After staying at the Winter Plum Courtyard for an entire month, Li Chen moved back to his own residence. And during that month, Qi Yunruo had often visited Ji Huan for a chat.

Qi Niqun cared not about his trips. On the other hand, Granny Song did not fail to make her own opinion known repeatedly. This time, she mumbled into Qi Niqun’s ear, “Third young master is always at the forecourt. Could he be trying to seduce His Highness?”

Hearing similar words so often, Qi Niqun naturally felt uncomfortable, heart twisting within her chest. Qi Yunruo’s purpose was clear. That she knew. To hold the prince’s affection during her pregnancy, so that his heart wouldn’t sway to another consort in that time. That said, she did not inform Qi Yunruo about the plan yet. As long as she could use her brother, there was no point wasting time
talking about it. However, that didn’t mean she would allow him to seduce the prince out of his own volition.

In the estate, Qi Niqun wasn’t the only one plagued with distress. Since Li Chen had accompanied Qi Niqunin for a whole month, Secondary Consort Ji experienced the bitter tang of loneliness. As such, she wouldn’t pass off a chance to give her rival some trouble.

Because Qi Niqun had recently married in, to assert her dominance and rein in control of the concubines, she ordered them to pay her respects every morning, half an hour after Li Chen left her residence for morning court. At first, there weren’t any issues. The concubines paid respects and saluted accordingly.

But today was different. Today, Secondary Consort Ji personally delivered Qi Niqun’s monthly allowance.

Normally, the main wife of a large and established family would manage the estate’s finances and send the monthly allowances to each concubine. Secondary Consort Ji usurped that role.

She sashayed her way toward Qi Niqun. Her bow was shallow, failing to match the respectful manner in which she spoke. “His Highness has a message for the princess consort; the ledger will stay in this concubine’s hands, and the princess consort will receive a monthly allowance of 6 kg of silver.” A beautiful smile graced her lips. “Because this concubine did not want to waste time, rather than running a double trip, this concubine will give the allowance after paying respects.”

In the blink of an eye, Qi Niqun’s hands clenched into fists, knuckles glowing white. Long nails left behind red crescents on her palms. Her expression did not change as she slowly said, “Secondary Consort Ji surely must have been troubled.”
However, the other woman merely smiled once more. “Such a thing is something this concubine should naturally do.”

Secondary Consort Wei also had something to say. “Consort Ji has in fact gone through much trouble for this. Not to mention, she has to diligently take care of the little master while managing the estate, both inside and out. Your Highness, the princess consort should not mind her too much.”

Consort Ji smiled but did not respond.

Of the tertiary consorts, only Tertiary Consort Li received Li Chen’s watchful care due to her giving birth to a daughter. Although the imperial palace had bestowed all four tertiary consorts to him, their statuses were humble. As the ones higher up on the hierarchy fought, they uttered not a peep.

Yet this wasn’t the case for all of his concubines. Seeing a chance to align herself with a higher power, a very low ranked concubine, surnamed Ying, stood from her seat in the back. She bowed. “Secondary Consort Wei’s words are reasonable. Although this slave is ignorant, this slave still knows that the managing power should be with the mistress of the estate. Whether the family is big or small. In the past, Secondary Consort Ji had this privilege. However, His Highness has already married the princess consort for one month. Shouldn’t she be the one managing the estate now?”

Tertiary Consort Li stoked this flame. “Younger sister Ying said it correctly. This slave also agrees.”

In no time at all, Secondary Consort Ji’s face turned a shade of green. She slowly said, “This concubine understands the two younger sisters’ reasoning. However, the prince was the one who let this concubine manage the estate. If this concubine suddenly yields it to the princess consort, this concubine is afraid she will disappoint His Highness.”
At the end, everyone scattered unhappily. Expression frigid, Qi Niqun picked up a small white porcelain vase, one that had been made in the past dynasty. And she tossed it to the floor. Once the sound of shattering porcelain rang, Liubai knelt on the ground to pick up the shards.

Granny Song’s face was shrouded by anger. “What’s Consort Ji’s intention? She purposefully picked a fight with you.”

Qi Niqun closed her eyes in thought. A moment later, she said, “Summon Granny Cheng.”

“Yes.”

Meanwhile, Consort Ji neither rushed nor took her time leaving, holding the hand of her maidservant, Pei Er, for support. Next to her was Consort Wei, whose smile did not quite meet her eyes. “Older sister is amazingly arrogant.”

Consort Ji glanced at her. Not a word left her lips.

Brushing her fingers against her flowing-pearl twin-butterfly dangling hair ornament, Consort Wei peeked over her shoulder. “Concubine Ying looks like a normal person, but her heart actually hides intentions.”

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Taking her time with her words, Consort Ji eventually said, “She used to be a palace maid that had served His Highness back in the imperial palace. Even I can’t compare.”
It didn’t take long for them to reach the Frost Autumn Courtyard. Then Pei Er carefully asked, “Why must master steal the limelight, inspiring the princess consort’s ire?”

Mood pitch-black, Consort Ji shot the servant a scorching glare. “For three years, I’ve managed the estate for His Highness. Yet as soon as she married in, I have to hand her my hard-earned work on a silver platter? I’m unwilling!”

Pei Er spared no time in kneeling and massaged her master’s legs, too frightened to even say a word.

Consort Ji smiled, cold enough to freeze. “No matter how one puts it, in reality the position of secondary consort is just a concubine.”

Word flew by quickly in the prince estate. After Ji Huan learned of his sister’s actions, his mood plummeted. His expression did not lighten even when Qi Yunruo once again came to visit. Not quite understanding the situation, Qi Yunruo asked, “Older brother Ji, are you feeling unwell?”

Ji Huan sighed. “How has Her Highness, the princess consort been these past few days?”

Qi Yunruo lowered his head. “I don’t know.”

Despite not forcing his sister to cease in her meddling, Ji Huan worried her actions would anger Li Chen. Ji Huan did not really like her to begin with, but in the end, they were on the same side.

Having heard a little about the morning’s events from Liusu, Qi Yunruo’s eyes shone with curiosity. “How much is older brother’s monthly allowance?”
The question caught Ji Huan off guard. That said, Ji Huan knew the younger male had a pure and innocent personality, and thus did not have any hidden meaning beneath his words. He was generous with his answer. “I receive 1.5 kg of silver, but if I need more, then I can get more from the outside.”

Qi Yunruo kept his gaze low. He played with Ji Huan’s paperweight that was the shape of a mythical beast. His voice was soft. “I don’t have an allowance.”

Shocked, Ji Huan blurted, “None at all?”

Qi Yunruo nodded. An obvious gloom enshrouded him. “When I lived in Count Ziyang’s estate and still had an older female servant looking after me, I would receive 0.25 kg of silver a month. But after she retired, I didn’t get anything anymore.”

Ji Huan wasn’t stupid. It was obvious to him that someone with power had not liked the teen. The allowance had been given, but before it could reach Qi Yunruo, others had already nibbled away at it until nothing remained. Sitting down next to him, Ji Huan reached out to stroke his soft hair.

“0.25 kg of silver is not enough. Just one book will cost that much. In one year, you would not be able to save much of anything.”

Qi Niqun’s wedding had been a grand affair, red silk and crates of dowry for miles, yet Qi Yunruo had not a penny to his name. Ji Huan softly said, “If you ever need anything, let me know. I’ll help you buy it.”

A smile slid across Qi Yunruo’s lips. “I don’t have anything that I want.”
Today had been the first day since Li Chen moved out of the Winter Plum Courtyard. Where he would spend the night was at the center of every concubine’s thoughts.

Currently, Li Chen had one son and one daughter. A couple days ago, the emperor had bestowed his eldest son the name of “Jing.” This child would be the third imperial grandson. On the other hand, His eldest daughter, whose mother had a low status, did not yet have a name. She was the first imperial granddaughter.

Li Chen was the empress’ first-born son. However, it was the empress dowager who had raised him. The empress’ second-born son was the fourth imperial prince, and this year he would be fifteen years old. Perhaps in half a year, he would move out into his own palace. Many years ago, the first imperial prince had been bestowed the title of Prince Jing, and his princess consort was born in Jiangnan, surnamed She. The third prince was bestowed the title of Prince Qing and was not yet married.

Li Chen’s princess consort, Qi Niqun, was born in the count estate, and even though Count Ziyang’s title has been passed down for three generations, it was still renowned and powerful. Princess Consort Jing was also from a large family renowned for many generations. Many members of her paternal family worked as officials. However, Prince Jing’s birth mother was born a servant, and subsequently had a low status. It wasn’t until a few years ago, when Prince Jing was bestowed his title, that the emperor had promoted her to the rank of Imperial Concubine. Only her paternal family supported her. Her maternal family did not. Needless to say, Li Chen was superior to Prince Jing in both birth and status.
Imperial princes could have a total of one main consort, two secondary consorts, and four tertiary consorts. Seeing that those positions were already filled in Li Chen’s harem, numerous families felt unhappy. In their minds, Li Chen was the most likely to be the next emperor. Now they had no chance to align themselves with him before his ascension.

In the evening, after Li Chen returned home from his post, he went to the Winter Plum Courtyard to accompany Qi Niqun for dinner. Then he returned to his own courtyard.

His residence was in the middle of the prince estate, and had two studies. The first was used to see guests and hold meetings. The second was a personal study, access restricted apart from himself. Li Chen’s important texts were all stored there. His personal room was large, a side room on both the left and right. The gardens were well-maintained too, with a small pond containing a few goldfish.

Li Chen’s personal eunuch managed the estate’s forecourt. His name was Su Ge, and he was in his thirties. Calm and stable. As soon as Li Chen sat down by his desk, Su Ge relayed the estate’s important events to him. Li Chen rubbed his forehead and slowly said, “What did Consort Ji say?”

Su Ge knew better than to answer directly. “It must have been difficult for the princess consort to stay calm.”

“It really must have been hard for her.”

“Tomorrow, should this slave inform Consort Ji properly?”

Li Chen shook his head. “It’s fine. Let’s see how the princess consort handles this.”
“Understood. This slave has another matter to mention. The eldest young master is living with Consort Ji. This slave heard that the princess consort has the intention of raising him herself.”

Those words stirred a bit of unhappiness within Li Chen’s heart. “He is still too young, and is not easy to be taken of at the moment. Wait until he’s at the ripe age to learn. At that time, I will bring him to the forecourt.”

Su Ge understood. Noticing that Li Chen wanted to rest, he went ahead and prepared for that. Although the Ink Lotus Courtyard had several beautiful maidservants among the staff, Li Chen was not one to let those women, women who wanted to climb up his bed, serve him. He also did not have the habit of bringing his concubines to the forecourt for that purpose. His exhaustion was apparent from his voice. “After one month of not attending to my post, the work has piled up. And I had to speak the whole day. Send over an eunuch who can give a hard massage later.”

“Yes.”

“...Forget it. Bring me to Ji Huan so I can speak with him.”

Su Ge said, “This slave understands.”

It was now completely dark outside. Su Ge lit up the surroundings with a lantern, Li Chen following behind. Meeting with Ji Huan always recovered his mood. Ji Huan had his own thoughts, but would not hide too much from him, allowing Li Chen to see his ambitions, his wants.

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After arriving at the guest quarter, Beautiful Forest, Li Chen shot a glance at Su Ge without saying a word. Light footsteps swiftly made their way to the door.
“...Little Qi likes this. Today, his eyes would not leave it. You should find a good looking box to place it in, and give it to him tomorrow.”

Li Chen blurted, “Who is ‘little Qi?’”

Ji Huan nearly jumped on the spot. In a flash, he turned to the door and saw that it was half ajar. And that Li Chen was standing right outside. Snapping back to his senses, Ji Huan quickly made his way to the door, opened it all the way, and welcomed Li Chen in. He smiled. “His Highness does not know? It’s the princess consort’s little brother, Qi Yunruo. In these past couple of days, he has come to play with me.”

Li Chen nodded, and a sound of acknowledgement left his lips. His eyes followed the paperweight that Ji Huan’s servant, Yueya Er, held. “He likes this?”

Ji Huan thought for a moment, and then said, “He’s still like a child. Likes things that resemble animals and dolls, and doesn’t like ordinary things like brushes.”

Li Chen took the adorable and docile-looking paperweight from the maidservant. “How can I take your things and give it to someone else? Su Ge, in the past I received a birthday gift of twelve zodiac ornaments. Choose a day to give them to him.”

“This slave will do as told. Tomorrow the gifts will be sent to young master Qi.”

Exhausted for the day, Li Chen did not have any desire to do anything else. He had only came to have a chat with Ji Huan. Ji Huan dismissed the servants in the room and brought in a kettle of high-quality tea, the Maojian Er. Sitting on the side, he waited for Li Chen to speak.

His rocking chair had been moved back inside the house in the evening, and Li Chen was currently sitting upon it. In his hand was a teacup, the tea not spilling even while he’s rocking.
Seeing that Li Chen would not answer, Ji Huan said, “Are Your Highness’ thoughts running amuck?”

Li Chen sighed.

It didn’t take long for Ji Huan to grasp the situation. “Does it have anything to do with His Majesty allowing Prince Qing to attend morning court?”

Li Chen stared at Ji Huan. “Why do you have such a keen eye?”

“Your Highness, Prince Jing’s ambitions have yet to reveal themselves, whereas, Prince Qing can no longer hold his in. His noble consort mother currently has the emperor’s affection. This mother and son pair’s ambitions have already expanded to the skies. Your Highness needs only to wait and see who the emperor appoints as Prince Qing’s princess consort. Depending on that woman’s family background, you can determine His Majesty’s thoughts regarding Prince Qing.”

“I’m not worried about Prince Qing. What’s on my mind is Imperial Father’s general attitude.”

The emperor had never shown his bias toward any of the princes. He found, for the eldest and second princes, a main consort from renowned and powerful families. For the third prince, he nurtured him well with imperial tutors. For the fourth prince, he showered him with a lot of affection. Li Chen still had a few younger brothers that were very young in age. The emperor treated those younger princes the same, rewarded them the same.

Others were unable to see why the emperor acted like so.

Prince Jing was already twenty-four years old. Li Chen himself was twenty years old. His younger brothers would grow older each day.
Li Chen turned his body to admire the paperweight in the shape of a mythical beast. *White pebble jade*² glowed softly under the candlelight.

*Winter Plum Courtyard.*

Granny Song slightly smiled. “Looks like the prince is on your side. During today’s dinner, he told those lower people not to look down on you.”

But Qi Niqun arched a brow, unsatisfied. “Why has His Highness still not mention the matters of managing the estate?”

Today she had spoken with General Manager Cheng, yet the latter only smiled and did not agree to anything. She still remembered the older woman’s words.

“This slave is only in charge of supervising matters within the Winter Plum Courtyard. If I suddenly stick my hands into the whole estate’s business, it will not be good.”

Qi Niqun stroked her flat abdomen. “Do you think the prince will let me raise the eldest young master?”

A moment of thought. Granny Song said, “Since Tertiary Consort Li spared no time in asking you to raise her daughter, we should not let her intentions go to waste. Once the young miss is brought over, it won’t be long until the young master is brought here as well. And at that time, let’s see what Secondary Consort Ji can even say.”

“Hm.”
With that settled, Qi Niqun found her thoughts entering different waters, those concerning Qi Yunruo. It did not suit her own purposes for him to continue his trips to the forecourt. Because according to her mother’s intentions, Qi Yunruo should only rely on Qi Niqun. If a person’s power increases, they would no longer be easy to keep under control.

However, in what way could she tie Qi Yunruo to her?

✿

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1. Paperweight in the shape of a mythical beast: (貔貅镇纸) Píxiū zhènzhǐ. Picture provided in the text.
2. White pebble jade: (白玉的籽料) Báiyù de zǐ liào. This is kind of hard to explain. Baiyu is white jade, and ziliao is like the pebble-shaped jade material that forms in a riverbank. A picture is provided in the text.