

I. Dynasty 40

Chapter 40: Xiao Wenxuan

“Ah, Prince Qi is truly filial to Your Majesty and Consort Zhen. As for us, we can only watch enviously as such exquisite perfume remains out of our reach.”

As Consort Zhen and Empress Zhao conversed, the other concubines grew increasingly eager to get their hands on the perfume. Seeing that they might miss out, Consort Shu spoke up.

Though her words praised Prince Qi’s filial piety, the underlying jealousy was unmistakable.

Empress Zhao smiled gently. Her ability to maintain harmony in the harem stemmed from her consideration of all the concubines’ feelings. She said, “Consort Shu, you are mistaken. As Consort Zhen mentioned, this perfume was sent by Prince Qi for me, but that doesn’t mean the rest of you are excluded. There’s so much perfume here—I certainly can’t use it all by myself.”

“Your Majesty is right. Sisters, Prince Qi sent so much perfume precisely for all of us. However, if I were to distribute it, I might not be fair to everyone. That’s why I entrusted it all to Her Majesty,” Consort Zhen added with a smile.

The other concubines’ faces lit up with joy. Consort Li remarked, “Prince Qi has become quite thoughtful.”

Empress Zhao and Consort Zhen exchanged a glance. Among the concubines, the two had a good relationship, as both were diplomatic and kind-hearted, unwilling to offend anyone.

Consort Zhen, in particular, had no powerful family backing, yet she had managed to navigate the harem safely through her intelligence and amiable nature.

Seeing the other concubines' eagerness, Empress Zhao said, "In that case, let's not just sit here. Come, everyone, take a look and choose a bottle you like."

Only the higher-ranking concubines had dared to come to Consort Zhen's chambers. Those of lower status wouldn't have presumed to intrude.

With Empress Zhao's permission, the concubines could no longer contain themselves. They rushed forward, almost scrambling to claim their bottles. Soon, only six bottles remained in the crate—two of each scent, reserved for Empress Zhao. The concubines knew better than to be too greedy.

As the room filled with the concubines trying out the perfume, Empress Zhao gestured for Consort Zhen to join her for a private conversation.

Consort Zhen understood and led Empress Zhao to a secluded corner of the main hall. Empress Zhao then said, "This perfume is so unique—it must be quite expensive. Prince Qi's fief is impoverished. Producing so much perfume must have cost him a fortune."

Consort Zhen sighed, her expression troubled. "To be honest, Prince Qi sent the perfume to the palace to curry favor with Your Majesty. I have no reason to hide this. Your Majesty surely remembers the incident three years ago when Prince Qi fled back to Chang'an. He did commit a grave mistake, but his fief is so poor that he lacks the funds to maintain his army. With only three thousand poorly equipped soldiers, how can he possibly defend against barbarian invasions? Moreover, according to Li San, Qingzhou has been buried under heavy snow for half a month. Many desperate citizens have turned to banditry. Although Prince Qi has been distributing porridge in six cities, the treasury is running dry."

She paused before continuing, "So, he sent the perfume for two reasons. First, he hopes Your Majesty can put in a good word for him with the Emperor and secure some funds to help him through this crisis. Second, he's left with no choice. If His Majesty still refuses, he'll have no option but to sell the perfume to raise money."

Empress Zhao sighed. "I had no idea Prince Qi's situation was so dire. Even now, the Emperor becomes furious whenever Prince Qi's unauthorized return to Chang'an is mentioned. Given his current efforts, I'll see what I can do."

Consort Zhen bowed deeply. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"No need for thanks. Let me gauge the Emperor's mood first," Empress Zhao said. Then, with a spark of interest, she added, "You mentioned Prince Qi can create custom fragrances for me?"

Consort Zhen was momentarily surprised but quickly smiled. "Yes, Your Majesty. In his letter, Prince Qi assured that he could craft any fragrance you desire."

Empress Zhao nodded thoughtfully. "These three scents are lovely, but now that all the concubines are using them, they've become rather commonplace."

Consort Zhen, ever perceptive, immediately understood Empress Zhao's implication. As the Empress, she couldn't possibly use the same perfume as the other concubines. She wanted a unique fragrance, one that would set her apart.

"Your Majesty, that won't be a problem. Simply let Prince Qi know your preferred scent, and he will create a perfume exclusively for you. No other concubine will have it," Consort Zhen said with a smile.

Empress Zhao nodded in satisfaction. It was always easier to converse with someone as astute as Consort Zhen, unlike Consort De, who often feigned ignorance.

“Then I’ll trouble Prince Qi with this request. Tonight, I’ll speak to the Emperor about his situation,” Empress Zhao said.

Consort Zhen remembered the Drunken Qingzhou wine and added, “By the way, Prince Qi also sent some fine wine. Your Majesty might consider sharing a drink with the Emperor tonight. Prince Qi claims the Emperor won’t want to leave after tasting it.”

“Really?” Empress Zhao’s eyes sparkled with interest.

Like all the concubines, she longed for the Emperor to spend more time in her chambers.

Consort Zhen nodded. “I can assure you, Your Majesty. I’ve tasted it myself, and it’s truly exceptional.”

“In that case, I’ll take it back and let the Emperor judge for himself.”

Having obtained what she desired, Empress Zhao returned to her seat, exchanged a few words with the other concubines, and then departed.

Once Empress Zhao left, the other concubines also made their excuses to leave, only to return shortly afterward, sneaking back one by one.

What Empress Zhao had realized, they had too. Each wanted a unique fragrance, and Consort Zhen agreed to their requests. However, unlike Empress Zhao, she made it clear that creating custom perfumes would be costly, and they would need to provide the funds.

These concubines hailed from the most powerful and wealthy families in the empire. With their monthly allowances and family wealth, money was no object.

The entire day was spent finalizing the perfume arrangements in the harem. That evening, Consort Zhen stayed in her chambers, awaiting news from Empress Zhao.

Meanwhile, in Fengming Palace, Empress Zhao was sharing a drink with Emperor Xiao Wenxuan. It was customary for the Emperor to visit the Empress once a month before moving on to other concubines.

But tonight, he was captivated by a jar of fine wine.

“This wine was sent by Prince Qi?” Emperor Xiao Wenxuan asked, surprised.

Empress Zhao placed a piece of lamb in the Emperor’s bowl and said, “Yes, but Prince Qi was afraid of angering Your Majesty, so he sent it to me first.”

Emperor Xiao Wenxuan's expression darkened. "Hmph! Qingzhou is so impoverished that they barely have enough grain to eat, yet he has surplus to brew wine? I was too lenient with him three years ago."

Empress Zhao spoke softly, "Your Majesty, please calm your anger. No matter his faults, Prince Qi is still your son and a prince of the Great Yu Empire."