

## I. Dynasty 32

### Chapter 32: Teasing Wang Shijie

Seven days after the first snowfall in Qingzhou, another heavy snow blanketed the region. However, unlike the tranquility of the first snow, the city of Qingzhou was now bustling with activity.

The Qin family had purchased all the rice wine in Qingzhou and delivered it to the Qi Prince's estate, causing quite a stir. Those who could no longer buy wine naturally cursed both the Qin family and the Qi Prince. However, some discerning individuals sensed something unusual and stayed up all night to gather information.

"His Highness has ordered that no one is to be admitted, and no outsiders are allowed into the estate!"

At the entrance of the Qi Prince's estate, Wang Shijie was stopped by Ziyuan, but he refused to give up, his eyes constantly peering inside.

Ziyuan, with her hands on her slender waist, looked stern and scolded, "Hey! Hey! Why are you still looking inside? Do you want me to have Zhao Long and Zhao Hu throw you into the snow?"

Under normal circumstances, Wang Shijie would have laughed it off, apologized, and taken his time admiring Ziyuan before leaving. But today was different.

The Qi Prince had personally visited the Qin family, and the very next day, the Qin family bought up all the rice wine in Qingzhou. Moreover, rumors spread that the Qi Prince was brewing a fine wine to be sold by the Qin family.

This news unsettled the Wang family. Ever since the Qi Prince arrived in Qingzhou, the Wang family had enjoyed his trust, consistently overshadowing the Qin family. But the prince's recent actions seemed unusual, as if he were now favoring the Qin family.

Wang Chengchou, the head of the Wang family, sensed trouble. This was a sign that the Wang family might be falling out of favor. He stayed up all night and the next day berated Wang Shijie, blaming him for distancing himself from Xiao Ming. He ordered Wang Shijie to immediately visit the Qi Prince's estate to reconnect with Xiao Ming and gather information about the fine wine.

Meanwhile, Wang Chengchou went directly to the Qin family to taste the wine and see if it lived up to the rumors.

"You little girl, even His Highness treats me with some respect. How dare you act so arrogantly in front of me?" Wang Shijie, anxious, spoke without thinking.

Ziyuan, having been raised by Consort Zhen, held deep-rooted beliefs in imperial authority. The four great families of Qingzhou might be influential locally, but outside the region, they were little more than merchants. In Chang'an, the true noble families held positions of power for generations. Ziyuan looked down on the Wang family from the bottom of her heart.

Enraged by Wang Shijie's words, Ziyuan's eyebrows furrowed, and she retorted, "How dare you! Do you not realize where you are? Do you think the Qi Prince's estate is a place where anyone can act recklessly? Our prince is kind, but that doesn't mean everyone here can be bullied!"

Wang Shijie's heart sank. He suddenly remembered that Ziyuan and Lu Luo were Consort Zhen's personal attendants, while he was merely a drinking buddy of Xiao Ming. If things escalated, he would surely be in trouble.

He quickly apologized, "Please forgive my rudeness, Miss Ziyuan. I was too hasty. Could you please inform His Highness that Wang Shijie is waiting outside?"

As he spoke, Wang Shijie pulled a silver ingot from his sleeve and presented it with both hands.

"Hmph, at least you know your place!" Ziwan glared at Wang Shijie, took the silver, and turned to enter the estate.

Wang Shijie tried to follow and peek inside, but Zhao Long and Zhao Hu immediately blocked him, glaring fiercely. He had no choice but to retreat and stand in the snow.

Inside the estate, Ziyuan made her way to the side hall, where the servants lived and the distillation equipment was installed. Seeing Xiao Ming by the stove, sketching something, Ziyuan approached and said, "Your Highness, your prediction was spot on. Wang Shijie has indeed come. As you instructed, I made him wait outside. Oh, and I also earned a silver ingot."

Ziyuan proudly placed the silver on the table where Xiao Ming was drawing.

"Not bad. You and Lu luo can use this silver to buy some girly things," Xiao Ming said, glancing at the ingot. It was probably around ten taels—Wang Shijie was certainly generous.

Lu luo, who was grinding ink beside Xiao Ming, smiled until her eyes curved like crescent moons. But then she pouted, "Your Highness, this silver is useless to us. Qingzhou has nothing. If there were malt sugar, we could buy some."

Li San, eager to curry favor with Ziyuan and Lu Luo—who were second only to Qian Dafu in the estate—chimed in, “Ladies, that’s easy. I’ll be going to Chang’an soon and can bring back whatever you need.”

“Yes, that’s right. Give the silver to Li San and tell him what you want,” Xiao Ming said, pointing at Li San.

In truth, Xiao Ming knew how to make malt sugar, but he didn’t have the time for it now. It wasn’t economically valuable—just a treat. He decided to let Li San handle the shopping this time and make some malt sugar himself when he had the chance. He was craving it too; after all, malt sugar was one of the few snacks available in this era.

Ziyuan and Luluo exchanged smiles, and Ziyuan handed the silver to Li San, saying, “Spend it wisely, or you’ll regret it when you return.”

Li San, accustomed to Ziyuan’s fiery personality, took the silver and said, “Don’t worry, ladies.”

Ziyuan then remembered Wang Shijie waiting outside and asked Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, Wang Shijie is still outside. What should we do?”

“Let him wait. I used to trust the Wang family too much, and they became arrogant, dominating the six prefecture. Pang Changshi has repeatedly informed me about the Wang family seizing land and oppressing people. It’s time to make it clear who’s in charge here,” Xiao Ming said with a cold smile.

“No wonder Your Highness visited the Qin family personally. It was to balance the power,” Ziyuan nodded in understanding.

“Exactly. Although the Qin family isn’t exactly virtuous, they’ve always been at odds with the Wang family. If I can divide and conquer, I can use all four families to my advantage instead of being led by them. Only when they compete can I benefit.”

Xiao Ming was in a good mood and revealed his true intentions.

Ziyuan looked at Xiao Ming with newfound admiration. This version of the Qi Prince was something none of the other princes or princesses would have expected.

After another hour of drawing, a schematic of a steel production line emerged under Xiao Ming’s brush.

Qian Dafu had taken the servants from the Engineering Department away for some time. When they returned, this steel production line would be born.

In addition to the production line, there was also a diagram of a crucible. Xiao Ming planned to take these drawings to the Engineering Department tomorrow and explain them further. The steel production line would then be almost complete. Although crucible steelmaking couldn’t match the output of converter steelmaking, it was a significant improvement for this era.

Progress had to be made step by step; one couldn’t become a giant in a single leap.

After finishing the drawings, Xiao Ming suddenly remembered Wang Shijie waiting outside. He immediately instructed Ziyuan to summon him. Two hours had passed—he hoped the man hadn't frozen to death.