

I. Dynasty 234

Chapter 234: The Secret Guards

Outside the Wei Family Tavern lay the bustling East Market of Qingzhou.

With the influx of merchants, the market had become livelier than ever. After the recent harvest, the people of Qingzhou had some extra coin to spend, making the marketplace even noisier. The clamor from the market could be clearly heard inside the tavern.

“So, we’ll be staying in Qingzhou for a while?” Zhao Yuanliang said.

Zhao Kuan nodded. “Your Highness, the Prince of Qi is undoubtedly keeping a close watch on the Machinery Department right now. If we act recklessly and get caught, we could lose our heads. But with you here, it’s different. If anything goes wrong, you can step in, and the outcome will change entirely. Besides, Empress Zhao is your aunt—if we bring her up, Xiao Ming won’t dare refuse us face. After all, Consort Zhen is still in the imperial harem.”

“Exactly. Though Xiao Ming has a volatile temper, he’s filial. If he doesn’t want his mother to suffer in the palace, he’ll have to give our Zhao family this respect. In that case, do everything you can to obtain the cannon technology as soon as possible.”

“As you command, Your Highness,” Zhao Kuan said with a bow.

Meanwhile, the tavern’s manager downstairs glanced up at the guarded guest rooms. Under the table, he secretly noted the number of people upstairs and the locations of their rooms.

Then, he called over a waiter and said, "Take this note to Commander Li."

The waiter nodded, deftly tucked the note into his shoe, and left the tavern. He blended into the crowd in the East Market, stopping at an old vegetable seller to buy some produce. While paying, he discreetly passed the note to the old man.

The old man then handed it to a thirteen-year-old girl playing behind him. The girl took the note and skipped away cheerfully.

Leaving the market, she entered a residential area near the Prince of Qi's mansion and eventually arrived at an unremarkable house.

"Is Commander Li here?" she asked as she stepped into the main hall, where four people were sorting through a pile of notes and copying down information.

This was the headquarters of the Secret Guards.

Li San had just returned from the prince's mansion. Seeing the girl, he said, "So, Prince Zhao's heir has taken up residence at the Wei Family Tavern, hasn't he?"

The girl, bright-eyed and lively, pouted. "How did you know?"

"I just came back from His Highness. We were discussing Zhao Yuanliang. Since he doesn't own property in Chang'an, he'd naturally stay at Qingzhou's finest inn."

The girl huffed. "Hmph, no fun. You always guess right."

"Of course. That's why I'm the commander, and you're still just a half-baked little spy," Li San said smugly.

The girl's gaze held a different emotion as she looked at him. "Well, I'm not just a little spy. At least I know your secret."

"What secret?" Li San said dismissively as he reviewed the incoming reports.

"Liuli-jie, Liuli-jie," the girl suddenly teased in a singsong voice.

Li San's expression instantly changed. "How do you know Liuli's name?"

The girl giggled. "Not just me—everyone in the Secret Guards knows. When you sleep, two out of three times you call out that name. Who is she?"

Li San's face turned red. "None of your business. Stop being insolent. Go back and keep an eye on Zhao Yuanliang. If anyone meets with him, make sure to note it."

The girl pouted in disappointment and left with a huff.

Once she was gone, Li San froze for a moment, lost in thought. The image of that beautiful figure at the docks outside Chang'an flashed in his mind, stirring a warmth in his chest.

The first time he had seen Liuli, she had seemed like a goddess descended from heaven.

After a moment of reverie, Li San snapped back to reality, his expression turning stern. He knew he had no right to indulge in such thoughts—after all, he had once been nothing more than a lowly servant in the prince's mansion.

Liuli, on the other hand, was a palace maid serving the Prince of Qi's mother. That was why he had been working tirelessly to build the Secret Guards into an indispensable force under Xiao Ming's command.

Perhaps then, he would have the standing to ask the prince to request Liuli's hand from Consort Zhen.

With renewed determination, Li San focused on the reports in his hands—each detailing the movements of suspicious merchants.

A few of them hailed from Zhao territory, which immediately caught his attention.

As the Prince of Qi had said, Zhao Yuanliang's mission in Qingzhou was undoubtedly to obtain cannon technology. To do so, he would need to connect with merchants familiar with Qingzhou.

And these merchants, having been in Qingzhou for nearly a year, were the perfect candidates.

With that in mind, he summoned the Secret Guards to assign tasks. The prince had ordered him to keep watch on the Machinery Department. Most of the craftsmen there lived and worked on-site, only allowed out once a month. Their next day off was approaching, and he had to ensure they were closely monitored.

At the same time, he planned to use a “fishing” tactic to lure out the spies among the merchants—a method Xiao Ming had taught him, calling it “entrapment.”

Under this plan, a craftsman would act as bait, offering a fake set of cannon-making techniques. Once the deal was made, the spies would be arrested, purging Qingzhou of infiltrators one by one.

After Li San left, Xiao Ming headed straight to Bowen Academy. By then, Yue Yun and the others had finished touring the galleon and arrived as well.

The academy had been in preparation for some time, aimed at spreading knowledge. Some students were already attending classes, while others awaited notification to enroll.

Lately, the number of scholars applying to Bowen Academy had been increasing, and the originally planned classrooms were starting to seem insufficient.

“Your Highness, what is this place for?” Yue Yun asked, watching the scholars coming and going.

“A place to learn knowledge,” Xiao Ming replied.

“What is knowledge?” Yue Yun asked, puzzled.

Xiao Ming smiled. “For example, what you’re about to study—navigation. That’s a form of knowledge. In short, knowledge is the accumulated experience of those who came before us.”

Yue Fei nodded, his eyes filled with curiosity about the place.

Just then, Luo Xin arrived with the artillery unit. “Your Highness, you summoned me?”

“Yes. Some of these men will serve as gunners. You’ll need to train them,” Xiao Ming said.

Luo Xin gave a wry smile. “Your Highness, I haven’t even mastered it myself. How can I teach them?”

“Exactly why I called you here. Your cannon firing today was no better than before. It’s time I taught you proper cannon-aiming techniques.”

“Cannon-aiming techniques?” Luo Xin perked up.

Xiao Ming nodded. “Since you’re all here, I’ll explain it in one go.”