

I. Dynasty 15

Chapter 15: Not Stupid

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

Xiao Ming gave a mysterious smile and signaled Chen Wenlong with a glance.

Understanding the gesture, Chen Wenlong instructed the craftsmen to bring in the coal briquettes they had made.

This coal briquette, also known as honeycomb briquette, was a cylindrical shape about ten centimeters in diameter, with holes running through it. In Xiao Ming’s previous world, this type of coal stove was very popular before the 1970s and 1980s, found in almost every household.

It could be used for boiling water, cooking, and heating—versatile and practical. Moreover, it was quite simple to manufacture.

Faced with this never-before-seen object, Wang Shijie and the other three were equally confused, waiting for Xiao Ming’s explanation.

“Take a closer look, everyone. This coal stove is essentially a cylinder divided into two parts by an iron rod. The upper part is the furnace, and the lower part is the air intake. There’s a vent on the outside—when it’s opened wider, more air enters, and the fire burns stronger. When it’s narrowed, less air enters, and the fire weakens. The coal ball is made by grinding and recasting coal briquettes. When combined with the stove, it produces a miraculous effect.”

After explaining, Xiao Ming personally took charge. He used charcoal and wheat straw to start the fire, then placed a honeycomb briquette at the bottom. He also used a clay tube as a chimney, placing it on top.

Wang Shijie and the other three stood together, whispering among themselves and watching Xiao Ming's every move intently.

Soon, the fire grew strong, and the honeycomb briquette ignited. Xiao Ming then inserted a second coal into the stove and removed the small chimney.

At this point, blue flames were burning vigorously inside the stove.

"Your Highness, this doesn't seem much different from a charcoal brazier," Sun Dong, who was always straightforward, said bluntly.

Qin Mu's eyes shifted, and he tapped his fan against his palm, displeased with Sun Dong's comment. "Brother Sun, you're mistaken. If His Highness is so invested in this, it must be something extraordinary."

"Brother Qin, your flattery skills are truly improving by the day, leaving us in awe. However, I think Brother Sun has a point," Wei Qing said seriously.

If Sun Dong was straightforward, Wei Qing was a bit stubborn. From what Xiao Ming knew, Wei Qing had only passed the provincial examination because his father had spent a considerable amount of silver to buy his way through.

As for Wei Qing himself, he preferred martial arts over scholarly pursuits.

Wang Shijie pondered for a moment, then gave the other three a look of disdain. “When it comes to His Highness’s coal stove, none of you can match my understanding. After His Highness’s explanation, this coal stove does seem very practical—much more convenient than a charcoal brazier.”

“Brother Wang is indeed insightful, as expected of someone in the coal and iron business,” Xiao Ming praised.

Wang Shijie, who was always quick to seize an opportunity, puffed up with pride like a victorious rooster. “Your Highness, this thing is truly impressive. Where did you learn about it?”

Xiao Ming replied casually, “That’s a long story. A few days ago, the steward of the prince’s residence bought a book from a foreign merchant. I found many items in it and decided to study them closely.”

Here, the advantage of Xiao Ming’s status as a prince became apparent. He could easily make up an excuse to explain the origin of the devices he planned to develop in the future.

If he were an ordinary person, these wealthy families would likely resort to murder to uncover the truth.

Wang Shijie was half-convinced, but since Xiao Ming had spoken, he didn’t dare to press further. After all, while they got along well with Xiao Ming, the hierarchy between them was a different matter.

“Your Highness, it seems fortune favors the noble. This coal stove is indeed impressive. Could Your Highness have the Engineering Department make one for us to try?”

Wang Shijie exchanged glances with Qin Mu and the others. The coal stove was novel, and they were eager to buy one to test it out.

Xiao Ming had been waiting for the fish to bite. It was impossible to sell the coal stove to ordinary households at this stage, as most commoners couldn’t afford coal and relied on firewood.

However, wealthy households were different. The psychology of any wealthy family was the same—they loved novel things.

“That’s not impossible, but this coal stove consumes both iron and coal. The Prince of Qi’s residence has always been poor...”

Wang Shijie, being a shrewd man, immediately understood. “Your Highness, no problem. Just tell us how much silver one coal stove costs, and we’ll pay.”

Qin Mu and the others nodded in agreement. They wouldn’t dare take advantage of Xiao Ming, as he was still a prince.

“How about fifty taels of silver per coal stove?” Xiao Ming made an outrageous demand.

Wang Shijie was shocked. The Prince of Qi was truly bold.

In his opinion, while the coal stove was much more convenient than a charcoal brazier, it wasn't irreplaceable. At most, it offered some added convenience and wasn't worth that much money—three taels of silver at most.

He said, "Your Highness, fifty taels is too much. Think about it—wealthy families all have servants. Boiling water, cooking, and warming wine may be a bit troublesome, but they don't have to do it themselves. Spending fifty taels on this is no better than buying a maid. Please don't make it difficult for me."

Qin Mu and the others nodded in agreement. Sun Dong added, "But Brother Wang's comment reminded me—this coal stove could be a business opportunity. We could sell it to wealthy households that have some money but can't afford maids."

Xiao Ming glanced at the four of them, realizing that the ancients weren't stupid. They were shrewd and calculated, and one couldn't just create something and expect to make a fortune easily.

The first round of deception had failed. Xiao Ming called Chen Wenlong over to ask about the cost of the coal stove.

Wang Shijie's estimate was quite accurate—the cost was around two taels of silver, as both coal and iron were expensive.

There would be no easy money from gullible buyers, but Sun Dong's suggestion was feasible. The coal stove was made to earn silver, after all.

Otherwise, how would he get the funds to build up the industrial base? He couldn't just confiscate the wealth of all the rich families in Qingzhou, could he?

"Brother Sun is truly wise," Xiao Ming praised.

At this moment, Qin Mu had a sudden idea. "Your Highness, my family is in the water transport business, and we travel all over the Great Yu Kingdom. Why not let my family handle the sales of this coal stove?"

"Brother Qin is indeed the most suitable for this," Wei Qing said.

"Brother Qin's suggestion aligns perfectly with my thoughts. As you all know, the tax revenue of Qingzhou has been declining year after year. If this continues, the Prince of Qi's residence will soon be reduced to living on air. Although you all often help the residence, it's not a long-term solution," Xiao Ming sighed deeply.

At this point, all four of them looked somewhat awkward. They were well aware of the root cause of the tax revenue problem.

However, which wealthy family in the Great Yu Empire wasn't holding onto their silver tightly?

Now that the Prince of Qi wanted to start his own business to supplement the residence's income, it was only natural. After all, which prince didn't have a group of merchants under him?

These merchants paid silver annually in exchange for business conveniences, and some highly profitable businesses were even directly managed by the prince's trusted aides.

Similarly, they also paid the Prince of Qi some silver every year, but the prince was so incompetent that he only used the money for his own pleasure.

He didn't even bother with the mines and water transport businesses that other princes tightly controlled.