

I. Dynasty 12

Chapter 12: Assassination

Emerging from the Armory, it was already evening. A streak of red clouds enveloped a man and his horse, casting Xiao Ming's elongated shadow on the yellow dirt road of Qingzhou City.

Teaching technology was exhausting. Now, Xiao Ming's mouth was parched and his throat dry, but today marked a historic step for him—the pure steel lathe was already in practice.

When he first arrived in this world, he had felt a bit lost. Now, that confusion had been replaced by the fervor of climbing the tech tree.

Xiao Ming never believed that an ordinary person could change an era. He was grateful to be a prince rather than an extra in the crowd.

In the Da Yu Empire, the deeply ingrained mindset of imperial rule and the age-old small-scale peasant economy meant that machinery lacked the driving force to be promoted.

The abundance of population made labor cheap, further diminishing the value of machinery.

In modern times, if it weren't for Western guns and cannons breaking open the doors of feudal imperial power, this self-sufficient agrarian economy of the "Celestial Empire" would have continued.

Thus, in his view, industrial revolution required a driving force, and he hoped this force wouldn't come from external sources.

This was also why he was glad to be a prince. As the supreme ruler of his fiefdom, he could fully act as this force to drive industrial change, and the existence of the tech library provided the necessary support.

Lost in thought, as he passed by a residential area, the sound of string and wind instruments suddenly reached his ears. Xiao Ming looked up.

Across from him was the Green Bamboo Lane, where the Wang family residence was located. Judging by the commotion, the Wang family's banquet must have already begun.

As for the guests at this banquet, he didn't need to guess—it was surely the Qin, Wei, and Sun families.

In Qingzhou, these four prominent families had been intermarried for a long time, maintaining close ties.

Another burst of a woman's laughter reached him. Xiao Ming quickly urged his horse to return. Having declined Wang Shijie's invitation, he had truly played the role of a virtuous man.

At the same time, he comforted himself with the thought that such a decadent banquet could lead to illness, and that wouldn't be good.

Just as he was lost in these random thoughts, the sound of a bowstring vibrating echoed not far from him.

Xiao Ming felt his hair stand on end. The Da Yu Empire was founded on martial prowess, and royal children were trained in archery and horsemanship from a young age.

They were especially familiar with bows and arrows, and the laws of the Da Yu Empire strictly prohibited civilians from privately possessing weapons.

Now, the sound of a bowstring in a residential area not far from him could only mean one thing—an assassin.

Instinctively, he rolled to the other side of his horse.

At that moment, an arrow whizzed past and embedded itself straight into the earthen wall of the residential area.

"Assassin!"

The instinctive fight-or-flight response in Xiao Ming's memory saved his life. He immediately shouted for help.

Just then, a patrol of cavalry in the city heard his cries and rushed over.

"Your Highness!" The leader of the cavalry, Lu Fei, galloped over.

Facing a life-and-death situation, Xiao Ming was still somewhat panicked. Seeing Lu Fei, he said, "Someone tried to assassinate me. Capture them immediately!"

Lu Fei saw the arrow on the wall and glanced in the direction from which it had been shot. He shouted, "Seal the city gates immediately. No one is allowed to leave the city without my orders. You two, escort His Highness back. The rest, follow me."

Two cavalymen responded, flanking Xiao Ming to protect him.

"I want them alive." After the initial shock, Xiao Ming said coldly. Someone wanted him dead—this was no joke.

"Yes, Your Highness!" Lu Fei led the others to surround the residential area, while one cavalryman went to relay the orders to all the city gates.

Returning to the prince's residence, Qian Dafu saw Xiao Ming covered in dirt and in a sorry state. He was horrified. "Your Highness, you... what happened?"

"Someone tried to kill me." Xiao Ming frowned. This Xiao Ming had done so many bad things in the past that he couldn't even pinpoint the most likely suspect.

Qian Dafu was terrified by Xiao Ming's words. He frantically checked Xiao Ming's body for any injuries.

"I'm fine. Commander Lu happened to pass by, and I wasn't hurt." Xiao Ming calmed down and said.

"That's good, that's good. You scared me to death, Your Highness. For the next few days, you should stay in the residence and not go out until the assassin is caught." Qian Dafu's concern was evident on his face.

However, Xiao Ming underestimated Lu Fei's efficiency. Before he even entered the residence, the sound of thundering hooves approached. Lu Fei arrived with a squad of cavalry.

Now, Lu Fei and his men's horses were all replaced with sturdy barbarian steeds, tall and strong, their armor gleaming. Lu Fei threw a person down from his horse.

"Your Highness, we've caught the assassin."

"Dead?" The body on the ground was that of a lean man, but his neck now had a large gash, blood flowing freely.

"When we found him, he slit his throat rather than be captured. Your Highness, this is no ordinary assassin. He must have been trained; otherwise, he wouldn't have been so decisive in taking his own life." Lu Fei frowned.

After a moment of silence, Xiao Ming said, “So who would want to kill me?”

Generally, the motive for murder could be deduced by figuring out who stood to gain the most. The local gentry wouldn’t want him dead for now, as the previous Xiao Ming had been sufficiently incompetent and still had some use.

If Emperor Xiao Wenxuan wanted him dead, it would be simple—no need for such elaborate measures. Such assassinations usually stemmed from power struggles within the royal family.

“Your Highness, I’ve seen this type of arrow in Shu. It’s the ‘Piercing Cloud Arrow’ produced there.” Lu Fei handed Xiao Ming an arrow engraved with clouds.

“Shu? The Prince of Shu?” Xiao Ming’s expression darkened.

Among the princes, the Prince of Shu had the worst relationship with him. Being of similar age, the two had engaged in numerous conflicts during their time in Chang’an, even coming to blows once.

But Shu was thousands of miles away. Would the Prince of Shu really send an assassin all this way to kill him?

“The Prince of Shu?” Qian Dafu’s eyes flickered.

"Not necessarily." Lu Fei's thoughts aligned with Xiao Ming's. "Although the Piercing Cloud Arrow is a specialty of Shu, it's not exclusive to that region."

"If I died, who would stand to gain the most?" Xiao Ming said gravely.

At this, Qian Dafu's body trembled slightly, and a look of concern flashed in his eyes.

Noticing Qian Dafu's strange expression, Lu Fei asked, "Steward Qian, do you know something?"

After hesitating for a moment, Qian Dafu sighed. "This old servant is merely speculating. Your Highness, do you remember the Third Prince, who has always been close to the Fifth Prince?"

"Of course. The Crown Prince is incompetent, and now the Third and Fourth Princes are the most favored by His Majesty. There are rumors that the Emperor intends to depose the Crown Prince. The Fourth and Third Princes are currently locked in a fierce struggle. But what does this have to do with me?" Xiao Ming said.

"Your Highness, have you forgotten who spoke on your behalf before the Emperor three years ago, allowing you to be spared?" Qian Dafu asked.

"The Fourth Prince!" Xiao Ming suddenly felt like vomiting blood. Back then, when the Fourth Prince had saved him, he had essentially pledged his allegiance.

This was tantamount to telling the other princes that he was siding with the Fourth Prince.

"Exactly. Once the Crown Prince is deposed, the princes will vie for the throne, and the Da Yu Kingdom will likely be plunged into another bloody storm. Behind each prince, you can see the shadows of the Five Surnames and Seven Clans." Qian Dafu said. "Recently, there have been reports that the Fifth Prince was also targeted by an assassination attempt in his fiefdom. Some suspected it was the Fourth Prince's doing to weaken the Third Prince's faction."

Xiao Ming slowly said, "Are you suggesting that this is the Third Prince's retaliation against the Fourth Prince, aiming to weaken his faction—me?"