

I. Dynasty 57

Chapter 57: The Ox-Powered Waterwheel

With the return of merchants from Qingzhou, the news of Prince Qi establishing the trade guild and auctioning off the rights to sell soap, perfume, and Drunken Qingzhou across Dayu quickly spread throughout the empire.

As the political heart of Dayu, Chang'an's nobles were always particularly sensitive to such matters.

Outside Chang'an, the Second Prince Xiao Ju rode through the forest alongside the Sixth Prince Xiao Mu, both dressed in military attire.

Behind them trailed several hundred guards, servants, and hunting dogs scouring the woods for prey.

Xiao Ju, gripping his bow, scanned the forest as his brother smirked.

"Second Brother, I never realized our Seventh Brother had such cunning in him."

Xiao Ju sneered.

"Cunning? It's nothing but petty tricks. Spending his days mingling with lowly merchants—he's still a baseborn wretch!"

Xiao Mu laughed along.

“Indeed! Even if he clings to Consort Zhen, what can the daughter of a mere seventh-rank county magistrate do? He thinks flattering the Crown Prince will make him a phoenix—how laughable!”

Xiao Ju’s cold smile grew wider.

“A phoenix? Hah... The Empress is grasping at straws. Why else would she seek help from a distant prince, offering only 100,000 taels of silver? That’s no more than a beggar’s handout.”

“A beggar’s handout for a beggar prince!”

The two brothers burst into laughter.

Suddenly, a young deer darted from the trees, cornered by hunting dogs.

Xiao Ju swiftly nocked an arrow.

“Sixth Brother, shall we hunt this deer together?”

Xiao Mu’s eyes flashed with understanding—the phrase “hunting the deer” was often used to symbolize competing for the throne.

He grinned and spurred his horse forward.

“When you ascend the throne, Second Brother, we can toss that wretched Seventh Brother into the hunting grounds. Now that would be sport!”

“Indeed... along with the Crown Prince.”

With a cold gleam in his eyes, Xiao Ju loosed his arrow.

The arrow struck the deer’s throat, sending it collapsing into a pool of blood.

Across the city, the Third Prince Xiao Zhen sat in his study, reading a secret letter from Qingzhou.

Beside him stood Li Zhong, Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue, who glanced over the message.

“Your Highness, Fourth Prince’s scheming has backfired. He tried to frame you, but ended up losing Prince Qi’s trust instead.”

Xiao Zhen smirked.

“He thought he could force Prince Qi to join him against me... but it seems our Seventh Brother would rather stay out of the succession struggle—just like Prince Wei did back then.”

Li Zhong frowned.

“Strange... the old Prince Qi would have rushed to report the assassination attempt to the Emperor. But this time, he remained silent. Now he’s fraternizing with merchants instead.”

“Perhaps the little beggar is smarter than we thought.” Xiao Zhen’s smile deepened.

Li Zhong bowed slightly.

“If Your Highness believes he’s useful, why not send him a letter clarifying the matter? It might prevent any lingering resentment.”

Xiao Zhen’s eyes narrowed.

“Not yet. Let’s observe him a little longer. If the time is right, he might be a valuable pawn. Besides...”

He chuckled softly.

“His territory is too far away. Distant water can’t quench immediate thirst.”

In another grand residence across the city, the Fourth Prince Xiao Sa discussed affairs with his advisors—all powerful members of the Zheng family, one of Dayu’s four great clans.

Unlike the other princes, Xiao Sa understood that the struggle for the throne wasn’t just between brothers—it was a battle between the empire’s aristocratic factions.

The Crown Prince had the Zhao family, the Xiao Zhen had the Li family, and Xiao Sa represented the Zheng family.

An elderly official with graying hair, Zheng Hongwen, spoke gravely.

“I warned you against reckless moves, Your Highness. Now Prince Qi has distanced himself from us and grown closer to the Crown Prince.”

Xiao Sa slammed his fist onto the table, shredding the letter from Qingzhou.

“Hmph! It doesn’t matter whose side he chooses—he’s just a minor figure. As long as the Third Prince doesn’t gain from it, I couldn’t care less!”

Zheng Hongwen narrowed his eyes.

“I disagree, Your Highness. Since the assassination attempt, Prince Qi has completely changed—strengthening his lands and creating new inventions. He may become a valuable ally.”

Xiao Sa sneered.

“Ally? By the time he’s useful, Father will already be dead.”

Zheng Hongwen fell silent.

While political undercurrents swirled in Chang’an, Xiao Ming remained oblivious.

He focused entirely on building Qingzhou’s industrial and agricultural foundations—unaware that his soap, perfume, and wine had triggered a chain reaction among the empire’s most powerful figures.

For Xiao Ming, Chang’an was nothing more than a distant city—a place that took half a month to reach by carriage.

After distributing the silver from the auction, he personally oversaw the shipyards, workshops, and mines scattered across Qingzhou.

Pang Yukun used the funds to pay off overdue wages and began collaborating with Xiao Ming to construct waterwheels in various counties.

Pang Yukun frowned as he examined a new blueprint Xiao Ming had drawn.

“Your Highness... this waterwheel doesn’t have any treading boards for people to step on. How is it powered?”

Traditional waterwheels in Dayu relied on human labor, much like a giant hamster wheel.

Xiao Ming grinned.

“This is a Niu Li Fan Che—a waterwheel powered by oxen.”

Pang Yukun’s eyes widened.

“I’ve never heard of such a device. Where did Your Highness learn this?”

“Because I’m smarter than you.”

Pang Yukun's face darkened.

"Paper theories! If Your Highness is so confident, have the craftsmen build one for me to see."

Xiao Ming chuckled.

"Give me five days."

Unlike traditional waterwheels, the Niu Li Fan Che used a gear-driven mechanism.

It consisted of A horizontal wooden gear wheel connected to a vertical axle. An ox would pull the axle, turning the horizontal gear. The horizontal gear then engaged a vertical gear wheel, which drove a bucket conveyor belt. Water would be continuously lifted and transported into irrigation channels. This design significantly reduced labor costs and increased efficiency—a revolutionary step forward in Qingzhou's agricultural technology.

Day by day, Xiao Ming quietly laid the foundations of an industrial revolution.

While the nobles in Chang'an schemed for the throne, the small butterfly in Qingzhou continued flapping its wings—sending ripples across the entire empire.

It would not be long before these ripples became a tidal wave, reshaping the power dynamics of the entire Great Yu Empire.

Even if the princes in Chang'an dismissed him as a beggar, they had no idea they were underestimating the man who would one day control the empire's wealth, technology, and future.

The wheels of history were already turning—powered by soap, steel, and the silent ambition of a modern soul hidden within a forgotten prince.

tn: Dayu = Great Yu