

I. Dynasty 39

Chapter 39: The Rhythm of Perfume

“Composed by Ming’er?” Consort Zhen chuckled softly upon hearing this. “How much literary talent does Prince Qi truly possess? This poem was likely written by someone else, wasn’t it?”

Li San protested, “Your Ladyship, this time you are truly mistaken. This poem was recited by His Highness himself, and Luluo personally heard it.”

“Is that so?” Consort Zhen remained skeptical, sighing deeply. “Whether it’s true or not, the poem is filled with longing for home. It seems Ming’er misses Chang’an dearly.”

As she spoke, Consort Zhen suddenly covered her face and began to weep softly.

Liu Li glared at Li San. “Her Ladyship has been unwell these past few days, and now you’ve made her cry. You deserve a beating.”

Li San shrank back, remembering what Prince Qi had told him before he left. He said, “Your Ladyship, there’s no need to grieve. His Highness said that he is quite content in Qingzhou. Being far from Chang’an spares him the daily scheming and intrigue. However, Qingzhou is too impoverished. He wishes to revitalize his fief but lacks the funds to do so.”

Consort Zhen, who had been grieving over her beloved son, now remembered the main purpose of Li San’s visit. She sighed, “If only he had realized this earlier. When he was in Chang’an, he never bothered to curry favor with the Emperor. Now he’s scrambling for solutions. Well, I suppose this perfume is

different from the usual incense. The Empress might like it. When the time is right, I'll whisper a few words in her ear, and perhaps the Emperor will remember his paternal affection."

"Your Ladyship is wise. His Highness said he deeply regrets his past actions. That's why he specially prepared this Drunken Qingzhou wine, hoping you could present it to the Emperor," Li San relayed Prince Qi's instructions.

"I understand. Liu Li, find an inn in Chang'an for Li San to stay for a few days. Once this matter is resolved, he can return," Consort Zhen instructed.

Liu Li acknowledged the order and led Li San out of the palace to an inn, instructing him not to wander off.

Li San, mindful of Prince Qi's repeated warnings, obediently settled into the inn and waited.

Meanwhile, in the palace, Consort Zhen seemed to have set aside the matters of the perfume and wine, spending her days reading in her chambers.

One morning, as Consort Zhen was going about her usual routine, a lively commotion erupted outside Bishui Pavilion. Among the chatter, Consort De's voice could be heard.

Liu Li hurried into the chamber and said, "Your Ladyship, your foresight is remarkable. Consort De flaunted the perfume in front of the Emperor, and it's said that the Emperor was so taken with the scent that he spent two nights in her chambers. The news has spread like wildfire among the concubines, and even the Empress can no longer sit still. She's on her way here with the other concubines."

Consort Zhen, dressed in a grand green embroidered palace gown, smiled. "Yes, I expected this to reach the Empress's ears by now. Let's go. This morning will be busy."

She stepped out of her chamber just as a woman in a phoenix-yellow palace robe, surrounded by attendants, entered Bishui Pavilion. With a square face, star-like eyes, and sharp eyebrows, she exuded an air of authority. This was Empress Zhao Shuyao, the reigning Empress of the Great Yu Empire.

“Greetings to Her Majesty the Empress,” Consort Zhen said, hurrying forward to pay her respects.

Empress Zhao smiled and gently stopped Consort Zhen from bowing. “No need for formalities, sister. Today, I’ve brought the other sisters with me. I hope we’re not intruding.”

“Your Majesty, you speak too kindly. I’m delighted to have you all here. Please, come in,” Consort Zhen said, ushering Empress Zhao into the main hall.

Empress Zhao took the seat of honor, while the other concubines seated themselves below. Consort De, Consort Shu (mother of the Second Prince), and Consort Li (mother of the Third Prince) were all present.

“Sister Zhen, if it weren’t for Consort De, I wouldn’t have known that Prince Qi sent you something called perfume. I heard it’s quite extraordinary, so I thought I’d come and see for myself,” Empress Zhao said with a smile.

The other concubines also looked on with curiosity. The news of Consort De’s newfound favor with the Emperor had spread like wildfire, and they were all eager to learn more.

Consort De's smile was strained. She had only enjoyed the Emperor's favor for two days before others began vying for his attention. She had even punished the eunuch who had leaked the news.

Seeing that the time was right, Consort Zhen no longer held back. "Your Majesty, it's true. This perfume was crafted by Prince Qi. He intended it as a gift for you, but I was hesitant to present it immediately, fearing it might be another of his whims. I wanted to test it for a few days first. Now that Your Majesty is here, I won't keep it hidden any longer."

With that, she instructed Liu Li to bring out the remaining perfume.

Three wooden crates were placed on the floor, and Empress Zhao's eyes lit up with anticipation. She had always been fond of fragrances, especially rare and exotic ones.

"Liu Li," Consort Zhen called, and Liu Li promptly opened the three perfume bottles, filling the room with their enchanting scents.

Empress Zhao had first sought out Consort De after hearing about the perfume, but Consort De had claimed to have used up her supply. Now, experiencing the fragrance firsthand, Empress Zhao knew immediately that this perfume was far superior to any incense she had encountered.

Seeing Empress Zhao's delight, Consort Zhen said, "Your Majesty, these are just three of the available scents. Prince Qi mentioned that if you have a preferred fragrance, he can specially craft a perfume for you."

Empress Zhao sampled each of the three scents and found herself enchanted by all of them. The idea of having a custom fragrance made her even more excited. "Prince Qi is truly thoughtful."

Curious about how to use the perfume, Empress Zhao asked, "How does one apply it?"

Consort Zhen stepped forward, took a feather, dipped it into the perfume, and lightly flicked it, causing the fragrance to mist over Empress Zhao. "This is how it's used. It's very simple, and the scent lasts all day. If it fades, you can simply reapply."

"How convenient," Empress Zhao said, inhaling the delightful aroma lingering on her robes.

The other concubines murmured among themselves, "Your Majesty, the scent is truly captivating. I can smell it even from here. No wonder the Emperor followed Consort De around for two days."

Consort De forced a smile. "I merely borrowed it from Sister Zhen to try. I didn't expect the Emperor to take notice."

The other concubines exchanged knowing glances, suppressing their laughter.

As the saying goes, "Fragrance reveals a woman's essence," which is why the concubines were so fond of various scents. The unique allure of the perfume had won Empress Zhao's heart.

She said, "Sister, is Prince Qi truly offering this perfume to me?"

“Your Majesty, of course. Prince Qi said that if you like it, he will gladly create more fragrances for you,” Consort Zhen replied.

Empress Zhao, born into the prestigious Zhao clan—renowned as the foremost scholarly family in the Great Yu Empire—was well-versed in literature and poetry. Her astuteness had maintained peace in the harem for years.

Though Prince Qi was far away in Qingzhou, his gift of perfume clearly had an ulterior motive. However, the perfume had struck a chord with Empress Zhao, appealing to her deepest desires.