

I. Dynasty 240

Chapter 240: A Trap Within a Trap

In the East Market, the chaos gradually subsided.

The three Zhao merchants were subdued by arriving soldiers, while the three craftsmen planted by Li San had all sustained injuries. At the same time, news came from the West Market—there had been another outbreak of violence, and craftsmen were injured there as well.

“What on earth is going on?” Li San frowned deeply. Everything had been proceeding according to plan, but now things had clearly spiraled far beyond his expectations.

“Immediately order all craftsmen to return to the Machinery Department. I fear we’ve fallen into a trap,” he said urgently after thinking for a moment.

He turned to look at the Wei Family Restaurant and saw Zhao Kuan turning and heading back inside.

He asked, “What’s the situation inside the restaurant?”

“Two of the guards went missing, and no one knows where they went,” one of the staff replied.

Li San’s expression grew increasingly grave. “Move quickly—I must go report to His Highness.”

The Secret Guards dispersed at once, while Li San hurried to the Prince’s Manor.

“What? The craftsmen were attacked?” Xiao Ming was slightly surprised after Li San explained the situation in both the East and West Markets.

To be safe, he turned to Zhao Long and said, “Immediately order the city garrison to shut the gates. No one is to leave the city without my command.”

Then, he said to Li San, “Come with me—we’re going to the Machinery Department now.”

As the two men stepped out, the signal bell rang across Qingzhou, the sound of three short and two long chimes—the emergency signal for all craftsmen to return to the Machinery Department.

By the time they arrived, some craftsmen had already returned. After waiting for about an hour, nearly all had made it back.

“Your Highness, what’s happened?” Chen Wenlong had also rushed over to the Machinery Department, his expression tense.

“I fear something serious has occurred.” Xiao Ming glanced over the assembled craftsmen, and something felt off. He was very familiar with everyone here, having spent plenty of time at the department.

“Your Highness, Zhang Liu is missing!” one of the craftsmen suddenly shouted.

Xiao Ming nodded—that was it. Zhang Liu was the one missing.

Upon hearing the name, Chen Wenlong's face darkened immediately. He understood—the various factions had their eyes on the Machinery Department. The craftsmen were clearly their target.

“Your Highness, could it be...” Chen Wenlong began hesitantly.

“Zhang Liu has likely been abducted. I truly underestimated how bold these people could be. I thought they would try bribery—but they went straight for kidnapping,” Xiao Ming said solemnly.

Li San's face flushed red with anger. He barked, “Who was assigned to follow Zhang Liu?”

“It was me, Commander Li,” a Secret Guard said fearfully. “I saw Zhang Liu enter the street near Duan Family Ward and didn't follow further. That's how we've always done it...”

“Then how could he be taken right at Duan Ward?” Li San asked, bewildered.

One of the craftsmen answered, “Only if the ward guards were changing shifts at the time—there would be no patrols on that street.”

“A meticulously planned operation... Seems they’ve been preparing for this longer than we thought,” Xiao Ming said with a bitter smile.

Indeed, his Secret Guard had only been formed recently, while Zhao’s intelligence network was generations old. King Zhao had a mature and far-reaching espionage system. In comparison, his own was still young and inexperienced.

Zhang Liu was one of the Machinery Department’s key craftsmen—not only involved in steelmaking, but also in cannon production and the development of the water-powered forging hammer.

If he had been abducted, then everything he knew could potentially fall into enemy hands—and the consequences would be dire.

“Find him. I don’t care if you have to turn Qingzhou upside down—bring him back!” Xiao Ming ordered.

Furious, Li San said, “Your Highness, why not arrest Zhao Kuan and interrogate him?”

“Do you have proof? Can you say for certain which faction took Zhang Liu?” Xiao Ming asked.

Li San’s face fell with guilt. He shook his head.

“The Secret Guard still lacks thoroughness. This failure is on your shoulders,” Xiao Ming said sternly.

Li San dropped to his knees. “I accept any punishment, Your Highness.”

“Whether you’ll be punished or not depends on whether you can make up for your mistake. Zhang Liu must not leave my territory,” Xiao Ming declared.

“Yes, Your Highness. I will act at once.” Li San’s eyes burned with fury. He’d been played—and this was a direct slap to his face.

As he stood, he turned to the guard who had lost Zhang Liu. “Why are you still standing here? Notify every Secret Guard agent and mobilize all informants. Find Zhang Liu! If His Highness takes my head, I’ll be taking yours first.”

The frightened agent trembled and ran from the room.

Li San also turned and left.

Chen Wenlong sighed. “Your Highness, with so many craftsmen and the Secret Guard’s limited manpower, it’s impossible to watch everyone so closely. Qingzhou is crawling with spies. We need a more stable solution.”

Xiao Ming nodded. “You’re right. But it’s not easy.”

Spies had always been difficult to guard against. The best way to fight espionage was with counter-espionage—through the very existence of the Secret Guard led by Li San and Wang Xuan.

Beyond that, all craftsmen in the Machinery Department, Military Workshop, and other critical facilities had signed confidentiality agreements. These contracts explicitly stated that leaking Qingzhou's secrets would result in severe punishment.

This was meant to prevent bribery from within. But neither he nor Li San had anticipated the spies would be so bold as to resort to abduction.

Just as he was stewing over the matter, Li San returned—this time with Wang Xuan in tow.

Li San wore a sour expression, but Wang Xuan had a cheerful smile. "Your Highness, we've caught the man who abducted Zhang Liu. He claims to be the heir of King Zhao. We await your decision."

"You caught him? How did you manage that?" Xiao Ming asked, surprised.

The Secret Guard was now divided into Left and Right Divisions—Li San handled internal affairs within the territory, while Wang Xuan focused on external intelligence.

Wang Xuan explained, "It was a fortunate coincidence, Your Highness. Li San has never been in favor of recruiting street thugs as agents. But I've always believed these people are the best candidates for informants. So I secretly brought a batch into the network.

“At the same time, the Zhao merchants seemed to have the same idea and also recruited some thugs. But one of their new ‘recruits’ was actually one of ours. Once he learned of the plan, I decided to play along and see what the Zhao merchants were really up to.

“I didn’t expect they’d receive last-minute orders to kidnap Zhang Liu today.”

He paused, then added, “There was no time to inform Li San, so I led a team myself and intercepted the carriage mid-route.”

Upon hearing this, Xiao Ming finally breathed a sigh of relief. The money and manpower he had poured into the Secret Guard were finally showing results.

“You did that just to make me look bad in front of His Highness,” Li San muttered bitterly. His one chance to redeem himself was gone.