

## I. Dynasty 239

### Chapter 239: Shadow Duel

At the Wei Family Restaurant, Zhao Kuan's eyes briefly scanned the innkeeper before he turned and stepped outside.

Today was a rest day—one of the rare days each month when craftsmen from the Machinery Department were allowed to leave for a day of respite.

Over the past two days, Zhao Kuan had been planning how to acquire artillery technology. He had already made contact with several merchants from Zhao territory. However, he was well aware that everything he did had likely already been noticed by Prince Qi.

Still, he sneered inwardly. If Xiao Ming thought that was enough to disrupt his plan, then he was sorely underestimating his opponent.

Ever since Qingzhou's goods began flowing into Zhao territory, King Zhao had taken an interest in the region. Many of the "merchants" from Zhao were in fact trained spies, carefully planted under royal orders. These agents were well-versed in gathering intelligence.

During this time, Zhao Kuan and his network had also used money and empty promises to recruit many local informants in Qingzhou.

After all, betrayal isn't impossible—it just means the price hasn't been right yet. Zhao Kuan understood this perfectly. Offer a street thug from Qingzhou wealth and power on King Zhao's lands, along with the promise of marrying a beautiful wife, and more often than not, he'd be happy to switch sides.

Using such methods, they had already buried quite a few informants within Qingzhou. Of course, he knew full well that other feudal princes had also quietly deployed their own agents here.

This time, his obvious, public meetings with Zhao merchants were nothing more than misdirection—bait to distract Xiao Ming’s eyes and ears.

The real operation would not be carried out by those Zhao merchants—but by sleeper agents already stationed within Qingzhou.

As he headed out this morning, Zhao Kuan planned to spend the day drinking and feasting with those merchants, touring the city. It was a ploy to draw attention and occupy Prince Qi’s surveillance.

The real instructions had already been quietly delivered.

“Xiao Ming, compared to King Zhao, you’re still far too green,” Zhao Kuan smirked to himself. He had already figured out the Wei Family Restaurant’s innkeeper was a spy. Staying there was simply a means to lull Xiao Ming into lowering his guard.

As he mused, Zhao Kuan made his way into one of the city’s residential wards, where one of the Zhao merchants happened to be staying.

At that exact moment, three young men emerged from another part of the residential area. As they passed Zhao Kuan, their eyes met briefly, and a faint smile curled at the corner of Zhao Kuan’s lips.

Outside the Machinery Department, craftsmen were trickling out. This once-a-month rest day was a rare opportunity, and the workers left in small groups—some heading home, some to the East Market to shop, and others simply to stroll around the city.

Trailing behind them were people dressed as ordinary citizens, maintaining a carefully calculated distance. These watchers never followed any one target for too long—each was swapped out periodically.

This method was designed to avoid drawing suspicion that the craftsmen were being protected.

At the East Market—Qingzhou's most crowded area—Li San was already stationed. Here, where the foot traffic was heaviest, the Secret Guard had to stay on high alert.

Just as planned, the other craftsmen had been instructed not to go to the East or West Market today. Only those involved in the sting operation were permitted there.

Within the East Market, a number of Secret Guard agents disguised as vendors loitered at key locations. As soon as the target craftsmen arrived, everyone went on alert.

"Commander Li, Zhao Kuan and several Zhao merchants have entered the market," one guard reported.

Li San looked toward the market entrance. Sure enough, Zhao Kuan and the merchants he had contacted were leisurely approaching.

Frowning, Li San muttered, “Something doesn’t feel right. Keep an eye on them.”

The agent nodded and melted into the crowd.

Zhao Kuan and the three merchants strolled casually into the East Market. He turned to one of them and asked, “Follow the plan. Can you identify the Machinery Department craftsmen?”

“No problem. We’ve been observing them for over a year. We can recognize the key ones on sight.”

“Good. Then get ready to stir things up,” Zhao Kuan said calmly.

The three merchants nodded and walked straight toward a trio of craftsmen walking side by side. As they passed, one merchant deliberately bumped into one of the craftsmen.

The craftsman stumbled a bit and frowned, glancing at the three men in merchant garb. Not wanting to cause trouble—especially while carrying out an assignment—he kept walking.

But the three men quickly stepped in front of them. One blocked their path and snapped, “Hey, you bumped into someone and think you can just walk off? Where’s your sense of law and order?”

The craftsman argued, “You’re the one who bumped into us—why are you twisting the story?”

“We bumped into you? Typical Qingzhou locals, always bullying outsiders. And now you’re trying to talk your way out of it? Let me tell you, unless you apologize right now, you’re not leaving. Judging from your clothes, you must be a craftsman—just another filthy lowborn,” the merchant sneered.

That last line struck a nerve. One of the craftsmen exploded in anger. “You scummy profiteers have no right to talk down to us! The hierarchy goes: scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants. You’re the bottom rung!”

The merchants were infuriated and immediately lunged at the trio, fists flying.

Chaos erupted in front of the Wei Family Restaurant.

Watching from nearby, Li San and his team were momentarily stunned. The three Zhao merchants clearly had the upper hand—one of the craftsmen was already staggering under their blows.

“This isn’t right,” Li San murmured. “Something’s off here...”

But there was no more time to hesitate. If they didn’t intervene now, the craftsmen might be beaten to death.

He gave the order: “Send a few people in—break it up.”

The message was quickly passed along. Four vendors disguised as Secret Guard agents moved in to stop the fight. However, the Zhao merchants were aggressive and violent—they lashed out at the intervening guards as well, landing punches and kicks.

The scene in front of the Wei Family Restaurant descended further into chaos. Even the innkeeper and staff came out to help break up the fight. And while they were distracted, two individuals dressed as palace guards quietly slipped out the back of the restaurant.

The front was too chaotic—no one noticed them leaving.

At that very moment, on the street near the Duan family ward in the southern part of the city, three shady-looking youths were squatting by the roadside.

When they saw a familiar craftsman appear, one of them called out, “Brother Zhang! Off from the Machinery Department today?”

The craftsman named Zhang looked up and responded, “Yeah, once a month.”

He recognized the three as street thugs from the ward where he used to live—idlers who neither farmed nor worked, just loitered about town.

After a brief greeting, he continued on his way, though he did briefly wonder what they were doing there. But the thought quickly passed.

Then, as he turned a corner, a sudden bolt of pain shot through his head—his vision blurred.

With one swift strike, the three youths knocked him unconscious with a wooden club.

They had already scouted the area. At this hour, the ward watchmen were changing shifts and wouldn't patrol this street. And this craftsman always returned to the ward at exactly this time on rest days.

Just then, a carriage pulled up beside them. The three youths stuffed the unconscious craftsman inside and drove off without a trace.