

## I. Dynasty 14

### Chapter 14: Coal Briquette Stove

“Your Highness, this might not be appropriate.”

Qian Dafu knew that once these four arrived, Xiao Ming would not be able to sit still. After all, Xiao Ming had always been fond of play and could rarely resist their coaxing.

“Steward Qian, there’s no need to worry. This time, we’ve brought many servants and attendants. Given our respect for His Highness, how could we possibly harm him?” Qin Mu tried to reassure Qian Dafu.

At this moment, Xiao Ming stood up and walked outside. “Let’s go. I’ll have Commander Lu accompany us.”

Here, he had no real friends, only these fair-weather companions with whom he could chat and share some amusing stories. Otherwise, life would be unbearably dull.

“With Commander Lu accompanying us, there’s no problem then.” Qian Dafu felt reassured.

Surrounded by Wang Shijie and the others, Xiao Ming boarded Wang Shijie’s carriage and headed south out of the city, straight for the Mi River dock.

At the dock, a painted boat was moored. The emerald-green waters of the Mi River flowed from west to east, giving off a majestic vibe reminiscent of a great river.

Xiao Ming was slightly surprised. He understood that in ancient times, natural environments were largely untouched, so rivers had much larger water flows. However, the Mi River was comparable to the modern-day Grand Canal.

“Your Highness.” Qin Mu gestured for him to board.

Among the four prominent families of Qingzhou, the Wang family primarily dealt in coal and iron, the Wei family in cloth and silk, the Sun family in ceramics and smelting, and the Qin family controlled water transport.

The painted boat before them was not particularly luxurious. In Xiao Ming’s eyes, compared to modern standards, he had yet to see anything truly splendid. Simplicity and antiquity were everywhere.

Inside the boat, a small table was set with several dishes and a jar of wine.

Under the table, a charcoal brazier was burning. As winter approached, there was a slight chill in the air. Although the boat was warm, there was a faint smell of coal.

“Your Highness, to help you relax, I’ve specially prepared some green ant wine, along with lamb, fermented beans, crown daisies, and sweet-and-sour crucian carp...” Qin Mu listed the dishes with pride.

Xiao Ming glanced at what could be considered a luxurious feast and sighed inwardly. As a prince, he was truly failing at life. Even Qin Mu lived more comfortably than he did.

But there was no helping it. The Qin family's water transport business spanned the entire Great Yu Empire, allowing them to bring back various goods not available in Qingzhou for their enjoyment.

Wang Shijie clapped his hands and laughed. "With Brother Qin around, there's never a shortage of good food and wine. Unlike us, who can only eat plain fare."

"Brother Wang, you flatter me. The sugar for the sweet-and-sour crucian carp was specially bought by my father's boatmen in Chang'an. The cooking oil was also purchased at great expense. Without these, we wouldn't have this dish today."

Sun Dong, who had always been a glutton, said, "Brother Qin, next time, could you bring some back for me too? Eating nothing but steamed buns, radishes, and leeks every day is so monotonous. It's driving me crazy."

Xiao Ming couldn't help but salivate. Compared to the variety of modern food, the options here were pitiful.

From his memories, he knew that potatoes, corn, tomatoes, and peanuts had not yet been introduced to the Great Yu Kingdom.

The variety of vegetables was also limited, mostly consisting of celery, radishes, leeks, spinach, lettuce, and eggplants.

And even these were rarely grown, as the common people could barely afford to eat, let alone cultivate vegetables. These items were mostly consumed by wealthy merchants and nobles.

The five of them sat around the small table as the boatman rowed, slowly moving the boat into the river.

It had to be said that the scenery here was beautiful. Both banks of the Mi River were covered in lush farmland, stretching as far as the eye could see, like a painted landscape.

The riverbanks were dense with water plants and reeds, with wild ducks and egrets. In the river, the water rippled, and occasionally a fish or two would leap out.

As they enjoyed the scenery, Qin Mu poured Xiao Ming a cup of green ant wine.

Immediately, a sour smell of rice wine hit his nose. To Xiao Ming, the green ant wine was of poor quality.

This wine was newly brewed, with the dregs still unfiltered. The green dregs gave the wine its name.

While the previous Xiao Ming could have drunk this, the current Xiao Ming found it hard to swallow.

Still, something was better than nothing. He took a few sips and tried his first stir-fried dish here—the sweet-and-sour crucian carp.

As the boat drifted downstream along the Mi River, Xiao Ming admired the scenery while also observing the conditions along the riverbanks.

In the Great Yu Empire, fertile farmland was mostly found along riverbanks, as it was easier to irrigate.

He noticed that there were few waterwheels or other irrigation tools along the Mi River. Even if there were, they belonged to wealthy families. Ordinary peasants could not afford to build them.

Seeing Xiao Ming occasionally lost in thought as he gazed at the riverbanks, Wang Shijie asked, “Your Highness seems preoccupied during this outing. Would you care to share your thoughts with us?”

Xiao Ming was thinking about how to improve the irrigation facilities in his fiefdom, something he naturally didn’t want to discuss with Wang Shijie.

At that moment, he noticed the charcoal brazier under the table and remembered something. “I’m not preoccupied, but the craftsmen at the Engineering Department are making something interesting—a hundred times better than this charcoal brazier. I wonder if you’d be interested.”

“Oh?” Wang Shijie looked surprised. “Was Your Highness busy at the Engineering Department the other day for this very thing?”

Qin Mu and the others also showed interest. Qin Mu said, “In that case, since we’ve already enjoyed the Mi River, why not go take a look at this “thing” Your Highness mentioned?”

Wei Qing and Sun Dong agreed enthusiastically.

The day before, while teaching the craftsmen about lathes, Xiao Ming had also instructed them to make a very practical tool.

This was the modern coal stove. After living in the prince's residence for a few days and seeing the servants burning firewood for every task, he felt increasingly uncomfortable.

So, before anything else, he had tasked them with making the coal briquette stove.

Seeing how these scions of prominent families lived more lavishly than he, a prince, Xiao Ming felt displeased. It was clear that the economy of Qingzhou was firmly in their hands.

In contrast, the tax revenue of Qingzhou was declining year by year. The reason, of course, was their tax evasion.

Qin Mu casually mentioned spending dozens of taels of silver, something even the prince's residence couldn't afford to do so lightly.

Now that he had access to the tech library, if he didn't use some modern tech to squeeze money out of them, how could he fund the establishment of his own state-run economy?

After this trip along the Mi River, Xiao Ming had a basic understanding of the irrigation situation along its banks. He said, "In that case, let's go to the Engineering Department and take a look."

Qin Mu immediately had the boat turn around, and the five of them returned to the dock.

Once ashore, Xiao Ming tightened his clothes. Winter was approaching, and the weather was getting colder. The coal briquette stove would come in handy now, and he was sure they would buy it.

Especially the Wang family, who sold him coal and iron ore at such high prices. How could he let them off the hook?

At the Engineering Department, a coal briquette stove wrapped in iron sheets had already been produced.

It was a simple coal briquette stove, with an earthen inner ring baked inside the iron sheets and a mesh iron sheet at the base.

While it didn't look as refined as modern versions, its functionality was essentially complete.

The craftsmanship of the coal briquette stove was simple, making it the first practice project Xiao Ming had assigned to the craftsmen.

When the five of them arrived at the Engineering Department, this was what they saw.

“Your Highness, what is this?” Wang Shijie asked, puzzled.

Xiao Ming smiled slightly and asked Chen Wenlong, “Have the coal briquette been made?”

“Your Highness, they’ve been made and are currently drying outside,” Chen Wenlong replied.