> I wanted to dance
> When it wasn't allowed.
> When at last came the chance
> I was lost in a crowd.

It seems the world has caught up with us now."

The clerk who handed out the forms told them nothing, but everyone assumed there would be some sort of audition or interview.

To prepare herself for this interview Yuezhu concentrated on her dancing, never missing a lesson. She understood now that the folk dances they had been doing these three years past, and those she had done at Seven Kill Stele, belonged to an inferior form. Real dancing was ballet,

foreign-style ballet, with special shoes and dresses, foreign-style music, mirrors and a barre. She longed to dance that way, she and Baoyu both longed to, but Teacher Li disclaimed any ability to teach foreign-style, and the two devotees were reduced to practicing what few steps they could remember from *Red Detachment of Women* and such other revolutionary ballets as they were able to get tickets for.

The interview came in June. It was a very odd business. One of the interviewers—they did not deign to introduce themselves by name—was a foreigner, or at any rate had the appearance of one. She was a woman of about fifty, brown hair beginning to turn gray, cut straight across the forehead and cropped short all round. Her eyes were blue and round, her skin fair; yet she spoke perfect native Mandarin, with a slight northeastern accent. You would never have known from her speech she was a foreigner. Not that she had much to say; most of the interview was monopolized by two very revolutionary-looking types, a man and a woman, neither more than thirty, clothes rumpled, the man's shirt with a carefully-located patch on the front. They spoke alternately, complementing each other, like the *xiangsheng* comedians on the radio that Yuezhu could remember from before the Cultural Revolution.

"Not much revolutionary experience!" barked the man. They had obviously had some access to her file. The man's hair was sticking up at all angles around his head. He had a big sharp nose and an Adam's apple that stuck out.

"Not much evidence of a desire to serve the people!" shrilled the woman, who was slightly cross-eyed and sported a faint mustache.

"I've always tried to study Chairman Mao's thoughts and carry out his instructions," said Yuezhu, apologetic in spite of herself.

"Since your best subject is languages, why do you want to study dancing?"

"Since your people are Army, why not enlist instead of going to the Dance Academy?"

"I feel that it's through dancing that I can best serve the people."

"Since you were raised by the People's Liberation Army, tell us what the Three Rules of Discipline are!"

"Tell us what the Eight Points for Attention are!"

Yuezhu rattled off the Three Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points for Attention, early instructions of Chairman Mao's which were now taught as the basic creed of the PLA.

The fourth member of the panel, an older guy with a rather haughty, aristocratic kind of face, who had seemed to Yuezhu to be asleep, suddenly spoke up.

"What are the fundamental principles of Dialectical Materialism?"

Yuezhu's heart sank. They had been doing Philosophy in school this last year, and she had struggled gamely with the gibberish phrases, but nothing had stuck.

"Well . . . There's the, um, the Interpenetration of Opposites . . . "

"Oh, let's see if she's suitable to be a dancer, why don't we?" It was the foreign-looking woman, speaking with ill-disguised impatience.

"Carry out the instructions of Comrade Zhao," muttered the young man, slumping back in his chair.

"Follow the directions of Comrade Zhao," pouted his echo, beginning to riffle through some papers on the table in front of her.

The foreign-looking woman, who was apparently Comrade Zhao, had Yuezhu walk up and down a few paces, swinging her arms; then told her to touch her toes, continuing downwards for as far as she could bend; then made her do the splits, which Yuezhu could accomplish easily; and finally asked her to go from a standing position to a lying one as gracefully as she could, by any means she chose. Lacking specific instructions, Yuezhu made rather a mess of this, and did little better at the reverse movement. Standing there under the cold blue eyes of Comrade Zhao after this latter evolution, she felt desperately awkward.

"You will be notified," said the young man.

"Successful applicants will be announced," said his ghost.

Comparing notes afterwards with Baoyu, the interview seemed to have been standard. For the lying-down business, Baoyu had said he pretended to be dying, as in the Uighur folk dance "Flying Goose Crossing the Desert", and by concentrating on this idea had attained a graceful movement.

"I wish I'd thought of that," said Yuezhu. "I really believe I made a mess of it. That foreign woman with her cold blue eyes. I lost my nerve."

"She's not foreign. My father found out. She's Chinese, from the northeast. Her parents were Russian immigrants, when they built the railroad. They stayed in China after the 1917 Revolution. Then they sent her to Russia and she danced with the Bolshoi Ballet. But there was some trouble, I don't know what, and she came back to China. She'd married a Russian guy, a choreographer, but she left him in Russia when she herself came back, and he's still there. She got struggled in '66 for being too expert and worked on a farm in Zhejiang Province, but now she's been reinstated."

Baoyu's father knew everything about everyone, it seemed. But that was his job, that was what the Public Security Bureau was for.

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For the pre-graduation exercises the dance group at Number 14 was to give a performance to the whole school, and they had begun rehearsing it after the Spring Festival break. The dance was a folk dance from the northwest, based on the story of Shining Lady Wang, which everybody knew.

Shining Lady Wang

Shining Lady Wang was Wang Zhaojun, one of the four great beauties of Chinese history. Some say she was the most beautiful woman that ever lived. Although of humble birth, she was chosen for the Imperial harem by those officials who toured the country looking for suitable material.

The ruler at this time was Liu Shi, tenth emperor of the Han dynasty. His harem was so big he could never get round to looking at them all personally, so he had one of his eunuchs, a man called Mao Yanshou, paint portraits of them all and make the portraits into a book. When the Emperor wanted female

company he would leaf through the book until one of the portraits took his fancy.

Now this Mao Yanshou was very venal. He would paint a beautiful portrait of a lady only if she gave him a bribe. Shining Lady Wang, trusting in her own beauty, refused to pay him the bribe, so he painted a very unflattering portrait of her. Because of this, the Emperor never chose her for companionship, and she languished in the harem unnoticed.

Liu Shi made a treaty with the King of the Huns, a wild tribe who lived beyond the Wall. In return for peace, the King of the Huns asked for a Chinese bride to take back with him to his encampment on the steppes. Looking into his harem book, the Emperor spotted the portrait of a plain, rough-looking lady, and said: "This will be good enough for the King of the Huns." Of course, the portrait he had chosen was that of Shining Lady Wang. He sent a servant to ask Shining Lady Wang if she would be willing to be a bride to the King of the Huns. Shining Lady Wang said: "Yes, I am willing. Better to be a Queen among barbarians than to waste away neglected in the Emperor's harem."

At the ceremony to present the King of the Huns with his bride, Liu Shi saw her for the first time. He was overwhelmed by her beauty. However, he had given his word to the King of the Huns, and could not break it. So Shining Lady Wang went off to live among the Huns, to drink mare's milk, dress in animal skins and dwell in smoky tents made of felt.

She proved, in fact, a very good Queen, teaching the Huns to farm and weave. She wrote many songs for the guitar, which she liked to play while riding Hun-style on horseback. If you see a lady playing the guitar on horseback in a Chinese painting, it is Shining Lady Wang. When she died she was buried, by her choice, on the barbarian side of the Wall. The grass on the barbarian side of the Wall is yellow; but in the place where Shining Lady Wang is buried it is always green, as in China.

Yuezhu, Number 14's best girl dancer, was to be Shining Lady Wang; Baoyu, the Hun King. Teacher Li had rechoreographed the dance to make it more revolutionary, eliminating solos in favor of group movements; but still there was a brief section where Yuezhu and Baoyu danced together. This they practiced endlessly until every least lift of the head and turn of the hand were second nature. They both felt now that these folk dances were childish and would soon be behind them; but (as Baoyu said) that was all the more reason to show that they had mastered them completely. The performance was a big success, the rows of students, teachers and Party Secretaries all clapping, clapping and smiling up at them from the auditorium. Bowing in the newly-approved style to acknowledge the applause, as the cast of Red Detachment of Women had bowed in the Great Hall of the People, Yuezhu could not help but think that her destiny was set, that she was fated to be chosen for the Dance Academy, to spend her whole life like this, rehearsing until her very body—the muscles and joints themselves—had memorized the movements, dancing and bowing for endless rows of smiling faces.

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Selections to the Dance Academy were to be posted in the second week of July. On the appointed morning she went with Baoyu to the Music Conservatory. The whole courtyard was full of people, two or three hundred, most middle-school students like themselves, the rest older people, presumably parents or representatives of out-of-town applicants. It seemed far more people than had been there for the application forms.

"Is this only for the Dance Academy?" she asked Baoyu, who knew everything about the process.

"Yes. The other departments post at different times."

"Oh, Heaven! What chance do we stand, with so many?"

"I bet there are even more than this. Think of all those out in the provinces who can't get here. Some of these people represent a dozen or more, you can be sure."

"Heaven! To select only forty!"

Baoyu, irrepressible, laughed at her. "Such a low spirit, Elder Sister! We shall go through that big door together next September, I feel sure."

"I wish I did."

At last, an hour late, a functionary appeared carrying a bucket of paste, a roll of white paper under his arm. With insolent slowness—savoring his rare moment in the spotlight—he scrutinized the wall where notices were posted, shook his head, and went back into the building. The crowd groaned. Twenty minutes later he came out again carrying a little folding ladder which he set up, with infinite fuss, at the foot of the wall. Another disappearance, another re-emergence, paste and paper again. Painstakingly—interrupting himself twice to shift the ladder an inch this way, an inch back, carefully setting down the paste and paper each time—he pasted his single roll to the wall and withdrew.

The crowd pressed forward. "Ah!" and "Oh!" and even one clear "Motherfuck!" in broad Beijing dialect sounded from the front; but Yuezhu was too far away to see the names.

"Baoyu, Baoyu! I can't see! Are we selected or not? How can we get to the front?"

The crowd went into a sort of slow fermentation process, those at the front who had finished scanning the lists elbowing their way back, those at the back struggling forward. Lists of this sort were always ordered by the number of brush-strokes in a person's name. Yuezhu's family name had twelve strokes, so she knew to look in the lower part of the list. Baoyu's name had eleven strokes, so would be just above hers. When she was close enough she saw his name first, then—struggling to keep her feet in the heaving mob—scanned downwards for her own. She couldn't see it. Had the names been listed in some irregular order? Out of order? No, she could see the first name on the list, someone called Bu, which had only two strokes. A heave of the crowd pushed her suddenly closer, and she could read all the names. Hers was not there.

Turning to look for Baoyu, as if in appeal, she met his eyes, and saw his distress. Distress for her, of course, dear Baoyu—neither of them had ever doubted he would be chosen. But neither had she had ever allowed herself to doubt that she would be chosen; yet she had not been. It was a fact in the world, the world which now had no meaning.

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Walking home with Baoyu (who was close to tears on her behalf), it seemed to Yuezhu that she was a kind of dupe, the victim of an illusion. The illusion, of course, was called Hope. More accurately, Hope was the agent of the illusion, the demon who had conjured it up, capering around her in her sleep, whispering in her ear so that she would never, never imagine not being able to go to the Dance Academy. The demon Hope—it seemed so clear to her, a new understanding. She could almost visualize him, one of those figures with wild, evil faces from illustrated versions of *Journey to the West*, to be outwitted by Sun Wukong the Monkey. But she was not Sun Wukong, she did not know how to outwit the demon.