

I. Dynasty 69

Chapter 69: Xiao Wenxuan's Astonishment

“Although Ming’er is known for his lack of discipline, the things he’s come up with this time are quite interesting. Nowadays, I use soap every day to bathe, and it leaves me feeling refreshed,” Xiao Wenxuan said. Now, if he didn’t use soap, he felt uncomfortable, as if he hadn’t washed properly.

“Your Majesty, indeed! We now use soap every day to wash our hands and bathe, and with the perfume, we feel so much more comfortable,” one of the concubines chimed in.

Xiao Wenxuan chuckled and gently stroked the concubine’s cheek. “My dear consort, your skin feels so much smoother today. Haha...”

“Your Majesty...” The concubine seized the opportunity to act coy.

Empress Zhao’s face flushed slightly. Xiao Wenxuan had always been fond of women, but lately, he had become even more unrestrained. He didn’t hold back even in front of so many concubines. However, she didn’t dare to say anything. These days, it was rare to see Xiao Wenxuan in such a good mood.

Holding the perfume in his left hand and the soap in his right, Xiao Wenxuan thought to himself that these two items would certainly enhance his intimate moments with his concubines. Feeling pleased, he said, “The Prince of Qi has finally done something to make me happy. I think I’ll have the remaining eight hundred thousand taels of silver sent to him soon.”

“Your servant thanks Your Majesty on behalf of the Prince of Qi!” Consort Zhen was overjoyed.

Xiao Wenxuan looked at Consort Zhen and nodded with satisfaction. "I've heard that the mung bean cakes here at Consort Zhen's palace are quite delicious. I'd like to try them and see what they taste like."

The other concubines couldn't help but feel envious. Xiao Wenxuan's words implied that he would be staying the night at Consort Zhen's palace.

Empress Zhao's expression shifted. She wasn't sure whether to feel happy or not. In the past, Xiao Wenxuan had doted on Consort Zhen above all others. However, after Xiao Ming repeatedly caused trouble in Chang'an, Xiao Wenxuan had grown distant from Consort Zhen out of frustration with Xiao Ming.

Now, whether intentionally or not, the Prince of Qi seemed to have genuinely pleased Xiao Wenxuan.

She was happy because the Prince of Qi was regaining favor. If he could support the Crown Prince, that would be good. On the other hand, as a woman, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

The concubines tactfully excused themselves, each leaving behind a stack of silver notes.

Xiao Wenxuan remarked, "This Prince of Qi has even brought his business into the palace."

Consort Zhen explained, "Your Majesty, the Prince of Qi had no choice. Now that he has turned over a new leaf and is diligently managing his fiefdom, he lacks both funds and talent. He had to resort to such measures."

Xiao Wenxuan frowned. "Nowadays, the Crown Prince, the Second Prince, the Third Prince, and the Fourth Prince are locked in a life-and-death struggle in Chang'an, undermining each other in court. It truly infuriates me. None of these unfilial sons can comfort me like the Prince of Qi. Ah!"

Consort Zhen said, "Your Majesty, the princes are just brothers squabbling. It's normal for them to argue. Your Majesty must take care of your health."

Xiao Wenxuan sighed. "It's only here with you that I feel at ease. Unlike Consort De, every time I visit her, she either asks for official positions or pleads for the Fourth Prince. You, on the other hand, didn't say a word when I sent the Prince of Qi to Qingzhou."

"Your Majesty is busy with state affairs day and night. How could I dare to speak out of turn? Your Majesty must have had your reasons for granting Qingzhou to the Prince of Qi," Consort Zhen replied.

Xiao Wenxuan nodded slightly. Although Consort Zhen wasn't from a noble family, she was well-educated and deeply understood his heart. He said, "The Prince of Qi may be a scoundrel and lack discipline, but he is still my son, a member of the royal family. I sent him to Qingzhou because he had no means to protect himself in the struggle for the throne. With the Prince of Wei nearby to look after him, he can live out his life as a prince."

Xiao Wenxuan furrowed his brow and continued, "But now the Prince of Qi seems to be making progress. This pleases me. If he can manage his fiefdom well, he can help hold back the barbarians' southern advance and serve as a royal prince that the non-royal princes will fear. Emperor Gaozu once said that it's better to have many royal princes, even if they cause chaos, because the empire will still belong to the Xiao family. If the non-royal princes gain the upper hand, that would be a disgrace to the Xiao family."

“Emperor Gaozu was indeed wise and mighty. It’s precisely because of this that the non-royal princes and the royal princes are wary of each other,” Consort Zhen said.

“Exactly. That’s why I’ve turned a blind eye to the Prince of Wei smuggling horses and have secretly supported him,” Xiao Wenxuan said. “However, if the Prince of Qi can maintain his progress, I will also support him. But it depends on his performance. After all, the entire court is watching. It’s clear which princes have achievements and which do not. If he can make contributions, I will have a legitimate reason to reward him.”

Consort Zhen smiled, feeling reassured. Her greatest worry had been the strained relationship between Xiao Ming and Xiao Wenxuan. Now, it seemed that Xiao Ming had acknowledged his mistakes and was reforming, while Xiao Wenxuan still remembered their past affection. She said, “Your Majesty, Ming’er has recently accomplished something noteworthy.”

“Oh?” Xiao Wenxuan picked up a mung bean cake brought by a palace maid and asked, “Tell me about it.”

Consort Zhen smiled and brought over a blueprint. “Your Majesty, this was sent along with the perfume and soap by the Prince of Qi.”

Xiao Wenxuan unfolded the blueprint. It depicted an ox turning a wooden rod, with the words “Ox-Powered Waterwheel” written beside it.

“Your Majesty, in his letter, the Prince of Qi said that this ox-powered waterwheel can draw water more than ten times faster than the waterwheels currently used in the Great Yu Empire. If it is implemented across the empire, it will greatly boost agricultural productivity,” Consort Zhen explained.

“Is that so?” Xiao Wenxuan said.

“Your Majesty, the Prince of Qi said that the waterwheel will be delivered soon. Once it arrives, Your Majesty will see for yourself,” Consort Zhen said.

Xiao Wenxuan nodded. “Interesting, interesting. I’d like to see what else the Prince of Qi has come up with.”

Three days later, a ship from the Qin family arrived in Chang’an carrying the components of the ox-powered waterwheel, along with craftsmen to assemble it. The components only needed to be put together in Chang’an to form a complete waterwheel.

When Xiao Wenxuan learned of this, he took his court officials to the imperial estate outside Chang’an, where the ox-powered waterwheel had been delivered.

After witnessing the waterwheel’s ability to draw water, the officials were utterly amazed.

“Your Majesty, this ox-powered waterwheel is truly a marvel of engineering. I wonder which craftsman came up with it,” Minister of Works Zheng Hongwen praised.

The other ministers also smiled approvingly.

The Third Prince quickly said, "Father, if this ox-powered waterwheel is promoted across the Great Yu Empire, it will greatly benefit agriculture."

Standing beside the Third Prince was a man in his thirties, dressed in a yellow brocade robe. He had intended to speak but was a step too slow. This was the Crown Prince, Xiao Shen.

The Fourth Prince sneered at the Crown Prince and said, "Father, the craftsman who invented this should be heavily rewarded."

Xiao Wenxuan laughed heartily. "This was not invented by some craftsman, but by your seventh brother, the Prince of Qi."

The expressions of the Third and Fourth Princes immediately stiffened. The Crown Prince said, "Father, in that case, the Prince of Qi should be richly rewarded."

Xiao Wenxuan nodded. The ox-powered waterwheel had seemed impressive on paper, but seeing it in person, he could truly appreciate its ingenuity.