

I. Dynasty 63

Chapter 63: Braised Chicken and Business

“Gulp.”

Another sound echoed as Lüluo, who was serving Xiao Ming his meal, couldn't help but drool. This girl had always been a foodie, and the irresistible aroma of the braised chicken was too much for her to resist.

Even in the palace, she had never tasted such a novel dish.

Braised chicken was not a dish found in the Great Yu Empire. In fact, stir-frying had only recently become popular in the empire, so the variety of dishes was still limited. At the very least, his cook had never prepared this dish before.

It was only after Xiao Ming personally instructed him that the cook managed to learn how to make it.

Moreover, the ingredients for braised chicken were readily available here. Green onions, ginger, and garlic were all common in the Great Yu Empire, and soy sauce and vinegar were also not in short supply. The only regret was the absence of chili peppers, but the use of Chinese prickly ash as a substitute for spiciness made up for it to a large extent.

Eating braised chicken around a warm iron pot during the cold winter was undoubtedly a rare pleasure. Xiao Ming picked up a piece of flatbread soaked in the sauce, noticing the longing looks in everyone's eyes.

“Your Highness, Ding Wanquan is here to see you.”

Just as Xiao Ming was about to taste the flatbread, Ziyuan walked in. As she spoke, she sniffed the air, her eyes immediately drawn to the braised chicken in front of Xiao Ming.

“Ding Wanquan?” Xiao Ming remembered this man vividly. The first transaction in the merchant guild had been conducted through him.

Moreover, he was the wealthiest man in Jinling City. While Xiao Ming wasn’t particularly interested in Ding Wanquan himself, he was always intrigued by the richest individuals.

Seeing that Xiao Ming was in the middle of his meal, Ziyuan said, “Your Highness, should I send him away? After all, you’re...”

“Let him in. Also, prepare an extra set of utensils,” Xiao Ming said.

Ziyuan acknowledged the order and instructed a servant to fetch the utensils while she went to bring Ding Wanquan in.

Xiao Ming was dining in the outer room of his private quarters. Soon, he saw Ziyuan leading Ding Wanquan across the stone bridge to where he was seated.

“Ding Wanquan pays his respects to Your Highness!” Ding Wanquan bowed.

“At ease. Have you eaten yet, Master Ding?” Xiao Ming stirred the braised chicken, picking up a piece of meat and taking a bite. The flavor was exquisite.

The free-range chicken, which fed on insects, had a naturally delicious taste, far superior to the flavorless, factory-farmed chickens of the modern era. The meat was tender yet firm, bursting with flavor.

Ding Wanquan glanced curiously at the iron pot in front of Xiao Ming, thinking to himself how peculiar it was for the Prince of Qi to eat directly from a pot. However, he maintained his composure and replied respectfully, “Your Highness, I have not yet eaten. I am returning to Jinling City soon, but after seeing Your Highness’s ox-powered waterwheel, I was so impressed by its ingenuity that I decided to pay my respects before leaving.”

“Oh? Since you haven’t eaten, why not join me for dinner?” Xiao Ming offered with a smile.

Ding Wanquan declined, “I am but a lowly merchant. How could I dare to share a table with Your Highness?”

Xiao Ming had tried this before. Even Pang Yukun, his trusted advisor, had refused to sit at the same table with him. So, he no longer insisted. “In that case, Lüluo, serve Master Ding some food.”

Lüluo acknowledged the order and scooped some chicken and a few pieces of flatbread onto a plate, handing it to Ding Wanquan. “Master Ding, please.”

Being served food by the prince was an honor, and Ding Wanquan dared not refuse. He bowed and said, "Thank you for your generosity, Your Highness."

With that, he began to eat.

However, after the first bite, his earlier skepticism vanished. The highlight of the braised chicken was the flatbread stuck to the sides of the iron pot. Soaked in the chicken broth, the flatbread was soft and flavorful. Despite having tasted many delicacies, Ding Wanquan was thoroughly impressed.

From then on, he ate without hesitation.

"How is it? My braised chicken isn't bad, is it?" Xiao Ming asked with a smile.

Ding Wanquan laughed heartily, "Having traveled across the Great Yu Empire, I have never tasted anything so delicious. This has truly been an eye-opening experience."

Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction. It seemed that good food transcended time. "If you like it, Master Ding, you're welcome to visit Qingzhou often. I can have my cook prepare it for you."

Ding Wanquan was momentarily stunned. Having amassed great wealth, he was no fool. Xiao Ming was clearly trying to win him over.

He replied, "Your Highness is too kind. However, after this trip to Qingzhou, I must return to report to the Prince of Wei."

Xiao Ming raised an eyebrow. Ding Wanquan was subtly reminding him that he was aligned with the Prince of Wei. "In that case, please convey my regards to Uncle Wei when you return."

"Yes, Your Highness," Ding Wanquan replied, though he seemed to hesitate.

Xiao Ming noticed and said, "If you have something to say, Master Ding, speak freely."

Ding Wanquan said, "I came here to ask if Your Highness would be willing to sell the iron ring on the ox-powered waterwheel."

"Do you not need the rest of it? Have you already figured it out?"

"Yes, I... No, not exactly..." Ding Wanquan instinctively replied but immediately realized he had fallen into Xiao Ming's trap. He quickly denied it, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

Having joined the merchant guild, he was well aware of the Patent Office's functions, one of which was to prohibit the unauthorized replication of registered patents. The ox-powered waterwheel had already been registered, and the Patent Office had posted notices everywhere.

However, like many other merchants, Ding Wanquan believed that the Patent Office, being a strange institution, could only enforce its rules within the Prince of Qi's fiefdom and had no jurisdiction outside it.

Thus, many merchants had brought craftsmen to secretly sketch the ox-powered waterwheel and replicate it back home.

However, while the craftsmen were confident they could build the waterwheel, they were completely baffled by the strange iron ring.

Xiao Ming inwardly sneered. When Ding Wanquan mentioned the waterwheel, he immediately understood. "This iron ring is called a rolling bearing. I can sell it to you, provided the price is right."

Ding Wanquan breathed a sigh of relief. The wealthy families of the Great Yu Empire valued land above all else. With vast estates under their names, they were naturally very interested in irrigation tools like the waterwheel.

"How much does the rolling bearing cost?"

"Three hundred taels of silver each," Xiao Ming said, naming an exorbitant price. The entire waterwheel cost only three hundred taels, and he was now selling the bearing for the same amount.

"This..." Ding Wanquan hesitated. He knew that the Prince of Qi was aware they only needed the rolling bearing and would have to build the rest themselves, hence the inflated price.

Xiao Ming continued eating. He needed merchants to revitalize his fiefdom, but he also understood their profit-driven nature. Thus, he chose to be lenient when necessary and strict when required.

After some internal struggle, Ding Wanquan decided to proceed. His vast estates required more manpower to cultivate additional land, and the ox-powered waterwheel would free up labor for this purpose.

Moreover, he owned over a dozen mines that also needed such waterwheels for water extraction. He said, "Your Highness, I will need five hundred for now."

"Very well. I'll make a note of it. Tomorrow, I'll have the Machinery Department start forging them for you," Xiao Ming said. While the rolling bearings wouldn't bring in huge profits individually, the sheer volume of sales would make the venture lucrative.

Additionally, the bearings had a limited lifespan and would need to be replaced when they wore out, ensuring a steady stream of business.

After seeing Ding Wanquan off, Xiao Ming finished his meal. He had only eaten half of the braised chicken.

He turned to Ziyuan and said, "Stop drooling. Ziyuan, share the rest of the braised chicken with everyone."

"Thank you, Your Highness," the servants said, their mouths watering once again.

