

I. Dynasty 67

Chapter 67: Wang Xuan

“Your Highness, the person I’ve found is on his way, but he’s actually a local. His name is Wang Xuan,” Pang Yukun said.

“Wang Xuan? Why does that name sound familiar?” Xiao Ming asked, puzzled.

“Your Highness, do you remember when Qin Chuanyun accused Wang Chengchou? At that time, there was a scapegoat,” Pang Yukun reminded him.

Xiao Ming recalled. Back then, Wang Chengchou had pinned all the blame on a man named Wang Xuan, clearly using him as a fall guy. Wang Chengchou had even said that the Wang family would handle the matter themselves. “Ah, yes, I remember now.”

“That’s the same Wang Xuan. After Wang Chengchou returned, he punished Wang Xuan under family law for the crime of hiding plowing oxen. Wang Xuan was given a hundred heavy lashes until he passed out. Then, Wang Chengchou ordered his servants to tie stones to Wang Xuan’s hands and feet and throw him into the Tuo River. However, Wang Xuan was lucky. The servants were lazy and didn’t tie the stones tightly. When he hit the water, he woke up, broke free from the stones, and floated downstream. I happened to be inspecting farming matters by the river that day and fished him out. At the time, he was barely alive.”

Xiao Ming was skeptical. “Wang Chengchou is indeed ruthless, but what does Wang Xuan have to do with the secret guards?”

“Your Highness, since ancient times, people who have been pushed to the brink are the best candidates for secret guards,” Pang Yukun explained slowly.

Xiao Ming pondered this. Pang Yukun’s words made sense. Wang Xuan had already died once and must harbor deep hatred for the Wang family. And since the Wang family was a target Xiao Ming planned to dismantle eventually, this could work in his favor.

If he gave Wang Xuan a chance to live, Wang Xuan would surely be grateful and would likely go to great lengths to help Xiao Ming take down the Wang family.

Xiao Ming smiled. “Pang Yukun, your foresight is truly impressive. I am humbled.”

The two were used to exchanging compliments, and Pang Yukun simply chuckled. He said, “It seems Your Highness has figured it out. But how can Wang Xuan serve by Your Highness’s side without being recognized by the Wang family?”

“That is indeed a problem, but it’s not insurmountable. I’ll have the Machinery Department craft a special mask for him. What do you think?” Xiao Ming suggested.

“Good idea. Wang Xuan, as a secret guard, should live behind a mask. I’ll speak with Wang Xuan again. If his resolve is firm, I’ll bring him to meet you tomorrow,” Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming nodded. He had been so busy building the industrial foundation that he had neglected the essential matters of a feudal lord’s survival.

The military was one priority. He was about to equip his army with plate armor, but that would take time. The second priority was the secret guards, or the intelligence system.

In any era, being uninformed was extremely dangerous. For example, Xiao Ming had no idea what his neighbor, the Prince of Wei, was up to, while the Prince of Wei likely knew everything about Xiao Ming's activities. This was a pitiful situation.

After finalizing the plan to establish the secret guards, Pang Yukun returned to his residence.

His home was a traditional courtyard house just a street away from the Prince of Qi's residence. When he arrived, his wife, Madam Sun, was playing with their five-year-old daughter.

Madam Sun was an ordinary-looking woman. Seeing Pang Yukun return, she said, "Husband, dinner is ready. We can eat now."

Pang Yukun played with his daughter for a while and then said, "Call Wang Xuan over."

Madam Sun nodded. Wang Xuan had been staying with them for over a month, and his health had mostly recovered. She went to the side room and called for him. A pale young man in scholar's attire, with a black mole between his eyebrows, emerged.

"Cough, cough... Minister Pang," Wang Xuan said weakly, still recovering.

Pang Yukun helped Wang Xuan into the main hall, and the two sat down at the dining table. Madam Sun took their daughter to play elsewhere. In the Great Yu Empire, men and women did not dine together, so Madam Sun would eat after the men had finished.

“Wang Xuan, I’ve spoken to His Highness about your situation. If you want to live, your only path now is to serve His Highness. Wang Chengchou has eyes and ears everywhere in Qingzhou. If you leave, you won’t make it out of the city alive,” Pang Yukun said.

Wang Chengchou had two brothers, and Wang Xuan was the illegitimate third son of Wang Chengheng, Wang Chengchou’s second brother. Wang Xuan’s mother was a mere servant in the Wang household, and Wang Xuan was the result of Wang Chengheng’s drunken indiscretion.

In the Great Yu Empire, from the royal family down to commoners, a child’s status depended on their mother’s standing. Since Wang Xuan’s mother was a lowly servant, he had never been treated well in the Wang family. He had been bullied by the Wang family’s legitimate children since childhood and had now become a scapegoat.

“Minister Pang, you saved my life. I’m nothing but a worthless wretch now, and I care about nothing except seeing Wang Chengchou brought to justice!” Wang Xuan said with hatred.

Pang Yukun nodded inwardly. “In that case, I will introduce you to His Highness tomorrow. From now on, Wang Xuan is dead. You will be His Highness’s shadow.”

“I will follow your orders, Minister Pang,” Wang Xuan said with determination.

He hated Wang Chengchou and the Wang family. His mother had been driven out of the Wang household the day after he was born, accused of seducing Wang Chengheng, and sold to slave traders. To this day, he didn't even know what his mother looked like.

For nineteen years, he had lived in the Wang household, treated worse than a servant.

"Good, that puts my mind at ease," Pang Yukun said with relief.

The horse smuggling case had revealed more than just Chai Lingwu's corruption. Pang Yukun had uncovered something even more significant. The Prince of Wei, known for his timidity, had smuggled three thousand high-quality warhorses from the grasslands over the past five years.

This could only mean one thing: the struggle for the throne in the Great Yu Empire was no longer just a conflict among the princes. It now involved the six non-royal princes.

When the six non-royal princes had helped Emperor Xiao Yuanzhi establish the Great Yu Empire, they had been promised a share of the kingdom. Over the past century, their territories had become like independent states within the empire.

However, as the imperial family's territories were increasingly encroached upon by northern barbarians, the emperor's authority had waned, and the six princes had grown increasingly disdainful of the royal family.

The deep camaraderie between Emperor Xiao Yuanzhi and the six princes had faded with the passing of that generation. The current generation of princes had little affection for the royal family.

If the struggle for the throne went wrong, the consequences would be severe.

The Prince of Wei, though timid, was highly intelligent. He was likely preparing for the worst, though it was unclear whether this was his own initiative or the result of someone else's influence.

This was why Pang Yukun had urged Xiao Ming to establish a secret guard system and gather intelligence on the empire's internal affairs. Otherwise, Xiao Ming might find himself caught off guard.

However, Pang Yukun believed that as long as Emperor Xiao Wenxuan remained alive, the princes wouldn't dare act too recklessly. After all, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan was a ruler who had emerged from bloodshed and chaos, and the princes were still under his control.