

I. Dynasty 38

Chapter 38: Concubine Zhen

“Your Ladyship, I have brought Li San,” Liu Li announced, leaving Li San to wait outside Bishui Pavilion as she entered the main hall to report.

Inside the hall, behind a screen painted with delicate ink landscapes, a noblewoman dressed in luxurious violet robes reclined on a couch, reading a Buddhist scripture. Upon hearing Liu Li’s words, she sat up and said, “Bring him in. Ming’er has been quite mysterious in his letter. I’m curious to see what this ‘perfume’ he mentioned is.”

With that, Consort Zhen rose and, assisted by two maids, made her way to the main hall, where she took a seat on a redwood chair.

At this moment, Liu Li called for Li San to enter.

“Your humble servant from the Qi Prince’s estate pays his respects to Consort Zhen,” Li San said, bowing deeply without daring to look up.

Seeing Li San dressed in coarse, tattered clothing, Consort Zhen frowned slightly. “Since you are Ming’er’s man, there’s no need to be so formal. Ming’er mentioned something about perfume in his letter. Is it true?”

Li San finally dared to look up and saw a woman of extraordinary grace seated before him. She had phoenix eyes, willow-leaf eyebrows, a face as fair as powdered jade, and lips as red as cinnabar. Though not a beauty capable of toppling kingdoms, she was undoubtedly stunning.

It was said that Consort Zhen, originally named Yun Xin'er, hailed from Suzhou in the Great Yu Empire. Her father, Yun Shang, had been a seventh-rank magistrate in Taiping County, Suzhou. Twenty years ago, when the Empress Dowager was selecting concubines for Emperor Wenxuan, all officials with daughters were required to present them as candidates. Yun Xin'er had been chosen during this selection and quickly won the emperor's favor. Within a decade, she had risen to the rank of Consort Zhen. However, in the ever-shifting world of the imperial harem, where new faces constantly replaced the old, Consort Zhen's influence had waned over time.

Snapping out of his thoughts, Li San replied, "Your Ladyship, I have been sent by His Highness to deliver both the perfume and the Drunken Qingzhou wine."

"Where are the items?" Consort Zhen asked.

Liu Li answered, "Your Ladyship, His Highness has sent quite a lot this time. I had a few eunuchs bring them over. They should be here soon."

As she spoke, a melodious laugh echoed from outside, and a concubine dressed in red robes entered, followed by several eunuchs carrying the perfume and wine sent by Prince Qi.

"Sister, Prince Qi is truly filial. He's sent so many things so early in the morning," the red-robed concubine said with a smile, seating herself casually in a chair on the side without any formality.

Consort Zhen chuckled lightly. This was Consort De, the mother of the Fourth Prince, who often visited her. She said, "It must be that little eunuch Xiao Guizi running his mouth again. He never learns."

“Indeed. Next time, I’ll give him a few slaps myself before you even have to,” Consort De said with a smile, knowing full well that Consort Zhen was annoyed by her prying. Given her status, Xiao Guizi wouldn’t dare refuse her questions.

Consort Zhen smiled. “I appreciate your kindness, sister. Since you’re already here, why not join me in seeing what Ming’er has sent? Life in the palace can be dull, and it’s always nice to have something new to look at.”

Consort De, who had been curious from the start, was now even more intrigued. However, she still politely said, “Sister, if it’s inconvenient, I can leave.”

In his letter, Prince Qi had made it clear that he wanted the concubines to know about the perfume. Therefore, Consort Zhen wasn’t upset with Consort De’s presence. In fact, Consort De was known for her gossipy nature, and her involvement could help spread the word.

“Sister, you’re being too polite. It’s no trouble at all. Liu Li, open the boxes,” Consort Zhen instructed.

Liu Li acknowledged the order, but before she could act, Li San eagerly stepped forward to open the wooden crates, saying softly to Liu Li, “These crates have nails. Let me handle it so you don’t get hurt.”

Liu Li smiled and nodded.

Four crates were opened—three containing small porcelain bottles of perfume and one filled with wine.

Li San took out one of the small porcelain bottles and handed it to Liu Li, saying, "This is the perfume personally crafted by His Highness."

Liu Li took the bottle and presented it to Consort Zhen.

Having read Prince Qi's letter, Consort Zhen had some idea of what the perfume was. She removed the wooden stopper from the bottle and, using a feather provided by Liu Li, dabbed a bit of the perfume on herself.

"Sister, what is this? It smells so delightful," Consort De asked, having watched Consort Zhen's actions closely. As soon as the perfume was applied, a captivating fragrance filled the room.

The scent was refreshing and pleasant, unlike the mixed aromas of traditional incense.

Consort Zhen, who had initially been skeptical about Prince Qi's gift, was now pleasantly surprised. She explained to Consort De, "Sister, this is called perfume. It's a special fragrance Ming'er learned to make in Qingzhou. It's said to be much more practical than incense."

"Perfume? I've never heard of such a thing. May I try it?" Consort De asked.

Concubines, like all women, were always at the forefront of fashion. In modern terms, they were the trendsetters of their time. Moreover, in their constant competition for the emperor's favor, concubines were always on the lookout for something new and exciting. Consort De, being well-versed in such matters, immediately recognized the potential of this novel item.

Taking the perfume, Consort De followed Consort Zhen's example and dabbed some on herself. Instantly, she was enveloped in a delightful fragrance.

"Oh, sister, this is truly wonderful! It smells amazing, and it's so easy to use," Consort De exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. She glanced at the three crates of perfume and her eyes sparkled with interest. "Prince Qi has sent quite a lot. You're so fortunate, sister."

Consort Zhen, understanding the underlying meaning of Consort De's words, said, "These perfumes were sent by Ming'er as gifts for all the sisters in the palace. If you like them, please take a few bottles for yourself."

Consort De was overjoyed. "You're always so kind to me, sister." With that, she eagerly moved to select a few bottles.

At this moment, Li San spoke up, "Your Ladyship, before I left, His Highness instructed me to mention that he forgot to include this in his letter: the three crates contain perfumes with different scents—tulip, jasmine, and agarwood. The intensity of the fragrances also varies, so each lady may choose according to her preference."

"Oh?" Consort De was even more delighted. "Quick, bring the other two scents here."

Li San bowed and retrieved the other two perfumes, presenting them to Consort Zhen.

After smelling the different scents, Consort Zhen and Consort De exchanged smiles. Consort Zhen said, "The jasmine is light and elegant, perfect for me. The tulip is warm and intense, more suited to you, sister."

"You're absolutely right, sister. I never expected Prince Qi to have such talent. This perfume is simply divine. I'm already in love with it," Consort De said, holding the bottle of tulip perfume with glee.

"In that case, this bottle is yours," Consort Zhen said.

Consort De glanced at the crates, each containing at least thirty bottles. She smiled ingratiatingly and said, "Sister, when did you become so stingy? This bottle is so small. Why not give me a couple more?"

As she spoke, she tugged at Consort Zhen's sleeve, pleading.

Consort Zhen laughed. "Alright, since you insist, take two more bottles."

Consort De, fearing Consort Zhen might change her mind, happily took the extra bottles and thanked her profusely before leaving.

Once Consort De was out of earshot, Liu Li snorted softly. "Your Ladyship, why did you give her two bottles? Consort De is always taking advantage of your kindness."

Consort Zhen shot Liu Li a warning look. "You can say such things in front of me, but never outside. Be careful, or you'll regret it."

"Your Ladyship, Sister Liu Li is just concerned about His Highness's perfume. After all, it was made by His Highness himself using the finest ingredients," Li San said cautiously.

Mentioning Prince Qi, Consort Zhen couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness. "Ah, it's rare for him to put in so much effort. But I have my reasons. If we were to send the perfume to the Empress too eagerly, it would seem too deliberate and might backfire. Consort De loves to show off. Once she starts flaunting the perfume, the Empress and the other concubines will come asking. We can bring it up then."

"Your Ladyship is truly wise," Li San said, bowing his head.

Consort Zhen then turned her attention to the wine jars, noticing that they were wrapped in fine paper with calligraphy on them. "Bring one of the wine jars here," she instructed.

Liu Li stepped forward, picked up a jar, and said, "Your Ladyship, there's a poem written on it."

Consort Zhen read the poem aloud softly:

"Qingzhou's fine wine, fragrant as tulips,

Poured into jade bowls, glowing like amber.

If the host can make his guests drunk,

They'll forget whether this land is home or a distant place."

She nodded slightly. "A fine poem. I never expected such literary talent from the barren lands of Qingzhou."

Li San barely suppressed a smile and said respectfully, "Your Ladyship, actually, this poem was written by His Highness."