

## I. Dynasty 68

### Chapter 68: Expanding Influence

A cold iron mask was slowly fitted onto Wang Xuan's face, and Pang Yukun smiled.

The next day, Xiao Ming met the Wang Xuan that Pang Yukun had spoken of—a pale, even malnourished young man. Could someone like this really handle the dark and dangerous work of a secret guard?

"The heart is what matters most!" That was Pang Yukun's explanation to Xiao Ming.

Seeing the determination in Wang Xuan's eyes, Xiao Ming chose to believe in him. After all, he currently had no better candidates, and Wang Xuan, alone and desperate, seemed like a suitable choice.

"Do you know the skills required for a secret guard?" Xiao Ming asked.

Wang Xuan shook his head but replied, "If I don't succeed, I'd rather die."

Xiao Ming nodded slowly. This was a man consumed by hatred, with enough drive to carry out this task. He said, "From now on, you will live behind this iron mask. Starting today, you are my Left Guard. I will also introduce you to a colleague."

As soon as he finished speaking, Li San stepped out from behind a screen in the main hall.

Xiao Ming continued, "This is Li San, one of my men. The matter of the secret guards is of great importance, and I cannot place my full trust in you alone, as it concerns my life and safety. Therefore, the secret guards will be divided into Left and Right Guards. You are the Left Guard, and Li San is the Right Guard. You will compete with each other. Whoever proves superior will become the chief when the two guards are merged in the future."

Wang Xuan glanced at Li San. His expression was unreadable behind the iron mask, but he said coldly, "Your Highness, the position of chief will undoubtedly be mine."

Li San smirked. Last night, when Xiao Ming had approached him about the secret guards, he had been shocked. But realizing that he could go from being a mere servant in the prince's residence to becoming one of Xiao Ming's secret guards overnight, the shrewd Li San knew exactly how to choose.

"Anyone can talk big. I, Li San, am no pushover," Li San said.

Pang Yukun, observing this, understood Xiao Ming's intentions. The secret guards were a matter of life and death for Xiao Ming, so he naturally couldn't entrust them entirely to Wang Xuan, whom Pang Yukun had recommended. Li San was a counterbalance to Wang Xuan.

However, Pang Yukun wasn't angry. Instead, he felt reassured. This showed that Xiao Ming had developed the qualities of a feudal lord—caution and prudence.

To Xiao Ming, Wang Xuan gave off an air of someone who would stop at nothing. Such a person could be terrifyingly effective in carrying out tasks. However, when it came to establishing the secret guards, both Wang Xuan and Li San were starting from zero in terms of knowledge. They would need to be trained.

After delivering Wang Xuan, Pang Yukun returned to the military headquarters to attend to his administrative duties.

Xiao Ming temporarily placed Wang Xuan in Bowen Academy. Over the next period, both Wang Xuan and Li San would undergo comprehensive training in espionage.

While Xiao Ming was methodically building his fiefdom, the influence of his innovations was spreading throughout the Great Yu Empire, carried by merchants.

New products, in particular, quickly reached the prosperous regions of the empire.

Chang'an.

With the mass production of soap in Qingzhou, a steady stream of soap flooded into Chang'an, becoming a daily necessity that the wealthy and powerful eagerly purchased. Now, not only were the imperial concubines using it, but even commoners considered owning a bar of soap a mark of prestige.

The introduction of perfume to Chang'an's East and West Markets after the soap caused an even greater sensation.

Xiao Ming's decision to produce perfume first wasn't without basis. Historical records showed that when perfume first appeared in Chang'an during the Tang Dynasty, it had caused a sensation among women. This precedent convinced him that perfume would have a market in the Great Yu Empire, and reality proved him right.

At a poetry gathering in Chang'an, a young lady from a prominent family flaunted her strong perfume scent as she walked through the crowd.

The overpowering fragrance made the other young ladies cover their noses in envy. Perfume was in such high demand that this young lady's extravagance was the subject of much admiration.

At the same gathering, behind a screen, several scholars gathered around a particularly fragrant scholar.

"Brother Wang, you smell as sweet as a flower. We're all envious," one scholar said. "But isn't perfume for women?"

Brother Wang rolled his eyes. "What do you know? This is the latest men's cologne from the Prince of Qi's residence. It's said that women can't resist getting close to you when they smell it."

"Really?" The other scholars grew even more envious.

Brother Wang smugly continued, "This cologne was just released a couple of days ago. I bought it as soon as it hit the East Market. On my way here, countless young ladies turned their heads to look at me. This poetry gathering is said to have many noble ladies attending. You know what that means..."

One scholar immediately said, "Brother Wang, I must excuse myself. I need to use the restroom."

“Me too.”

“...”

In a flash, only Brother Wang remained. But soon, the other scholars returned, each smelling even more fragrant than the last.

At the Wang family’s shop in the East Market, Qin Mu was apologizing profusely as he escorted out the son of an official. The men’s perfume had sold out.

He couldn’t help but admire Xiao Ming. Before leaving for Chang’an, he had visited the Prince of Qi’s residence to pay his respects, as was customary. Wang Shijie also made it a point to visit Xiao Ming before traveling to Chang’an, asking if there was anything Xiao Ming needed so he could purchase it in the capital.

Before Qin Mu left, Xiao Ming had shared this idea with him and even made a bet. In truth, there was no such thing as men’s perfume. Xiao Ming had simply created a justification for men to use perfume.

Sure enough, once the idea spread, many young noblemen rushed to buy the perfume.

However, Qin Mu wasn’t happy about it. He had lost the bet, and losing meant another ten thousand taels of silver gone. In his eyes, the Prince of Qi was becoming increasingly greedy, finding every possible way to squeeze money out of them.

Of course, these new products had earned them a considerable profit, but compared to the silver the Prince of Qi was making, it was nothing.

During this visit, Xiao Ming had not only shared this idea but also asked Qin Mu to deliver some items to the palace. Qin Mu figured they should have arrived by now.

As he expected, the imperial concubines were currently vying for their share of the unique perfumes. Surprisingly, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan had also come to the rear palace.

“Your Majesty, this is the perfume specially made for you by Ming’er. It’s said to refresh the mind and relieve fatigue,” Empress Zhao said as she handed a bottle of perfume to Emperor Xiao Wenxuan.

When this batch of perfumes arrived, Empress Zhao was surprised to find that there was a special perfume for the Emperor. After reading the accompanying letter, she understood and immediately sent a palace maid to inform the Emperor. To her surprise, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan showed interest in the perfume and came to see it.

“Your Majesty, besides the perfume, there’s also this special soap. According to Ming’er’s letter, both the soap and perfume contain medicinal ingredients that are good for the body,” Consort Zhen added, presenting a bar of soap.