

I. Dynasty 17

Chapter 17: Warming the Bed

“Your Highness, do you think the Wang, Wei, Sun, and Qin families will buy our coal briquette stoves?”

In the Qi Prince’s residence, in front of Xiao Ming’s sleeping quarters, lay a traditional garden.

Clear water, stone bridges, flower beds, and a vermilion-colored pavilion with carved railings standing by the water.

At this moment, dusk was approaching, and a faint twilight enveloped the residence. In the pavilion, Xiao Ming was having his meal.

Before him was a newly made gas stove. The Engineering Division had produced two units today—one had been taken by Wang Shijie, and the other had only just been completed in the evening.

Chen Wenlong, not daring to delay, had brought it over immediately.

“Heh heh, Your Highness is brilliant. If they don’t buy such a marvelous invention, then it only proves they lack vision,” Qian Dafu chuckled cheerfully.

For the past five years, Xiao Ming had spent most of his time eating, sleeping, and playing. This time, he had finally invented something useful, which could generate some income for the residence. In Qian Dafu's view, it would be even better if the Qi Prince resumed his studies.

Ziyuan, while massaging Xiao Ming's legs, stole glances at him.

Before coming to Qingzhou, the Qi Prince's notorious reputation preceded him. The entire journey here, they had wept in sorrow, expecting a miserable fate.

Yet, after serving him for some time in the residence, they realized that he was not as terrible as the rumors had suggested.

Their initial worries gradually faded.

Moreover, Qi Prince was the son of Consort Zhen, who had always been kind to them. In the past few days, Xiao Ming himself had treated them with a surprising level of friendliness, making them feel a bit closer to him.

"This servant thinks it would be wise for Your Highness to have them each submit their bid in sealed envelopes," Ziyuan said with a gentle smile, dimples appearing on her cheeks.

Seated on a stone stool, Xiao Ming had just finished explaining how to use the coal briquette stove.

Since his daily needs were attended to by these two maids, they immediately understood how convenient this new stove was.

“And why do you think so?” Xiao Ming asked.

Ziyuan replied crisply, “If Your Highness asks them to state their prices openly, given their nature, they will surely conspire to lower the price together. But if they submit their bids separately, without knowing each other’s offers, they will compete fiercely to secure the stove’s distribution rights, allowing us to reap the benefits.”

“Not bad. That is precisely my intention,” Xiao Ming gave Ziyuan an approving glance.

Her analysis was spot on. In essence, this method was a simplified form of modern bidding—where competitors had to offer their best prices to secure the deal.

Lüluo pouted enviously, “Ziyuan-jie is so smart! Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you’re slow,” Xiao Ming teased, grabbing Lüluo’s small hand and rubbing it as he looked up at her mischievously.

Lüluo’s face instantly flushed red, and she lowered her head, too embarrassed to speak.

Seeing this, Ziyuan’s eyes darted around playfully, and the hand she had been using to massage Xiao Ming’s thigh suddenly exerted pressure.

“Ouch!” Xiao Ming yelped, feeling as if a mosquito had bitten him.

Ziyuan quickly stood up and said anxiously, “Forgive this servant, Your Highness. Did I press too hard?”

The two little maids were delicate and charming—any man would be tempted, let alone when they were under his care. Taking a small advantage here and there seemed natural.

Realizing that they were in the presence of others, Xiao Ming reminded himself—this was ancient times, not the modern era where public displays of affection were acceptable.

He cleared his throat.

Ziyuan appeared obedient, but he could tell she had done it on purpose. The girl was clever, but he did not want her to make a habit of using her wit against him.

With a wicked grin, he said, “It’s quite simple to earn my forgiveness. Since the weather is getting colder, why don’t you come and warm my bed tonight?”

Ziyuan froze. She clearly hadn’t expected Xiao Ming to make such a move.

“Since you’re silent, I’ll take that as consent. Ziyuan, you are the most thoughtful,” Xiao Ming said, standing up with a smirk. “Dafu, I’ll leave the coal briquette stove to you. With this, our limited staff will have a much easier time.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Qian Dafu replied, though he cast a worried glance at Ziyuan.

Lately, he had found it difficult to predict Xiao Ming’s actions. Now, this clever maid had tried to play tricks on the Qi Prince, only to end up in a predicament herself.

Xiao Ming turned and walked back to his sleeping quarters.

Lüluo grabbed Ziyuan’s hand and whispered, “Jiejie, what are we going to do? Are you really going to...?”

Ziyuan’s face turned pale—her usual cunning had failed her this time.

Qian Dafu sighed and then said, “Ziyuan, you are indeed clever, but sometimes cleverness backfires. Here, let me teach you a way out...”

Ziyuan and Lüluo listened carefully.

Ziyuan hesitated. “Will this really work?”

“Do you have any other choice?” Qian Dafu asked. “Disobeying His Highness would mean punishment under the household laws.”

Lüluo squeezed Ziyuan's hand. "Jiejie, let's try it."

Letting out a sigh, Ziyuan nodded. It seemed she had underestimated the Qi Prince—he was not someone to be easily manipulated.

Back in his sleeping quarters, Xiao Ming did not go to bed immediately.

By candlelight, he was sketching blueprints with a brush.

Once he secured funds from the four families, his next plan was to establish a water-powered lathe workshop.

This was why he had visited the Mi River—not only to observe the local conditions but also to find a suitable location.

The planned water-powered lathes could handle woodwork and basic iron fittings, but they weren't strong enough to process steel.

The issue lay in the lathe tools themselves—they lacked the necessary hardness.

Without high-strength alloy cutting tools, machining steel was virtually impossible.

And to produce alloys, he needed trace elements such as nickel, tungsten, molybdenum, cobalt, aluminum, titanium, boron, and zirconium. These were not materials one could obtain easily.

Although he had anticipated difficulties, the actual challenges still felt overwhelming. Starting from scratch was no easy feat.

However, there was a way.

His technological knowledge contained information on every type of mineral deposit—locations, associated minerals, color indicators, and mining techniques.

He needed to find a trusted aide to train in prospecting, as these metals were critical—not only for alloy production but also for his broader plans to establish his own mining operations.

His fiefdom covered the modern Shandong region, an area rich in mineral resources, including a large gold deposit near Laizhou.

If managed properly, it could provide him with significant financial support. Mining was a crucial step in his grand strategy.

Everything needed to progress in tandem.

As he was deep in thought, he suddenly sensed someone sneaking into his room.

Turning around, he saw a dark figure slipping under his blanket.

“Ziyuan?”

Xiao Ming called out.

He had only been teasing her—he hadn’t expected her to actually come and warm his bed.