

## I. Dynasty 241

### Chapter 241: Kill!

The tension in the Machinery Department lightened slightly after Wang Xuan's words.

Xiao Ming said, "You still have the nerve to speak? If it weren't for Wang Xuan this time, I would've had your head."

Li San lowered his head in shame.

Wang Xuan added, "Your Highness, Commander Li's arrangements were already very thorough. It's just that King Zhao's men were one step ahead. Their carrier pigeon messaging system is incredibly difficult to detect. That's how they managed to pass orders without a trace."

"No need to defend me. I lost this round—because my skills aren't up to par. I accept whatever punishment is due," Li San said calmly.

Xiao Ming glanced at him. "At least you're self-aware. The two of you—one in charge of internal matters, the other external—are my left and right hands, my eyes and ears. Spies in Qingzhou are increasing by the day, but I cannot afford to restrict trade because of it. Therefore, the responsibility of countering espionage lies squarely with you both. You must share intelligence with one another without reservation."

"Yes, Your Highness," the two responded in unison.

Xiao Ming continued, “Also, what I’ve taught you both—don’t keep it to yourselves. Pass it on to every Secret Guard. Only by cultivating new talent can we avoid another failure like today.”

They nodded again, more earnestly this time.

After addressing them, Xiao Ming followed Wang Xuan to the southern district. According to Wang Xuan, the carriage had been intercepted near the South Gate.

Zhao Yuanliang had likely hoped to use his identity to smuggle Zhang Liu out of the city.

Disguised as a guard, Zhao Yuanliang had even managed to fool the innkeeper during the earlier chaos at the Wei Family Restaurant.

Near a narrow alleyway by the South Gate, Xiao Ming finally saw Zhao Yuanliang—who was furiously pacing, his face contorted in anger.

Upon seeing Xiao Ming, Zhao Yuanliang shouted, “Xiao Ming, you’ve gone too far!”

Xiao Ming said coolly, “I’ve gone too far? Is abducting a craftsman from the Machinery Department your idea of Qingzhou etiquette?”

“I didn’t abduct him! Some street thugs threw him into my carriage. He was badly injured, so I was taking him back for treatment. And that’s an offense?” Zhao Yuanliang tried to twist the facts.

“You really don’t give up, do you?” Xiao Ming sneered. “You’ll understand soon enough. For now, I’ll have to inconvenience you. Men, escort the Young Lord back to the Wei Family Restaurant and keep him under close guard.”

This, effectively, was house arrest.

Zhao Yuanliang roared, “Xiao Ming, how dare you! I am the Crown Prince of Zhao, nephew of the Empress herself. Even His Majesty gives me due face. Do you not fear offending them?”

“I am a son of His Majesty too. Do you not fear offending me?” Xiao Ming replied coldly.

With a wave of his hand, soldiers stepped forward and took Zhao Yuanliang into custody, escorting him back toward the restaurant.

Zhang Liu was still unconscious, a streak of blood on the back of his head. Xiao Ming instructed, “Take Zhang Liu back. Apprehend everyone involved in the attack—immediately.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Li San replied and departed swiftly.

Wang Xuan said, “Your Highness, why bother with this Zhao brat? Just beat him senseless and throw him out.”

"It's not time to burn bridges just yet. A lesson will suffice. What matters most is uprooting King Zhao's entire spy network here in Qingzhou. Zhao Yuanliang himself is irrelevant," Xiao Ming replied.

Wang Xuan nodded.

He added, "By the way, I have another matter to report."

Whenever Wang Xuan spoke of "other matters," it usually involved the barbarians. Xiao Ming asked, "Have the barbarians made a move?"

"Yes. I've received solid intel—Beishan is organizing captured craftsmen from the Ottoman Empire to forge cannons," Wang Xuan said, his tone grim.

"Ottoman craftsmen?" Xiao Ming frowned.

"Yes. During multiple western raids, the barbarians captured quite a few artisans from the Ottoman Empire. Beishan is now fully focused on cannon development and questioned these craftsmen extensively. Turns out a few of them were indeed involved in Ottoman cannon forging."

Xiao Ming furrowed his brow. "Do we have any intel on how powerful Ottoman cannons are?"

"Unfortunately, no. The Ottoman Empire is too far from the Great Yu Empire for direct comparison," Wang Xuan said.

Xiao Ming nodded. Just as he expected—once a new weapon appears on the battlefield, enemies will scramble to replicate it.

Beishan's actions proved that. But Xiao Ming wasn't too worried. His own artillery was based on late-18th-century tech, and with recent upgrades to aiming devices and gunpowder, he was confident that even if the barbarians succeeded, their cannons wouldn't be on par with his.

Still, this development would undoubtedly complicate future wars against the barbarians.

Wang Xuan continued, "There's more. Word is that Beishan openly declared in Shengdu that once their cannons are finished, he'll launch another attack on Cangzhou—to prove their power."

Xiao Ming's brows furrowed again. This Beishan—he had to admit—was a clever and calculating opponent.

He said coldly, "Then let him come. I'll let him taste lead bullets. Keep monitoring the barbarians. Report any unusual movements immediately."

Wang Xuan nodded and took his leave.

The situation had been perilous, but thanks to Wang Xuan's foresight, disaster was averted. In this regard, Wang Xuan had proven more reliable than Li San.

At noon, Li San returned to report—still reeking of blood.

“Your Highness, we’ve extracted confessions. All the Zhao merchants involved have been captured. They confessed that Zhao Kuan gave the order.”

“They talked that easily? I assumed they were all fanatics,” Xiao Ming said in surprise.

“No fanatic can withstand Your Highness’s interrogation methods. After about a hundred cuts, they confessed everything,” Li San said.

“In that case, let’s pay Zhao Yuanliang a visit. It’s time to send him on his way,” Xiao Ming said with a cold smile.

At the Wei Family Restaurant, Zhao Yuanliang slapped Zhao Kuan hard across the face.

“You told me this plan was foolproof! How could something so simple fail? Because of this, our entire spy network in Qingzhou has been wiped out. What am I supposed to report to Father now?” he raged.

“Your Highness... I didn’t expect that thug to take silver from both sides. If not for that, we would’ve succeeded,” Zhao Kuan muttered, holding his swollen cheek.

A single lapse in judgment had unraveled an entire operation.

While they were arguing, the door burst open—Xiao Ming stepped inside.

“Young Lord, here’s all the evidence. Do you have anything to say?” Xiao Ming tossed a confession sheet onto the table.

One by one, Zhao Yuanliang read the names on the page, his heart sinking. Every agent they had embedded in Qingzhou—wiped out.

He clenched his fists. “Very well, Xiao Ming. You win. Let’s see what happens next.”

With that, he turned to leave with Zhao Kuan.

But just then, Li San stepped forward, silver flashing in his hand.

In one swift motion, he slashed Zhao Kuan across the throat.

Zhao Kuan clutched his neck, a gurgling sound escaping his lips as blood gushed from the wound.