

I. Dynasty 33

Chapter 33: Probing

The cold wind howled, and snowflakes danced wildly in the air, carried by the fierce gusts like flying dragons and serpents.

Standing outside the gate, Wang Shijie was nearly frozen to death. Only when Ziyuan announced, "His Highness summons you inside," did Wang Shijie feel as if he had been granted amnesty. Shivering, he hugged his arms and hurried into the Qi Prince's estate.

Xiao Ming had already moved from the side hall to the study. The secrets of the side hall were not something Wang Shijie could be allowed to see.

"Your Highness, you nearly froze me to death," Wang Shijie said with a sneeze, looking utterly aggrieved. "I don't know how I've offended you these past few days to deserve such treatment."

Xiao Ming gestured to the chair opposite him, inviting Wang Shijie to sit, and said with a smile, "Brother Wang, you worry too much. I had some urgent matters to attend to earlier, which is why I kept you waiting. But on such a cold day, didn't you come by carriage? Why are you covered in snow?"

"Your Highness, I was in such a hurry to see you this morning that I didn't even have time to prepare a carriage," Wang Shijie replied, moving closer to the coal stove to warm himself.

Xiao Ming feigned ignorance and asked, "On such a bitterly cold day, Brother Wang must have come in such a rush for something important, right?"

“Well...” Wang Shijie hesitated for a moment before asking, “I heard that a few days ago, Your Highness gave the Qin family a fine wine to sell. Is this true?”

“Indeed, it is. I even saved a jar of that wine for you, Brother Wang, planning to have it sent over to warm you up. I didn’t expect you to come here yourself,” Xiao Ming said, knowing full well that Wang Shijie was more interested in how he had brewed the wine. But he deliberately avoided mentioning it.

Wang Shijie clasped his hands and said, “Your Highness, you even remembered to send me wine. I’m truly moved. Since it’s brewed by Your Highness, I must have a few cups.”

“That’s no trouble at all. Li San, go fetch the wine,” Xiao Ming called out.

Li San, who was waiting outside, acknowledged the order and soon returned with a jar of Drunken Qingzhou and two porcelain bowls.

The art of porcelain-making in the Great Yu Empire was already quite advanced, though only the nobility could afford the finer pieces. Common folk still used ordinary earthenware.

The porcelain in the Qi Prince’s estate had been brought from Chang’an, produced in the official kilns of the Great Yu Empire. Xiao Ming had studied these pieces and found them comparable to modern porcelain in quality. That’s why, when choosing containers for his perfume, he had opted for porcelain bottles—elegant and practical.

“Drunken Qingzhou, what a fitting name! I wonder who came up with such a refined name,” Wang Shijie said, examining the jar closely. Seeing the red label with the name “Drunken Qingzhou,” he couldn’t help but lavish praise. He already knew Xiao Ming had named the wine but pretended otherwise.

Li San, who was serving in the room, proudly said, "Our prince came up with the name."

"So it was Your Highness! Ah, Your Highness is truly talented. Wang, Qin Mu, Wei Qing, and Sun Dong once called ourselves the Four Talents of Qingzhou, but now it seems we were just boasting in front of a master. How embarrassing," Wang Shijie said with exaggerated admiration.

Xiao Ming felt a chill run down his spine. The flattery was so clumsy and tasteless. Even though the previous Xiao Ming had been uneducated, he would have known that "Drunken Qingzhou" was nothing extraordinary.

"Brother Wang, you flatter me too much. Come, you must be freezing. Have a drink to warm up. Li San, warm a cup of wine for Brother Wang."

Li San placed a copper warmer on the stove and heated the wine for a while before pouring a cup for both Wang Shijie and Xiao Ming.

In his modern life, Xiao Ming hadn't been fond of drinking, but since coming here, he had gradually come to appreciate it. Especially in the cold winter, a cup of warm wine was more effective than an air conditioner. A few cups could make him sweat.

After a slight buzz, lying down in bed would make the long, boring night pass quickly.

And now, with the heavy snow and fierce winds making it inconvenient to go out, a small drink was the perfect way to pass the time.

“Your Highness, please!” Wang Shijie raised his cup and lightly licked his lips.

Xiao Ming raised his cup as well, and the two drank together. As the warm wine went down, Xiao Ming felt a fire slowly ignite within him.

“Ah!” Wang Shijie let out a groan, stimulated by the strong liquor. He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and savored the taste for a moment before saying, “Your Highness, this wine is spicy yet smooth. After drinking Your Highness’s wine, the rice wine I used to drink tastes like water. Truly excellent wine. But what a pity...”

“A pity? What do you mean, Brother Wang?” Xiao Ming gestured for Li San to refill Wang Shijie’s cup.

The cups in the prince’s estate were wide-mouthed, narrow at the bottom, and could hold at least two taels of wine. Wang Shijie had just downed his cup in one go, as he was accustomed to doing.

Wang Shijie, still preoccupied with his father’s instructions, seized the opportunity to bring up the matter. “It’s a pity that our Wang family cannot sell this wine.”

“Brother Wang, there’s a reason I gave the wine to the Qin family. While the Wang family has a horse caravan, it can’t compare to water transport. Giving it to the Qin family allows me to earn more silver,” Xiao Ming explained.

Part of the reason he gave the wine to the Qin family was to support them, and part of it was what he had just said. In this backward era, land transport was inferior to water transport. Although water transport wasn't fast, it could carry large quantities and was relatively safe.

"I see," Wang Shijie said, feeling slightly reassured. But he couldn't resist probing further. "When did Your Highness learn to brew wine? Was it also from that book?"

"Let's keep that between us," Xiao Ming deflected, unwilling to elaborate. He raised his cup and said, "Come, today we drink and enjoy the snow. Let's not bother with trivial matters."

Having drunk a bowl too quickly, Wang Shijie was starting to feel the effects. His head was spinning, and he thought to himself that he had asked what he needed to ask. Why not just enjoy the wine? He said, "You're right. Let's drink."

With that, he downed another bowl.

"Brother Wang, you have quite the capacity," Xiao Ming said, taking only small sips. He knew how potent the wine was, but Wang Shijie was clearly used to drinking this way.

"Your Highness, your humble brother can drink a thousand cups without getting drunk. This little wine is nothing," Wang Shijie boasted. Remembering that the main hall of the Qi Prince's estate had three floors, he suggested, "Your Highness, drinking here is rather dull. Why don't we go up to the pavilion, enjoy the snowscape of Qingzhou, and drink there?"

"Brother Wang is absolutely right," Xiao Ming agreed. He had Li San bring the wine and the stove to the third-floor pavilion of the main hall, and the two followed.

In Qingzhou, the main hall of the Qi Prince's estate stood out like a crane among chickens, primarily because of its three-story height. From the top, one could take in the entire city of Qingzhou.

The two sat by the railing of the pavilion and continued drinking. Wang Shijie quickly downed two more cups.

"Your... Your Highness, this wine is truly excellent. Come... come, fill it up again," Wang Shijie slurred after consuming eight taels of wine. He was now as unsteady as a dizzy duck.

Xiao Ming shook his head. Wang Shijie was still treating his wine like ordinary rice wine. He said, "Brother Wang, you're drunk. Let me have someone escort you back."

Wang Shijie slapped his chest, looking offended. "Your Highness, do you doubt my drinking ability? I can still drink more."

If it weren't for the fear of Wang Shijie drinking himself to death in the Qi Prince's estate, Xiao Ming wouldn't have bothered. He said, "Then how about two more bowls, Brother Wang?"

"Pour the wine!" Wang Shijie stood up, swaying left and right. He flicked his sleeve and declared, "Your Highness, with this fine wine and the snow, today I shall compose a poem to entertain you."