Earlier, Countess Ziyang had trembled with both joy and worry regarding her daughter’s pregnancy. As such, she seldom spoke at the start of the banquet. For the remainder of the year Qi Niqun would be barred from spending the night with Li Chen. What’s worse, this mother and daughter pair had witnessed a most disgruntling scene: Li Chen had summoned Qi Yunruo to dine with his brothers and father. Watching as the group of males left for the lakeside pavilion, Countess Ziyang coldly said, “Who knew this cheap spawn had such good tricks under his sleeve?”

Qi Niqun rubbed her abdomen. She hesitated before saying, “In mother’s opinion, should I fulfill His Highness’ wish?”

“Darling Qun, for you to directly bring this up and for His Highness to bring this up are two entirely different scenarios. Now that you’re with child, naturally you have some standing. That cheap spawn hid from you that His
Highness liked him, so that he can suppress you and keep His Highness’ affection. So that he can gain more and more of His Highness’ heart. Daughter, you must suppress his nature. So that in the future, there will be no harm in sending him to His Highness. He won’t spit on your grace.”

A moment of thought. Then Qi Niqun said, “I’ve put a good word to His Highness for that Concubine Ying and Tertiary Consort Li. Now that they are on my side, I should be receiving the benefits.”

A smile graced Countess Ziyang’s lips. “Naturally.”

Once Li Chen and Qi Yunruo had arrived at Winter Plum Courtyard, Li Chen glanced at his companion. His thoughts wandered. He recalled the other’s task of copying Buddhist scriptures. “Once the child is born, this courtyard won’t be big enough to accommodate you,” Li Chen couldn’t help but say. “In a few days, I will find a suitable place for you to live.”

Qi Yunruo nodded.

After that, two eunuchs brought Qi Yunruo through the doors of Winter Plum Courtyard, to his own little suite. Li Chen would later make his way back to his own residence.

But first, he wanted to pay his princess consort a visit.

A soft and warm smile had made its way across Qi Niqun’s lips, fueled by her happiness in becoming a mother. She appeared kind and gentle as she personally poured a cup of sobering tea for Li Chen.
“The princess consort should quickly sit,” Li Chen said. “Just leave this to the servants.”

Qi Niqun said, “This concubine has heard that pregnant women cannot sit idly. The further it is into the pregnancy, the more exercise is required.”

Li Chen smiled and spoke not a word.

“In these past few days, this concubine has noticed that Concubine Ying has a good character. With such a person caring person by His Highness’ side, this concubine is relieved.”

Originally, Li Chen had wanted to stay at Winter Plum Courtyard for a while to speak with Qi Niqun. This would be his first legitimate child, so he naturally hoped this child would be talented and healthy. And if that meant bettering the relationship with its mother, then so be it.

But as soon as he had heard those words, his mood took a turn for the worse. Li Chen didn’t show it on his face, however. He slowly said, “Ying Qiu is indeed good.”

Qi Niqun did not hear the chill in his voice. A light sigh escaped her lips. “After this concubine brought Sweet Yan over to this courtyard, I realized that being a mother wasn’t easy. Tertiary Consort Li sent over some handmade clothes. Truly a mother’s heart.”

Li Chen set down the tea cup. “It’s late. The princess consort should rest early. This prince¹ will return.”

“This concubine will send off Your Highness,” said Qi Niqun, quickly rising to her feet.

“The princess consort needn’t come.”

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Later, as Qi Niqun sat in her bed, she twisted her handkerchief, soft words meant only for herself. “Was I too in a rush?”

Liuyue, the servant by her side, pulled the covers over Qi Niqun. Her words were also soft. “Your Highness is thinking too much. Your Highness should just do what you can.”

Yet there still existed a discomfort in Qi Niqun’s heart. She slowly lay down on her bed. Sighed the cumulation of her exhaustion.

Liuyue snuffed out the candles and took care as she left the room.

Although one person had gone to bed, another was wide awake. The princess consort had overstepped her boundaries. It was not in Li Chen’s itinerary to be a piece of prime rib, a tool someone used to reel in power. He also didn’t want those caught in his net to break free.

Upon reaching the entrance of Ink Lotus Courtyard, he stopped in his tracks. “Let’s visit Consort Wei.”

The Consort Wei in question was currently reading books under the candlelight. As soon as she saw Li Chen, her heart fluttered with happiness. She climbed down her bed and saluted. Li Chen supported her arm and examined the books lying on her desk.

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“I heard that the princess consort is with child. This concubine wants to prepare a gift, but isn’t aware of her preferences.”


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Consort Wei smiled. “This concubine’s possessions can’t compare to those of the princess consort.”

The moment he heard this, Li Chen shook his head. “It’s about time to make summer clothes. Tell Su Ge to send over some bright bolts of cloth from the storage.”

Again, Consort Wei smiled prettily, the expression adorable. “Then tomorrow this concubine won’t hold back.”

Li Chen grunted in acknowledgement.

Once summer had started, the second young miss of Count Ziyang’s estate, Qi Danxia, prepared for her marriage. On the day that the relatives and friends of the family would normally added to the dowry, Qi Niqun did not personally visit her paternal family’s home, citing her pregnancy as an excuse. Instead, she sent Granny Song.

Of the two sisters, Qi Niqun was older and had gotten married first. She was also a princess consort. When Qi Niqun had still lived in the count estate, she wasn’t very close to this illegitimate sister of hers. However, she still sent a lot of jewelry to add to her sister’s dowry. An especially precious gift she had sent was a bolt of red cloth with double-sided embroidery. An imperial offering that was bestowed by the empress to Qi Niqun in the past.
Count Ziyang doted on Concubine Liu, the mother of Qi Danxia. As such, Qi Danxia’s dowry consisted of eighty chests. Concubine Bai took in the sight with a jealous gaze and Countess Ziyang felt unhappy as well. Even so, the latter didn’t show it. She considered the best way to act in this situation, and ended up adding a lot to Qi Danxia’s dowry. When Count Ziyang saw this, he was hit with surprise and gratitude.

Just in Qi Niqun’s first year of marriage, her actions had implied her mother-in-law’s birthday was more important than her own sister’s marriage. However, she did not rush Qi Yunruo to finish the copies of Buddhist scriptures meant as a birthday gift. Now that she was heavy with child and responsible for managing the estate, she was too lazy to deal with him.

So he found an opportunity to visit Ji Huan. As Qi Yunruo arrived at Beautiful Forest, Ji Huan had just finished a piece of calligraphy. He casually struck up a conversation. “Aren’t you going to send your sister a wedding gift?”

Caught off guard, Qi Yunruo took a moment before replying, “Which sister?”

Ji Huan felt that something was off. He shook his head. A period of thought later, Qi Yunruo said, “Oh! I remember now. She’s getting married?”

“Chen Lingjun, the eldest son of the Minister of Revenue Cheng Wenjie, is considered a young talent.”

The maternal grandfather of Qi Danxia worked in the Ministry of Revenue. Because the emperor appointed Li Chen to supervise the Minister of Revenue, the Ministry of Revenue lay in the palm of this prince’s hand.

Qi Yunruo did not have a good impression of his second sister. Back at the count estate, Qi Danxia and Qi Ruxue looked at him with cold eyes, as if he were something foul. The brother and sister pair of Qi Yunshan and Qi Niqun did not treat him much better, acting as if he didn’t exist in their world.
And then there was Qi Yunying, his second elder brother, who was a silent person in general.

Qi Yunruo submerged himself in thought. Shortly after, he asked, “Why do I have to send a gift for her wedding?”

The innocent question brought a slight smile to Ji Huan. “It’s not always the case that one has to. If you don’t feel like sending a gift, then don’t.”

“I don’t have anything to give.”

At the sound of those words, Ji Huan nudged closer to the young teen, stroking the latter’s head. Voice akin to a whisper. “If you ever need anything, just tell me.”

“There’s really nothing I need.”

“Why don’t you have lunch here today? What do you like to eat?”

Qi Yunruo blinked a few times. “I want sweet and sour crunchy radishes.”

And Ji Huan burst into laughter. Prior to Qi Yunruo’s visit, he had already picked several dishes for the noon meal, and now added a large plate of radishes to the mix. As talented as the estate’s chefs were, naturally the radish strips were, other than sweet and sour, very refreshing with just the right dash of spiciness. One bite later, even Ji Huan found them irresistible.

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An entire pitcher of osmanthus wine later, Qi Yunruo clung to Ji Huan’s torso. Without a word, Ji Huan carried him past the screen divider, laying him on his bed to rest. Qi Yunruo wasn’t actually drunk. Rather, he had felt a bit dizzy after all the alcohol and wanted to nap. As he observed the
slumbering figure of his companion, Ji Huan recalled the last time Qi Yunruo had gotten drunk. How he had stumbled out of Ji Huan’s residence without knowing if he himself could find his way home.

Ji Huan made his way around the screen divider, past the round table the servants had cleared of dishes, and only stopped once he was in the area of the large room he had assigned as his study. He sat down at his desk and began to read. Time passed in a blink of an eye without him knowing it. Yet Qi Yunruo was still wrapped in slumber.

Then, come dinnertime, Li Chen arrived.

His appearance jolted Ji Huan from his reverie. He sat there dazed for a second, before glancing at the direction of his bedroom area out of reflex.

Li Chen took his seat across from Ji Huan, leaning lazily on the back rest. Because the princess consort had to prepare items to add to her sister’s dowry, Li Chen’s relationship with the Minister of Revenue was complicated. Much consideration needed to be given when determining the appropriate gifts.

These past few days, the Qiang people in the north had been in unrest. Another growing concern was the country of Xinyuan, which had seemed peaceful until now. Li Chen suspected that this was why his Imperial Father wanted the Third Prince to enter the Ministry of War.

Consort Ji’s father started from the bottom as a lowly 8th-rank official to what he was now, a 3rd-rank Right Assistant of the Minister of War. The Minister of War was loyal to his Imperial Father. It was for this reason his Imperial Father had appointed him that position. What a pity that his old injuries made it so that he wouldn’t be in this position for long. The next Minister of War would either be Ji Hansong or the Left Assistant Zhao Weidou. The two candidates had their respective good and bad points. Ji

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Hansong was a man of the pen and not the sword. Although in the past, there were civil officials that had sat in that seat to balance the excess of power held by the military officials, the current emperor was not a stubborn individual. He liked to use Ji Hansong because he was fair and just. Every year, his evaluation was high. In the past, the emperor had praised him as well.

Regarding Zhou Weidou, he was currently a 3rd-rank General Huwei⁴. However, he was quick to anger. In the past, he had fought with others during morning court. After that, out of fear the Imperial Censors did not single him out for a couple months.

Zhao Weidou never acted close with any of the princes. Therefore, Li Chen wanted Consort Ji’s father, Ji Hansong, to become the next Minister of War. However, if Ji Hansong received the position, he would need to elevate Consort Ji’s position in his inner court.

It took much consideration for Li Chen to place his subordinates in the best positions. An elaborate game of chess.

When his Imperial Father had his eldest son, he was more than twenty years old. Now he was in his fifties.

Ji Huan did not disturb Li Chen’s thoughts. Their usual meetings occurred in such a manner. If Li Chen found it necessary, Ji Huan would reveal his opinions. Sometimes, Li Chen was closer to him than to his own strategists, sharing information not even his strategists were privy of. Sometimes, Ji Huan just needed to be there as accompaniment, and sit there quietly.

“...Older brother Ji.” Qi Yunruo covered his yawn with a hand. Then he walked around the screen divider and into the open. “What time is it? Has Liusu come to get me?”

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Li Chen suddenly broke from his thoughts by the sound of Qi Yunruo’s voice. Turned to his direction.

It wasn’t long before Qi Yunruo finally realized it wasn’t just him and Ji Huan in the room.

Ji Huan smiled. “Little Qi drank a lot of osmanthus wine again today. He’s been resting in my bed until now.”

Li Chen nodded. “Tonight let’s have something light.” Having Little Qi eat dinner with them was what’s left unspoken.

“Little Qi should refrain from drinking tonight.” The smile never left Ji Huan’s lips.

Shortly after, the kitchens sent a bowl of black glutinous rice porridge with a spoonful of sugar. After finishing the bowl, Qi Yunruo felt sated.

But Li Chen was of a different opinion. “You haven’t eaten enough.”

Ji Huan said, “Little Qi had a lot of sweet and sour radish strips during lunch.”

“So you’re fond of that dish,” Li Chen said, the corners of his lips tilting upward.

“Mm, it’s delicious.”

Ji Huan rolled his eyes. He glanced at Qi Yunruo. This was a person who belonged to the prince by name. At fifteen, he’s neither young nor old. To put into perspective, his younger sister was getting married and his eldest sister was already with child.
Li Chen said, “Have you finished copying your scriptures?”

Shaking his head, Qi Yunruo said, “Not yet. I don’t feel like doing it and no one’s there to push me. I’ll finish the copies when I have time in the future.”

“If you don’t like doing it, you can stop.”

Instead of responding to Li Chen, Qi Yunruo continued to stuff radish strips into his mouth.

Meanwhile, Ji Huan and Li Chen toasted a cup to each other. The former wore a smile on both his lips and eyes, but his eyes also held unspoken thoughts.

With a bitter smile, Li Chen turned to Qi Yunruo. “Previously, I mentioned having you move to a new residence. What kind of place do you prefer?”

After thinking for a short while, Qi Yunruo said, “Any kind is fine.”

Li Chen was sure to put this matter into his heart.

Indeed, a few days later, Li Chen mentioned this to Qi Niqun.

A certain thought jumped into her mind. Then her lips broke into a smile. “We don’t have to rush this. Once this concubine finds a suitable courtyard, this concubine will inform you on an auspicious day.”

“Then I will trouble the princess consort.”

“That Your Highness likes third brother is his fortune.”
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1. **This prince:** (本王) Běn wáng. Illeism for princes. Literally “This prince.” It’s used toward lower ranks, especially when the prince wants to warn/remind the other party of their place.

2. **Lao Zhuang:** (老庄) Lǎo zhuāng. A famous book, the title of which uses the combined names of Laozi and Zhuangzi. This book is like a doctrine of sorts.

3. **Qiang people:** (羌族) Qiāngzú. From Wikipedia— The Qiang people form one of the 56 ethnic groups officially recognized by China, and live mainly in a mountainous region in the northwestern part of Sichuan on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

4. **General Huwei:** (虎威将军) Hǔ wēi jiāngjūn. In the context of this novel, this is a title given to Zhao Weidou, most likely praising his military talent and merits. The author is probably drawing an analogy between this man and the actual General Huwei from the Three Kingdoms period in ancient China. Zhao Yun of the Eastern Han dynasty.

5. **black glutinous rice porridge:** (黑糯米粥) Hēi jǐngmǐ zhōu. A picture is provided in the chapter supplement.

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