

I. Dynasty 278

Chapter 278: Fried Eggs on New Year's Eve

The night grew darker.

Inside the main hall of the palace, Xiao Ming invited everyone to take their seats. On his right sat General Niu Ben, followed by Lu Fei, Luo Xin, and the other military officers. On his left were the civil officials, starting with Pang Yukun, then Zhan Xingchang, Chen Wenlong, and others. Altogether, over a hundred officials were gathered.

Sitting at the head of the table, Xiao Ming looked at his loyal team. The restless feelings he had earlier in the day began to fade. Yes, it had only been one year since he arrived in this world—and already he had achieved so much. With more time, why couldn't he lead the age of exploration himself?

He stood and addressed the crowd, "Tonight is New Year's Eve, and it brings me great joy to welcome all of you to the palace. Without you, this place would feel lonely."

Lu Fei raised his hand with a grin. "Your Highness, it's our honor to be invited to celebrate the new year with you."

Li Kaiyuan chimed in cheerfully, "He's right! To celebrate with Your Highness on New Year's Eve? That must mean my ancestors are smiling down on me!"

Laughter filled the room.

Pang Yukun asked, “Your Highness, I heard there are music and performances tonight. Is that true?”

Xiao Ming smiled. “Yes, but first, let’s eat. After dinner, we’ll light fireworks—and then enjoy the performances.”

Cheers broke out across the hall. Tonight was going to be a grand night.

Soon, the servants arrived, carrying in delicious dishes. Every official had their own table loaded with fine food. All of it had been carefully prepared under Xiao Ming’s instructions—many dishes inspired by modern flavors.

The sight of the food made everyone’s eyes light up. One of the reasons they loved coming to the palace was for the food. Xiao Ming was used to it by now, but to them, these dishes were a rare treat.

He did, however, regret that many ingredients common in modern times were missing—no chili peppers, no white sugar. This was exactly why he had tasked Yue Yun with bringing back important crops on his voyage.

He also made a mental note to start organizing agricultural reform after the New Year. Currently, Qingzhou’s crops were very limited—mostly rice and cotton. To support industrial development, he needed raw materials, like sugarcane, which could be used to produce white sugar and, in turn, many processed foods, including military rations for soldiers on long expeditions.

“Your Highness, this cooking oil is amazing!” said Chen Qi, in between bites.

Xiao Ming chuckled. “Of course it is. We made it right here in the palace kitchen.”

Pang Yukun's eyes lit up. "Your Highness, I think the delicious flavor of tonight's food owes a lot to that oil. Perhaps... we should teach this method to the chefs at Wei Family Restaurant? That way, visiting merchants will love dining there—and the income could help the treasury."

Wei Family Restaurant had once belonged to the Wei family, but Xiao Ming had taken it over through the local government. It also allowed his secret agents to better monitor important guests.

As Pang spoke, a new idea formed in Xiao Ming's mind. In modern times, a sign of a thriving economy was a good hotel and restaurant scene. Now that Qingzhou saw a constant stream of merchants, this could be a profitable new business.

"You're right," Xiao Ming said excitedly. "After the holiday, I'll summon the chefs from Wei's restaurant and have them learn from our palace cooks. We'll even supply them with our oil. With dishes like this, merchants will never want to leave Qingzhou!"

"I'm sold," said Niu Ben, raising his cup. "If that happens, I'll eat at Wei's every day!"

"Same here!" said Lu Fei, already munching on a chicken leg. "After tasting this food, everything else just tastes like wax!"

As the mood lifted, Zhan Xingchang asked curiously, "Your Highness, these dishes taste completely different from what we usually eat. Are they boiled?"

“Nope. These are stir-fried.”

“Stir-fried? What’s that?” Murmurs filled the room.

Even though these officials lived comfortably, most of them had only recently begun to eat well. Before, food was usually boiled or roasted, and that was it. The tools needed for stir-frying—woks and stoves—were still rare and expensive.

Recently, Xiao Ming had focused on military industries and shipbuilding. His work on improving everyday life had only just begun. So he called for a servant to bring a wok and stove into the main hall, along with oil, salt, and eggs.

“This,” he announced, “is a wok. You need one of these to stir-fry food.”

Xiao Ming walked over to the stove. The wok was already heated over coal fire.

Everyone stopped eating and crowded around. Chen Qi squinted at the pot. “I’ve never seen one of these before. Did Your Highness invent it?”

“Of course,” said Qian Dafu proudly.

“And how do you stir-fry?” Pang Yukun was watching closely, already planning to ask Xiao Ming for his own wok after the holidays.

New Year's was a time for fun, and Xiao Ming was in a playful mood. "I'll show you. Let's make a simple fried egg."

He poured oil into the hot wok. The oil heated quickly. Then he added a pinch of salt, cracked an egg, and dropped it into the pan.

Sizzle! The egg danced in the hot oil. A few drops splashed and hit Lu Fei's face, making him yelp and jump back.

Everyone else leaned in, wide-eyed and fascinated.

In no time, Xiao Ming scooped up the perfectly fried egg and looked at the crowd.

"So—who wants to try it first?"