

Finest 236

Chapter 236 Organizing the Troops?

The two left Jinling city, setting their course and racing their horses towards the northwest. After less than four hours of travel, they left Jiangsu and entered Anhui territory.

Lin Wanrong, unfamiliar with the landscape, saw that Gao Qiu was silent as they pressed on, so he urged his horse to ride alongside him and asked loudly, "Brother Gao, where are we going?"

Gao Qiu slowed his horse's pace, chuckling as he responded, "We've been rushing so much that I forgot to tell you, brother Lin. We're heading towards Chuzhou, where several units of men and horses are waiting for us."

"Chuzhou?" Lin Wanrong was familiar with this place. It was several hundred miles from Jinling city, connected to areas such as Fengyang and Tianchang, and served as the eastern gateway of Anhui. It faced Jiangsu across the river, and its strategic geographical location was of utmost importance.

"What are we going to Chuzhou for? Is Mr. Xu there too?" Lin Wanrong questioned, furrowing his brows.

Gao Qiu answered, "Master Xu is not in Chuzhou. He has already hurried off to Pei County in Xuzhou due to urgent military matters. He only instructed me to bring you, brother Lin, to Chuzhou to meet up with the troops there. From there, we are to head towards Xuzhou via Suzhou."

As Xu Wei's military strategist, Lin Wanrong was supposed to stay by Xu Wei's side. Little did he know that the old man had run off alone. It seemed that the frontline indeed had an emergency. However, given Lin Wanrong's current mental and physical state, he wasn't prepared to head directly to the frontline. It would be better to first get to Chuzhou and familiarize himself with the atmosphere after meeting the army.

Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "That sounds reasonable. Brother Gao, how many troops are stationed in Chuzhou? How did Mr. Xu arrange it?"

Gao Qiu shook his head, "I'm not entirely sure. I heard there are troops from Zhejiang and Shandong, as well as soldiers from the divine machine unit. I'm only in charge of ensuring your safety, brother Lin. Master Xu is the one to consider troop deployment, and I have no say in it."

Lin Wanrong knew that to avoid drawing attention, Zhejiang's infantry and cavalry had passed through Anhui to reach Shandong. Hearing that there were troops from these three locations, it seemed like the place should be well-defended and relatively safe.

"In that case, let's hurry to meet the troops," Lin Wanrong said impatiently. He had never seen tens of thousands of soldiers training together. It should be quite a lively scene.

Gao Qiu laughed, "There's no rush. It will be enough if we arrive today. Master Xu also left a message for you, brother Lin."

"Old Xu, oh, what did Mr. Xu say?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously.

Gao Qiu relayed, "Master Xu asks that you familiarize yourself with military matters as soon as possible and fulfill your duties as the military strategist."

Of course, he needed to hurry. he was even more anxious than old Xu. He had several wives at home waiting for comfort.

"Master Xu also said," Gao Qiu continued leisurely, "that the soldiers in Chuzhou are specifically left for you, brother Lin. He asks that you get them into shape and bring them to the frontline."

"Organize the troops?" Lin Wanrong was puzzled. He was just a little military strategist with no real power or position. The title 'military strategist' was a mere flattery. At most, he could give Xu Wei, some bad ideas. How could he be able to organize troops?

He gave Gao Qiu a puzzled look, "Brother Gao, you must have heard wrong. I have neither an official position nor any military experience. How could Mr. Xu ask me to organize the troops?"

Gao Qiu shook his head, laughing, "I heard clearly, I couldn't possibly be mistaken. Master Xu did instruct you to go to Chuzhou and organize the troops."

Tens of thousands of troops were stationed in Chuzhou, yet Mr. Xu wanted him, a mere servant, to prepare them for war. Was Xu Wei intentionally trying to make things difficult for him? Xu Wei trusted him, but he didn't trust himself. Seeing his hesitation, Gao Qiu chuckled, "Brother Lin, don't worry. I believe in Master Xu's judgment. He wouldn't have picked the wrong person. You surely have the ability."

Even Gao Qiu is saying this. Damn, don't I trust myself? It's just a few tens of thousands of people. Even if I haven't tasted pork knuckles, haven't I seen pigs run before? I'll just give it a try and have a taste of directing people. That being said, Xu Wei trusted me enough to leave the organization of such a large force in my hands.

He laughed, "Fine, I'll give it a try. Actually, in my humble opinion, though the task of organizing the troops is difficult, it's not insurmountable. Brother Gao, do you know what the most difficult thing in the world is?"

Gao Qiu shook his head curiously, "What is it?"

Lin Wanrong responded with a mysterious smile, "If you, brother Gao, marry more than a dozen wives, then you will understand what the most difficult thing is."

Gao Qiu was stunned for a moment, then understanding dawned, he gave a thumbs up, "Profound wisdom, brother Lin, that is indeed profound wisdom." The two men exchanged glances and shared a burst of salacious laughter only men could understand.

The journey to Chuzhou was neither long nor short. With Gao Qiu by his side, Lin Wanrong had nothing to worry about. All the way, he was planning about his arrival in Chuzhou, what kind of authoritative demeanor he should put on, and what impressive tactics he should use to impress the unruly soldiers. The thought of wielding authority in front of tens of thousands of people excited him. It would surely feel satisfying.

By the time they reached Chuzhou, the sun was already setting. Bathed in the slanting rays, the ancient city of Chuzhou was peaceful and calm, hardly looking like a place where a large army was stationed.

In Lin Wanrong's imagination, a place where tens of thousands of troops were stationed should at least have brightly shining weapons, a bustling camp, neighing warhorses, and constant shouts of battle. But looking at the bustling crowd that resembled a dispersed marketplace, Lin Wanrong couldn't associate the scene before him with a large army.

"Brother Gao, are we sure we haven't taken a wrong turn?" Lin Wanrong asked, perplexed.

"There's no chance of that. I've traveled this route at least four or five times." Gao Qiu pointed at the two characters on the city gate and laughed, "Look, isn't that Chuzhou?"

Lin Wanrong looked up and saw the two bright red characters Chuzhou, under which was a small inscription: Commemoration by Ouyang Yongshu.

"Who is this Ouyang Yongshu?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"I heard Master Xu mention him once," Gao Qiu explained, his head bobbing with the rhythm of his words. "It seems he was a man of the previous dynasty, named Ouyang Xiu. He was the governor of Chuzhou. I heard that the fellow liked to drink, and a monk from Langya Mountain, to please him, built a pavilion named the 'Drunken Old Man Pavilion.' There's also a Fengle Pavilion at the foot of Feng Mountain west of Chuzhou city, also built by him." Gao Qiu's words carried an air of pride as he rarely had the chance to display his knowledge before Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong nodded, recognizing the name Ouyang Xiu. He thought these literate people enjoyed creating confusing aliases to bewilder others.

"Brother Gao," he said as they led their horses into the city, glancing around. "You said a large army is stationed in this city, but it doesn't look like it." Despite its age, Chuzhou City held a strategic geographical position. Although it couldn't compare to the prosperity of Jinling, its stores, restaurants, brothels, and clubhouses stood tall, depicting a picture of bustling activity.

"There should be troops stationed here," Gao Qiu said, his confidence wavering as he noticed the lack of armored soldiers on the streets. "Master Xu specifically asked you to come to Chuzhou to organize the troops, but why can't we see any trace of them?"

They stopped several passers-by to ask about the large army, but none had heard of it. Damn it, tens of thousands of soldiers, enough to rain down saliva or thunder with their farts. Had they evaporated? Or was Xu Wei playing tricks on him?

"Brother Gao, didn't Mr. Xu tell you who to find when we get here? We can't just blindly crash around," Lin Wanrong said.

"Master Xu said that once in Chuzhou, observing carefully would lead us to them," Gao Qiu replied, wiping away sweat. He held blind faith in Xu Wei, following his instructions to the letter.

Observe? Observe what? This was a busy part of Chuzhou City. No soldiers were to be seen anywhere. Could they all be hiding in brothels? What riddle was this old man Xu playing?

"Move, move" Their ponderings were interrupted by rough shouts. Two war horses galloped toward them like arrows, causing pedestrians to scatter like ghosts.

Gao Qiu brightened, pulling on Lin Wanrong's sleeve, "Brother Lin, look, aren't they soldiers?"

Lin Wanrong looked and saw that the riders on the galloping horses indeed wore grand military uniforms. Their reckless demeanor suggested they were Xu Wei's soldiers, but from which province, he had no idea.

"They're in such a hurry, could there be some urgent military matter?" Gao Qiu wondered aloud.

"Is that so?" Lin Wanrong laughed, "I think they're headed to that Lixiang Pavilion. Could they be delivering messages to the girls there?"

As they spoke, the horses indeed stopped in front of Lixiang Pavilion. A madam with a heavily powdered face came out to greet them, her mouth wide in a smile. "General Zhao, General Fu, ah, why have you only just arrived? Little Yu and the others have been waiting for you for a long time."

The officer leading the way, his face dark as obsidian, let out a laugh as he casually placed a hand on the madam's shoulder. "Oh, really? Has Little Yu not had enough of my prowess from last night? Seems she's eager quite early today. How about this, Madam, why don't you join us tonight as well? I assure you, it will be a night of intense pleasure, as intoxicating as the elixir of the immortals."

The soldiers trailing behind the leading officer broke into raucous laughter at this. The madam flirted coquettishly for a moment before leading the group inside.

Damn it, Lin Wanrong thought to himself with a bitter smile, they really did come to report to the girls. The audacity of these men to visit a brothel in their military uniforms! He turned to Gao Qiu and said, "Brother Gao, could this be a part of the massive army we've been searching for?"

Gao Qiu responded with an embarrassed expression, "It seems likely. Brother Lin, what do you suggest we do?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Visiting a brothel, well, that's quite an enjoyable affair, all men fancy it! How about this, Brother Gao, let me host, and we'll have a visit as well."

Chapter 237 The Dilemma

Gao Qiu jumped in shock, hurriedly shaking his head. "Brother Lin, that is unacceptable, absolutely unacceptable. In our Great Hua army, we have rules. If a soldier indulges in drinking, gambling, or prostitution on his own, at best he'd be flogged, at worst beheaded."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Brother Gao, are you afraid of being flogged, or of losing your head? The generals we met earlier didn't seem afraid at all."

Gao Qiu laughed awkwardly. If it were normal times, he would be quite good at visiting brothels himself. However, things were different now. They were in the army, and they were in the midst of marching and battling. Military discipline had to be strictly followed, otherwise, what kind of war could they wage?

Seeing that Gao Qiu remained silent, Lin Wanrong realized he was hesitant. With a mischievous smile, he led his horse toward the Lixiang Pavilion. Despite being only a minor military strategist, Xu Wei's orders allowed him to control the soldiers in Chuzhou. As Gao Qiu was responsible for protecting Lin Wanrong, seeing him stride into the brothel, Gao Qiu had no choice but to follow.

When the elderly madam of the brothel saw two more guests leading their horses over, she perked up. The man in the lead was young and healthy-looking, handsome; the one following was tall and sturdy, like a bodyguard. Having spent years in this line of business, she had a keen eye for clients. Her eyes gleamed as she wiggled her way over, "Oh, sirs, you've finally arrived!"

Lin Wanrong slapped her ample backside, grinning, "Do you happen to recognize us, sister?"

The madam swiveled her hips, fluttering her eyelashes flirtatiously, "Never seen you before, but I know you now, don't I? Look at you, both so handsome and strong, you must be important men. Your presence brightens up our little place."

Lin Wanrong tossed half a tael of broken silver onto her ample bosom, grinning, "Sister, you do have a sweet mouth. I like it." He tugged Gao Qiu forward, "This big brother of mine is a very important man. Be sure to take good care of him."

Seeing Gao Qiu's imposing stature, the madam thrust her bosom towards him, giggling, "My lord, you're so tall and strong."

Gao Qiu gave her waist a light squeeze, slapping her backside, "Big sister, not only am I tall, I'm also quite sturdy. Fancy a try?"

"Oh, my lord, you're so naughty!" The madam feigned shyness but leaned even closer into him.

It turned out Gao Qiu was a fan of mature women. Watching the two exchange flirty glances, Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. The madam let out a loud call, "Girls, upstairs and downstairs, make sure to treat our two lords well--"

As she spoke, a servant led the two men inside. Gao Qiu turned back, "Big sister, make sure to come and keep me company later."

The madam's heavily painted lips parted, "My lord, my only fear is that you'll forget about me when you see the young and pretty girls."

Goosebumps broke out all over Lin Wanrong's body, what a pair of debauchees, getting on so quickly. He clapped Gao Qiu on the shoulder and said, "Brother Gao, you are truly impressive. In my experience of visiting brothels across the lands, it's usually the madams who are the most difficult to approach. They might be rotund, but they are also very coquettish. I didn't expect you to charm her so quickly. You have my utmost admiration. It seems you have a special affection for older women."

Gao Qiu, already well-acquainted with him, laughed and replied, "To be honest, Brother Lin, I have a preference for older women, especially those around forty or fifty. As the saying goes, they start to get wild at thirty, wilder at forty, peak at fifty, and it's a wave upon wave at sixty. These women are experienced, know how to cater to a man's needs, and offer a level of comfort those young vixens can't match." As they had shared the battlefield and now shared the brothel, their bond was truly iron-clad, allowing them to speak without any inhibitions.

Their shared laughter echoed loudly as they entered the main hall. It was early evening and the hall was already filled with diverse, jovial guests, arm in arm with courtesans, drinking, jesting, and flirting. Vulgar jokes were thrown around amidst the lively atmosphere.

Before entering the brothel, Gao Qiu had been somewhat reluctant. But once they found a quiet spot to sit, he became comfortable, wandering around and taking in the sights. Suddenly, he tugged at Lin Wanrong's sleeve, "Brother Lin, look over there."

Following his gaze, Lin Wanrong saw several of the soldiers they had just met sitting not far away. Each held a woman in his arm, their hands already exploring the women's chests, making crude jokes, half their armor discarded next to them.

True to their military nature, they were truly unrestrained. Gao Qiu turned to Lin Wanrong, "Brother Lin, what should we do?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Let's wait and see. These men are so audacious, they must have some backing. We should find out which province's soldiers they are first. If their backing is too strong, we may want to lay low and stay out of their way."

His words were casual, implying that if the men had strong backers, they should just ignore the situation. If any upright person heard him, they would sneer and refuse to associate with him. But Gao Qiu, who had seen all manner of shady dealings in the palace, simply gave a thumbs-up and said, "Brother Lin, you are truly wise. No wonder Master Xu values you so much."

Laughing, Lin Wanrong replied, "Brother Gao, I'm just being a coward, yet you see it as being smart."

Gao Qiu, speaking seriously, said, "Brother Lin, I grew up in the palace and have witnessed countless instances of infighting. I've seen many honorable and deceitful characters. It's often said that good men die young while villains live for a thousand years - a seeming iron rule in our Great Hua. But has anyone ever wondered why good men die so young? To my mind, it's because they are too upright, too willing to face danger head-on, too averse or too inexperienced to engage in schemes and plots, making them easy targets. These people are naively idealistic, exposing themselves even when they are outmatched, essentially waiting to be struck down. To be a good man, one must first learn to protect oneself. Brother Lin, you are truly wise. To deal with deceitful people, you must outsmart them."

Gao Qiu's words resonated deeply with Lin Wanrong. He had initially thought of Gao Qiu as a man interested only in brawling and carousing, yet here he was expressing profound insights. Lin

Wanrong raised his cup and said, "To your wise words, Brother Gao. You are truly a kindred spirit. I toast to you."

The two men downed their drinks in one go, just as two carefully selected courtesans joined them, sitting by their sides. The splendor of Chuzhou City paled in comparison to Jinling, as did the quality of the courtesans. Lin Wanrong, having a beautiful wife and several exquisite women waiting in the wings, found these powdered women ordinary.

After some light flirtation with the courtesan, Lin Wanrong gestured to the soldiers at the other table. "Huh, Brother Gao. Those generals look familiar. It seems I've seen them somewhere before."

Gao Qiu, engaged in singing a bawdy song with his courtesan, paused at Lin Wanrong's words. He glanced at the table and pretended to be surprised, "Isn't that so? These generals do look very familiar."

The courtesan at Lin Wanrong's side ran her hand along his arm and asked coyly, "Kind sir, you wouldn't happen to be from the capital, would you?"

"The capital?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback, quickly saying, "Ah, yes, yes. Could it be that these generals are from the capital as well?"

Gao Qiu's courtesan gave him a flirtatious look and said, "No wonder you're so robust, you're from the capital."

Did that have anything to do with being from the capital? Lin Wanrong gave a wry smile, listening as the courtesan continued, "Those men are generals from the capital, something about a 'Divine' something 'Unit'..."

"Divine Machine Unit?" Gao Qiu quickly interjected.

"Yes, that's right, the Divine Machine Unit. You're not only robust but also quick-witted." The courtesan giggled, "That General Zhao, I heard he's a Hundred-Man Commander in the Divine Machine Unit. They've been stationed here for several days already."

A mere Hundred-Man Commander daring to openly wear his armor while visiting a brothel - where was his superior? The Thousand-Man Commander? Lin Wanrong wondered aloud, "Oh, so he's a

Hundred-Man Commander. Miss, I'm just passing through this city. Why are the soldiers of the Divine Machine Unit stationed here? Could it be that there's a war coming?"

"A war? What war?" The courtesan laughed, "According to the Hundred-Man Commander, there are only a few hundred of them. Where would they go to fight a war? But now that you're here, you could engage in a different kind of battle with me." With a burst of laughter, the courtesan leaned in closer to Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, playfully patting the cheek of the woman by his side. But he was puzzled. Why were there only a few hundred men? If he was to take command, wouldn't Xu have the decency to give him at least several tens of thousands of soldiers?

After probing a little more, he found that the two courtesans knew little else, only confirming for him and Gao Qiu that there indeed wasn't a large army stationed in Chuzhou. The two men exchanged glances, their doubts deepening.

Seeing that the Hundred-Man Commander Zhao from the neighboring table was having a great time with his courtesan, Lin Wanrong signaled to Gao Qiu. Gao Qiu nodded, and Lin Wanrong approached, patting Commander Zhao's shoulder and saying with a laugh, "General Zhao, what a coincidence!"

General Zhao, thoroughly enjoying himself as he fondled the girl at his side, turned around in response to the call, only to see a young man winking and smiling at him. He paused, confused, and asked, "You are...?"

"Do you not remember me? Capital City... The Eight Alleys..." Lin Wanrong suggested, pretending to jog his memory.

At the mention of the Eight Alleys, General Zhao's eyes lit up, "Ah, you are...you are that...who?"

"I am Lin..." Lin Wanrong responded with a salute, "Also a frequent visitor of the Eight Alleys."

"So it really is you, Master Lin," General Zhao suddenly seemed to understand, yet he struggled to remember exactly who this Master Lin was and from which influential family he hailed, "Why are you here in Chuzhou?"

"Oh, I am traveling the world. Today, I happened upon Chuzhou. An old habit flared up, and I decided to have a drink here. I didn't expect to run into General Zhao. It's indeed a pleasant surprise."

At this point, Gao Qiu silently stood behind Lin Wanrong, his eyes gleaming as he surveyed the room. It was clear he was Lin Wanrong's bodyguard. Although General Zhao was only a Hundred-Man Commander, he came from the Divine Machine Unit stationed near the capital and had a keen eye. Seeing the tall and fierce-looking Gao Qiu, he quietly wondered about Master Lin's background and why such a formidable man was his bodyguard.

General Zhao invited Lin Wanrong to sit down, and Gao Qiu took his position behind him. As they talked, Lin Wanrong, unfamiliar with the layout of the capital, let Gao Qiu fill in the gaps. As a guard in the royal palace, Gao Qiu was more than familiar with the city's topography and affairs. The number of doors in the palace, which concubine the emperor favored, where the houses of the Secretaries were, which house in the Eight Alleys the Assistant Minister of the Ministry of Personnel had stayed in last night, who had impregnated the daughter of the Inspection Censor, all the gossip was shared.

A few sentences in, General Zhao was convinced that Master Lin was indeed from the capital, even though he couldn't remember where he had seen him. However, seeing Lin Wanrong's dark complexion, he was reassured that he likely wasn't the descendant of any high-ranking officials.

General Zhao, whose full name was Zhao Liangyu, was a Hundred-Man Commander in the Divine Machine Unit stationed near the capital. This time, he led two Hundred-Man squads, escorting two large cannons to the front lines in Jining. Those who came with him today were his banner leaders. Upon hearing this, Lin Wanrong felt a slight disappointment. This Zhao Liangyu only had a couple hundred men under his command. Commanding an army? That was a joke.

Zhao Liangyu chatted with Lin Wanrong for a bit and felt they were fairly acquainted, especially since they had "met" in the Eight Alleys. So he relaxed and began to joke around again, draping his arm around the woman by his side. Gao Qiu, observing all of this, shook his head in private. For soldiers from the Divine Machine Unit, which was essentially a royal guard near the capital, they sure had an intriguing character.

"General Zhao, looking at your spirited eyes and your powerful presence, I can tell you are from a distinguished family. May I ask about your ancestors?" Lin Wanrong laughingly said.

"The current Deputy Minister of the Ministry of War, Master Tie, is a distant uncle of mine," Zhao Liangyu said with pride.

"Oh, so you are the distant nephew of Master Tie. My apologies for not knowing," Lin Wanrong chuckled. No wonder he was still just a Hundred-Man Commander. It turned out his uncle was a distant one.

"May I ask what you do in the capital, Master Lin? I seem to remember you mentioning it once in the Eight Alleys. But I have forgotten," Zhao Liangyu inquired about Lin Wanrong's background.

"Oh, my family owns a cloth store. Just a small business," Lin Wanrong responded honestly.

Hearing this, Zhao Liangyu felt even more at ease, and he slightly sneered, "So you're a merchant. That explains it."

Damn it, thought Lin Wanrong, I earn my money honestly through business, which is far better than using military funds for debauchery.

"General Zhao, doesn't it seem inconvenient for you to come to a pleasure house dressed in military armor?" Lin Wanrong asked, smiling.

"What's so inconvenient about that? We, the soldiers of the Divine Machine Unit, have fought hard on the front lines. What's so outrageous about visiting a brothel?" Zhao Liangyu responded casually and dismissively glanced at Lin Wanrong, thinking that he was such a meddler.

"Aren't you supervised by anyone?" Lin Wanrong asked with a grin. "I've heard a very important person is coming to Chuzhou to lead you to a glorious victory."

"Important person, my ass! It's just some junior Military Strategist. I don't even know where they dug him up from. I bet he has never seen a real battlefield. And he dares to lead an army? We've been waiting here for him for days," Zhao Liangyu shouted, clearly displeased. His subordinates echoed him, "That so-called Military Strategist is nowhere near as good as our General Zhao. He isn't fit to lead an army. It should be General Zhao who takes command."

Seeing them protesting loudly, Lin Wanrong leaned in to whisper to Gao Qiu, "Brother Gao, can Mr. Xu handle this Deputy Minister of the Ministry of War?"

Gao Qiu smiled, "A petty Deputy Minister can't compare to Mr. Xu. Moreover, this lad is just a Hundred-Man Commander. His relationship with Deputy Minister Tie surely can't be that good."

Seeing Lin Wanrong whispering with Gao Qiu and recalling his previous question, Zhao Liangyu's face changed. "Who are you? How do you know someone is coming to Chuzhou?"

Lin Wanrong grinned, "Well, I am but a humble Military Strategist, also known as Lin San."

"Military Strategist?" The faces of everyone present paled. If that was the case, wasn't this the man supposed to command the troops in Chuzhou? The flag bearers were especially upset. They had just criticized the Military Strategist! While their Hundred-Man Commander Zhao had the backing of the Deputy Minister, they, however, weren't so lucky.

Zhao Liangyu, after all, was a Hundred-Man Commander. After a moment of panic, he suppressed the anxiety in his heart and said, "You have no proof. Do you have an imperial edict?"

Gao Qiu snorted, "The Imperial Edict of Marshal Xu, it's not for someone of your rank to inspect. Once you have gathered your soldiers, someone will read it out."

Zhao Liangyu didn't dare to make a sound. He was a man of the military and understood the importance of obeying orders. Although this Military Strategist didn't hold a formal position, he did have the power to command troops. If he offended him, one military order could lead to his execution without anyone daring to object.

Lin Wanrong, with a sinister smile, asked, "Commander Zhao, do you know your crime?"

Zhao Liangyu, with cold sweat rolling down his forehead, dared not speak. Lin Wanrong said with a sneer, "Brother Gao, according to our Great Hua laws, what should be the punishment for fraternizing with prostitutes while on military duty and slandering superiors?"

"According to the law, it's death!" Gao Qiu said decisively.

Zhao Liangyu and his fellow flag bearers hurriedly knelt down and pleaded, "Please spare us, General Lin. We were confused waiting for you in Chuzhou. That's why we came to this pleasure house. Please consider Deputy Minister Tie's face and spare us."

"Harassing the civilians, visiting a brothel in armor, any of these offenses can be punished by death." Lin Wanrong sighed, "Commander Zhao, you're putting me in a difficult position."

Hearing that there seemed to be room for negotiation in his tone, Zhao Liangyu quickly bowed, "I was confused. Please forgive me, General Lin. I will never dare to do this again."

Lin Wanrong snorted, "In that case, remove your armors. Return to the camp and await your punishment."

Gao Qiu acted accordingly, ordering them to remove their armor, holding them in his own hands. They were left wearing only their undergarments. Seeing that this new Military Strategist seemed to have some fear of his distant uncle, Deputy Minister Tie, Zhao Liangyu felt a bit relieved. With this relationship at his disposal, he was not afraid.

The crowd saw the once noisy soldiers suddenly calm down, take off their armors and become utterly compliant. They didn't know what had happened. It was only after this group left the Lixiang Pavilion that they began to chatter.

Lin Wanrong ordered the flag bearers to bring the horses, leaving only Zhao Liangyu, "Commander Zhao, where are your troops stationed?"

Seeing Lin Wanrong's polite approach, Zhao Liangyu felt much more at ease. He replied, "General, my two hundred men are stationed at the foot of Langya Mountain."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Are only your Divine Machine Unit soldiers stationed in Chuzhou? By rights, there should also be soldiers from Shandong and Zhejiang. Where are they stationed?"

"In response to your question, General, there is a Hundred-Man Commander from both Shandong and Zhejiang. They lead two groups of hundred soldiers each, stationed at Langya Mountain, very close to my Divine Machine Unit," Zhao Liangyu answered.

Shandong and Zhejiang each had over two hundred men? By that count, in Chuzhou City, including the Divine Machine Unit, there were just over six hundred soldiers. No wonder there was little activity. Xu Wei, the old man, had tricked him. He had thought he would be leading an army of thousands. Who knew it would be just a tiny group of men? Such a force would barely be enough for a single charge on the battlefield. And yet, they wanted him to lead this? He sulkily thought this was a far cry from the command he had imagined.

"What are those more than two hundred men each from Zhejiang and Shandong doing here? Surely they are not also here to visit brothels." Upon learning the truth, Lin Wanrong's spirits deflated significantly, his words now lacking energy. He thought to himself, 'I was too naive. I should have known that Xu Wei wouldn't trust my abilities that easily. He probably handed these six hundred men to me as a test. Damn, if he wanted to observe me, he should have said so earlier. All these roundabout ways, and I even played matchmaker for him. However, if Xu Wei had rashly handed over tens of thousands of soldiers to him, then this old man wouldn't have been worth helping.' With this thought, he felt slightly better.

"The troops from Zhejiang are here to transport supplies, and those from Shandong are here to meet them. Although there are over four hundred of them combined, they are composed of remnants selected from various garrisons," Zhao Liangyu explained.

Transporting supplies? Lin Wanrong's eyes widened. The rule of 'supplies move first, then the army' was as basic as it could be. Xu Wei had used only four hundred men for supply transport, and they were the leftovers? It had to be a joke. If the White Lotus cult received this information, they would be completely finished.

"What kind of supplies?" Lin Wanrong managed to steady his mood and asked.

"As winter is coming, they are transporting dry grass for the warhorses. The main supply transport troops have already passed. What remains now is only supplementary, with or without, it wouldn't matter," Zhao Liangyu's words eased Lin Wanrong's doubts. No wonder Xu Wei trusted him with such a "great responsibility."

In that case, those who had remained in Chuzhou to wait for Military Strategist Lin, were a motley crew and mixed units, numbering over six hundred in total. Lin Wanrong managed a bitter smile. Xu Wei, the old man, was indeed good at setting difficult tasks.

Chapter 238 Night Patrol of the Three Camps

Lin Wanrong and Gao Qiu, accompanied by Zhao Liangyu and several flag bearers, spurred their horses into a gallop. They arrived at the base of Langya Mountain in one breath, where from a distance, they could see a few tents lit up, bustling with shadows of people, presenting a lively scene.

"Commander Zhao, your camp seems quite lively. It appears that the brothers have a rather vibrant off-duty life!" Lin Wanrong said with a playful grin.

Zhao Liangyu, the hundred-men commander, awkwardly laughed twice without giving a reply. They hadn't even approached the camp when they began to hear the nonstop clamor, coupled with the sound of dice hitting cups. Several soldiers were loudly yelling, "Roll, roll, one, two, three, six, small, house wins all!"

Having spent a long time in the palace, Gao Qiu knew that gambling with the guards was common, but he was surprised to find that the soldiers had the audacity to hold public gambling events while in the army camp.

Lin Wanrong squinted his eyes and asked, "Commander Zhao, what is that noise?"

Zhao Liangyu's face turned alternately red and pale, feigning ignorance, he said, "Reporting to the general, I don't know. Perhaps the soldiers are just making a ruckus out of boredom during the march."

Lin Wanrong chuckled. If the officials were out whoring, the soldiers would be in the houses gambling. This Divine Machine Unit was indeed chaotic from top to bottom, covering all forms of indulgence.

As they dismounted, they saw two massive cannons placed in the center of the camp. A soldier was lazily leaning against a carriage, dozing off, oblivious to their approach.

Lin Wanrong carefully examined the two large cannons, made of pig iron, with long and thick barrels that bore no signs of firing. These must be the improved cannons that Xu Wei had mentioned. He stroked the cold barrel, his interest piqued. He wondered about the power of these cannons and thought that he might fire a couple of rounds himself when he had the chance.

Zhao Liangyu saw the newly arrived Military Strategist, General Lin, staring intently at the two cannons he was transporting, and seemed very interested. He promptly boasted, "These two cannons are the latest creations of the ingenious craftsmen of our Divine Machine Unit and have not been used yet. It is said that these cannons are extremely powerful and accurate. Once on the frontline, they will surely obliterate those White Lotus rebels."

Accurate firing? Even the most accurate cannon would become a decoration in the hands of these tofu soldiers, thought Lin Wanrong as he sneered, "Oh, is that so? In that case, I'm looking forward

to seeing the power of these cannons tomorrow. I won't hide it from you, Commander Zhao, I've never seen a cannon fired."

Lin Wanrong, accompanied by Gao Qiu, entered the central tent, where about twenty soldiers surrounded a small table, engrossed in their gambling.

Lin Wanrong signaled to Gao Qiu with a glance. Gao Qiu strode forward in three steps, grabbed the cup of dice, and loudly announced, "Who dares to gamble with me?"

The crowd, seeing his towering and intimidating figure but noticing his lack of armor, didn't know where he came from. A few soldiers yelled, "You audacious lad, this is the sacred ground of the Divine Machine Unit, not a place for the likes of you to trespass."

Zhao Liangyu hurriedly said, "Watch your manners. These two are the newly arrived Military Strategist, General Lin, and his accompanying officer. Shouldn't you all pay your respects?"

The soldiers were terrified at the revelation, hastily bowing and paying their respects to the two high-ranking officials. Lin Wanrong, laughing, said, "No harm done. Since you brothers enjoy gambling with dice, then allow my companion, Officer Gao, to join in on the fun. However, to make it truly interesting, we should add a little something extra."

Seeing the newly arrived Military Strategist speak, everyone fell silent and listened attentively. The General continued, "Here's the deal. All the brothers participating in the gambling here will each get a turn to gamble individually with Officer Gao. If you win, then the matter of today's gambling within the army has nothing to do with you. But if you lose," General Lin smirked, "you'll have to accept the military punishment of fifty heavy strokes. Oh, and I think Commander Zhao should be the one to personally administer the punishment."

At these words, the people in the tent began discussing amongst themselves. According to the laws of the Great Hua army, gambling in the army was a serious crime, punishable even by beheading. However, the soldiers of the Divine Machine Unit, who were accustomed to being arrogant, didn't really care about these military regulations. The sudden arrival of the Military Strategist threatening real consequences had left them somewhat afraid.

Lin Wanrong had already guessed their thoughts. He smiled and said, "Brothers, don't worry. My rule is very fair. Since everyone enjoys gambling, I've specially opened this game. If you win, that's your skill, and I, as a general, have nothing to say. But if you lose, then you must accept the loss. We soldiers, what's a flogging to us?"

Upon consideration, the men realized that indeed, the ones who agreed to gamble must accept the loss. Moreover, the general had given everyone a chance, so why not go up and test their luck? Several brave soldiers stepped forward to challenge Officer Gao.

Gao Qiu, a master of gambling and a martial arts expert, could easily manipulate the dice. Whether he wanted big or small, he got what he wished for. These soldiers were no match for him, and after one round, they were defeated. Within moments, all the twenty soldiers in the tent had lost.

Seeing all the soldiers dejected, Lin Wanrong swept his gaze over them and loudly asked, "Who else wants to gamble?" After witnessing Gao Qiu's prowess, none of the soldiers dared to act out. They all remained silent.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I've given everyone a chance. This rule will always be in effect. If anyone can beat Officer Gao, at any time, any place, even if it's in the middle of a battlefield, I won't mind at all. But if you lose, the flogging is inevitable."

He smirked at Zhao Liangyu, "Commander, these brothers are all yours. Twenty people, if you break five rods, that's acceptable."

Upon hearing this, the soldiers drew in a sharp breath. The Military Strategist was smiling, but his actions were brutal. The fifty heavy strokes would leave them bedridden for several days. But rank scares the brave, and with these being military rules, they considered themselves unlucky to have crossed paths with this general today.

General Lin had given Commander Zhao an unyielding order to break five rods, and given that Zhao Liangyu himself was at General Lin's mercy, he dared not hesitate. Gathering all his strength, he personally carried out the punishment. These soldiers, bold enough to publicly gamble in the camp, were all Zhao Liangyu's confidants. However, today they had to endure their Commander's harsh punishment, which naturally left them extremely unsettled.

Listening to the wails from outside, Gao Qiu worriedly said, "Brother Lin, punishing so many people at once, could it cause any trouble or mutiny?"

"Mutiny?" Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile and shook his head, then sighed. "Brother Gao, I'm not afraid of them mutinying. If they did mutiny, it would indicate that they still have some of a soldier's spirit. I'm afraid that they don't even have the courage to mutiny."

Gao Qiu contemplated his words and found them quite insightful. These soldiers of the Divine Machine Unit were usually arrogant and overbearing, appearing fierce but truly they were bullies who feared the tough. Speaking of soldier's spirit, they indeed seemed lacking. Brother Lin's view was indeed unique, seeing right to the heart of the issue. No wonder Mr. Xu held him in such high regard.

After a while, a heavily sweating Zhao Liangyu came in to report, "General Lin, all twenty men have been punished, and five rods have been broken, please verify." Immediately, the banner officers following him presented the five broken rods, which were spotted with blood.

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively, smirked, and said, "Good job, Commander Zhao. Pass the order down. From now on, anyone found gambling in the camp will be punished in the same way. Also, pass my command. Tomorrow morning, the Divine Machine Unit will hold an exercise with live fire. I want to personally inspect it."

The few men answered in unison, and the banner officers arranged the tasks overnight. Lin Wanrong stopped Zhao Liangyu and said, "Commander Zhao, where are the soldiers from Zhejiang and Shandong stationed? Lead me to inspect them."

Zhao Liangyu had a completely new understanding of this smiling general. Swift in action and ruthless in method, he was not someone to be trifled with.

The tent of the Divine Machine Unit was on the far left, and a mile away was the camp of the two hundred soldiers from Zhejiang. A mile further was the camp of the Shandong soldiers. The three groups, each led by a hundred-men Commander, didn't interfere with each other, forming three small clusters.

When Zhao Liangyu led Lin Wanrong and Gao Qiu to the Zhejiang camp, it was not as noisy as the Divine Machine Unit. The camp was brightly lit, with several carts loaded with food and grass stationed there, and soldiers were moving about.

Lin Wanrong carefully observed the soldiers and found that they were indeed as Zhao Liangyu had described: old or young, weak and emaciated.

The two hundred men from Zhejiang were led by a hundred-men Commander named Du Xiuyuan. When Du Xiuyuan learned of General Lin's arrival, he hastily came out of the camp to greet him. Commander Du, with a clean-shaven face and lively eyes, saluted Lin Wanrong, "I am Du Xiuyuan, honored to meet General Lin."

"Commander Du, it's interesting," Lin Wanrong said with a smile, "This is my first visit to your camp, yet it's so quiet. There seem to be no guards. Could it be that all the soldiers in the camp are asleep?"

"General Lin, you misunderstand," Du Xiuyuan hurriedly explained. "It's not that I haven't arranged for any defense, it's just that the soldiers under my command, both from the old regiments and the newly recruited, vary greatly in age, with the oldest being in their forties and the youngest barely fourteen or fifteen. With such disparity and no unified training, if we were to openly display our formation, the enemy would instantly gauge our strength. That would be unwise."

"Oh?" Lin Wanrong looked at Du Xiuyuan with interest. This clean-shaven man seemed to have some ideas. "What's your strategy?"

Instead of exposing our weakness, it's better to hide in the dark," Du Xiuyuan explained. "Although my troops are weak, they can still prove their worth." He clapped his hands thrice, and from the camp, around seventy soldiers emerged, old and young, yet physically stronger than expected. They formed a defensive formation, with spearmen on the outside and swordsmen inside.

Du Xiuyuan continued, "These are the elite troops I've chosen from the more than two hundred soldiers under my command. They secretly guard the camp, far stronger than those openly flaunting their strength."

So it was a strategy of appearing relaxed while maintaining tight internal control. This Du Xiuyuan did have some ideas. However, observing his troops, their formation was good, but their individual abilities were quite lacking. Lin Wanrong sighed and said, "Commander Du, you have ideas, and that's good. However, your soldiers need more training." He walked up to a spearsman, pulled him with both hands, and the soldier lost balance, falling sideways.

Zhao Liangyu's troops, even though they were from the Divine Machine Unit, were much better than these Zhejiang soldiers. Seeing the flimsy formation of the Zhejiang troops, he couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Lin Wanrong shot him a sharp glare, What's so funny? Wait until tomorrow morning when the Divine Machine Unit tests the cannons. I'll give you something to laugh about then. Du Xiuyuan's face turned red and white, not knowing what to do. Soldiers from the south were physically weaker than those from the north, not to mention these were the leftovers.

Looking at Du Xiuyuan, this Commander seemed to have a strategy but was not good at training troops. Lin Wanrong nodded and patted Du Xiuyuan's shoulder, "Brother Du, don't worry. Training troops is not an overnight task. Your strength lies in strategy, focus on that. You seem to be educated, what does your family do?"

Du Xiuyuan answered, "General, I'm from Hangzhou, my family has been in business for generations. But under my management, our fortunes declined, and since I was interested in the military, I joined the army."

"A businessman?" Lin Wanrong was very interested when he heard this. No wonder Du Xiuyuan had some strategic acumen. Businessmen are cunning, bringing that to the military might not be a bad thing. "We are colleagues then, I'm also a businessman in Jinling, and this time Mr. Xu asked me to take on this temporary duty."

After touring the Zhejiang camp, Lin Wanrong noted that Du Xiuyuan's soldiers, though individually weak, were somewhat skilled in formation, reflecting Du Xiuyuan's hard work.

Not one to back down from a challenge, Lin Wanrong, accompanied by two hundred-men Commanders, decided to head straight into the Shandong camp. They were still a considerable distance away from the camp when they heard the cacophony of a massive skirmish, punctuated by the occasional whinny of a war horse. Startled, Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "What on earth is going on? Has a fight broken out?"

Du Xiuyuan by his side explained, "General Lin, you may not be aware, but this is how Hu Bugui, the Commander of Shandong camp, trains his troops. He does this morning and night, relying solely on brute force. I fear it may be of little help on the battlefield." The disdain in Du Xiuyuan's voice was evident; it seemed he was not in agreement with Hu Bugui's methods.

Before Lin Wanrong and his entourage could approach the Shandong camp, several soldiers sprang from the roadside, challenging them: "Who dares to trespass on our camp at night?"

Gao Qiu shouted back, "Quickly inform your Commander. General Lin is here on a night patrol." Immediately, one of the soldiers went to relay the message while the rest kept a wary eye on Lin Wanrong and his party, as though they were the enemy.

Noting that these soldiers were merely fourteen or fifteen years old but already possessed a certain hardness, Lin Wanrong nodded slightly. "Young fellows, how long have you been in the army?" he asked.

One of the boys, who appeared to be the leader, responded aggressively, "Don't try to extract information about our army."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily at this spirited young man. Looking toward the camp, he saw dust swirling under the bright lamplight, with two platoons of men engaging in fierce combat on horseback, while others trained vigorously against wooden dummies. Despite being composed of leftovers from other units, they possessed a certain ferocity. From these sentries alone, one could see that Hu Bugui certainly had a knack for training troops.

While he was musing over this, a burly, dark-faced military officer in his forties approached, his fast and urgent stride exuding an air of authority. Before the man arrived, his gruff voice could be heard, "Which of you is General Lin?"

Lin Wanrong stepped forward with a smile, "I am Lin San. Are you the illustrious and valiant Commander Hu Bugui?"

Upon seeing this youthful, joking man of about twenty who seemed to be flattering him openly, Hu Bugui felt a wave of disdain. However, noticing that both Zhao Liangyu and Du Xiuyuan were following Lin Wanrong, he figured that this man's status must be genuine. Bowing respectfully, he said, "Hu Bugui greets General Lin."

"There's no need for formality, brother Hu. I just arrived in Chuzhou today and thought I'd take a look around. I hope you won't take offense at my intrusion," Lin Wanrong replied cheerfully.

Hu Bugui thought to himself, as my superior, it's only natural for you to inspect my camp. Still, you have to pretend to be modest and talk about intruding. This man is incredibly insincere. Hu Bugui internally sneered at General Lin, and said out loud, "General Lin, you're too polite. Please, follow me."

As they walked past the young soldiers, Lin Wanrong turned to the young man who had previously rebuffed him, asking, "Young man, what's your name?"

The young soldier thought his previous words and actions had offended Lin Wanrong, and a hint of fear flashed across his face. However, he quickly recovered, raising his chin in defiance and declaring, "My name is"

Hu Bugui, unable to decipher Lin Wanrong's intentions but noticing the young soldier's expression, preemptively intervened, "General Lin, these soldiers are under my command and act only upon my orders. If there is any blame to be laid, it should fall on me."

Though Hu Bugui was somewhat brash, he was loyal to his troops. Lin Wanrong laughed and responded, "Why would I punish anyone, Hu? This young lad has shown courage and commitment to his duty. He should be praised, not reprimanded."

Hu Bugui couldn't fathom the true intentions behind the grinning general's words. Whether genuine or not, he quickly guided Lin Wanrong further into the camp. Throughout their journey, the camp was disciplined, with sharp weapons and stern soldiers. The atmosphere was a stark contrast to that of the Divine Machine Unit and Zhejiang Camp. Even though the two hundred Shandong soldiers were of varied ages, their physical strength and size far surpassed the soldiers from the south. Hu Bugui's training prowess was impressive; in such a short time, he had transformed this motley crew into formidable fighters.

The two groups of soldiers practicing nighttime combat were Hu Bugui's trump card. They were expert horsemen with lethal swordsmanship, presenting a formidable spectacle. Lin Wanrong, intrigued, asked, "Commander Hu, how long have you been training these soldiers?"

"About a month," Hu Bugui replied.

Lin Wanrong was astonished. A mere month of training had produced such a formidable force. Despite being in his forties, Hu Bugui's talents were undeniable. However, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but wonder why someone as skilled as him was only a hundred-men Commander.

"Brother Hu, in your opinion, is there really such a significant difference between the soldiers from the south and those from Shandong?" Lin Wanrong asked, his tone hinting at something deeper.

Hu Bugui responded, "The southern soldiers are generally softer and physically weaker compared to those from the north, due to their geographical nature. However, this isn't a deciding factor. If the southern soldiers were under my command, I could make them just as fierce as my Shandong warriors. My years of military experience have proven that there are no weak soldiers, only weak generals."

The implication of his words directed at Du Xiuyuan was clear. Du's face reddened as he retorted, "Your focus on individual soldiers and neglect of group tactics and formation training will cost you on the battlefield."

"And you believe those delicate soldiers of yours, who couldn't even squish an ant, will win the battle by showing off some flashy moves?" Hu Bugui retorted.

Though they hailed from Zhejiang and Shandong regions not typically at odds they somehow found themselves in a heated argument. Lin Wanrong, however, found this technical debate intriguing. As someone who had little patience for flattery, the candid exchange between Du Xiuyuan and Hu Bugui was exactly what he wanted.

Observing these Commanders' incessant quarreling, Lin Wanrong suggested with a smile, "Gentlemen, there's no need for this dispute. Coincidentally, I am scheduled to inspect the Divine Machine Unit's artillery tomorrow morning. Why don't we seize the opportunity to conduct a live drill? Both of you should bring your troops and engage in a battle simulation. That way, we can settle the argument once and for all."

The idea was good, and the two Commanders had no objections, so they agreed to hold a joint training session the following morning.

General Lin Wanrong was intrigued by the quality of the soldiers under Hu Bugui's command; they were clearly superior in their individual abilities. He was especially curious about the man with the big beard. Grasping his arm, he said, "Brother Hu, I see that you have a unique way of training and leading soldiers. How is it that you are still only a hundred-men Commander? You should at least be a thousand-men Commander, or even a garrison Commander."

Hu Bugui gave him a wary look, unsure whether he should answer. Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "It seems I've overstepped our acquaintance. Perhaps Brother Hu is not yet familiar with me. I am a straightforward, honest, modest, and studious man. It was for these qualities that Mr. Xu sent me to lead troops in Chuzhou. Though we've just met, I have a weakness for seeing talents mistreated. That's why I dared to ask, wishing to speak up for you."

Seeing him boast, Hu Bugui found it amusing. But he had to admit that this man was genuinely open-hearted, so he replied, "To tell you the truth, General Lin, I am a man of Jining."

"Jining?" Lin Wanrong furrowed his brow. Wasn't that the origin place of the White Lotus cult? He continued to ask, "Brother Hu, did you get involved because of this White Lotus cult?"

Hu Bugui nodded, "The White Lotus cult deceives the people and does evil, and I find them contemptible. I was originally fighting against the barbarians in the north, and was promoted to a

thousand-men Commander. But when the White Lotus incident happened, the court distrusted all the officers from Jining, and I was called back and demoted to a hundred-men Commander."

No wonder Hu Bugui was proficient in leading troops; he had once fought against the barbarians and had served as a thousand-men Commander. Lin Wanrong shook his head and said, "The court is absurd. How can they distinguish between loyal and treacherous officials based on region? These people only think with their asses."

Although his words were coarse, they appealed to Hu Bugui, who quickly changed his opinion of General Lin. He laughed, saying, "It seems General Lin shares my sentiments. While the White Lotus cult is evil, they are simply a rabble and easy to deal with. The true enemies of our Great Hua Empire are the nomadic barbarians from the north. Although I am from Jining, my ancestors lived in the north. My father died under the hooves of the barbarians, and I bear a deep grudge against them. My original name was Hu Shouxin, but I changed it to Hu Bugui, meaning 'the barbarians shall not return,' to express my resolve to resist them."

So the name Hu Bugui was one he had chosen for himself. Lin Wanrong laughed and gave him a thumbs-up, "Brother Hu, you have such grand ambitions. I admire you. Don't worry, I have a good relationship with Old Xu. When I have a chance, I'll speak on your behalf. It distresses me to see talents being mistreated."

Hu Bugui was shocked when he heard him refer to Marshal Xu as Old Xu. He wondered who this Military Strategist, General Lin, really was. His tone was so big, could it be that he was really close with Marshal Xu?

Lin Wanrong, newly arrived in Chuzhou, had visited three camps in one breath and was truly exhausted. Among the three camps, aside from the lax discipline of the Divine Machine Unit, the other two were passable, which brought some comfort to his mind.

Spending his first night in the military camp, the sound of patrolling soldiers intermittently walking past kept him awake for a long time. Life was indeed strange. From the moment he entered the Xiao family, his life had inexplicably changed. He had done a lot of messy things, met many people, and now, as a mere servant, he was leading hundreds of soldiers to the frontline. Who would believe it if the news were spread?

He sighed, a multitude of faces flashing across his mind. Where was Qingxuan? Did she know that he had been dragged into the army inexplicably? Was Qiaoqiao, the little girl, sound asleep? She must be thinking about him. The Second Miss was probably praying for him again. And Luo Ning,

was that girl counting the days for his return? And the Eldest Miss, he wouldn't see her for a while. He was not used to not having his daily banter with her.

Upon reflection, they were all women, women with whom he had ambiguous relationships. He couldn't help but laugh at himself. Having entangled himself with so many wives and potential wives, he was indeed quite a character.

As he was drifting between sleep and wakefulness, he suddenly heard a soft voice whispering in his ear, "Young master, young master..."

He turned over groggily, intending to sink back into sleep when he suddenly became aware. He was in the army camp. Where would a woman be talking to him?

Startled awake by the surprise, he quickly sat up on the bed. To his astonishment, there was a woman sitting by his bed, smiling at him with alluring charm.

"Xian'er?!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed in surprise, softly calling out.

Chapter 239 The Stubborn Xianer

The seated woman possessed the beauty of a masterpiece painting, her face adorned with a gentle smile, filled with affection. Wasn't she the charming Qin Xian'er?

"Young Master, have you awakened?" Qin Xian'er looked at him, gracing him with a smile.

Could he not wake up when this young lady called him a few times? Lin Wanrong sat up, laughing as he said, "Xian'er, how did you come here?"

Having said that, his body was already drenched in cold sweat. It was not the first time someone had invaded his room in the middle of the night. First, it was Xiao Qingxuan, then it was Old Wei, and now it was Qin Xian'er. He hadn't expected that even Old Wei was a top expert, just like Qin Xian'er and the others. If they wanted to take his life, it would be as easy as slicing a watermelon. Luckily, one of these three was his wife and Old Wei wasn't bad to him, which was why he had managed to live peacefully until now.

Thinking about this, he suddenly remembered Gao Qiu. Wasn't this guy supposed to be an imperial guard? How did he not notice someone breaking in? Was this the mark of a skilled fighter? He was fortunate it was Xian'er; if it had been anyone else, he would have been killed long ago.

"I have been staying in Chuzhou for the past few days." Qin Xian'er smiled and said, "When I saw you tonight, I was delighted. I found out where you were staying and came to see you."

Qin Xian'er said these words lightly, but the more Lin Wanrong heard, the more alarmed he became. To discover his dwelling and come to see him, was it easier than a casual visit? Damn, it seemed he had unknowingly died hundreds of times.

His heart tightened, and he grabbed Xian'er's hand, "How did you get in? There are soldiers guarding here."

Qin Xian'er blushed and giggled, "The security here is tight. I changed my clothes and disguised myself to get in." It was then that Lin Wanrong noticed she was wearing light armor; she had disguised herself as a soldier.

Qin Xian'er smiled again, "Actually, with my martial skills, entering your camp is not too difficult. But there's a guard in your tent whose skills are good. I didn't want to cause you any trouble, so I disguised myself."

The guard she mentioned must be Gao Qiu. Lin Wanrong felt a bit relieved. Hearing her say that she didn't want to cause trouble for him, he was moved and held her hand jokingly, "This armor is too heavy for you. Let me take it off."

Qin Xian'er's face flushed a deep red, "Young Master, you're naughty." But even as she spoke, she had gently removed her armor, revealing her petite and voluptuous body.

Being bored on a long night, and suddenly being visited by a great beauty, how could Lin Wanrong resist? He whispered in her ear, "Xian'er, sitting can be tiresome. Let's lay down and talk."

Qin Xian'er emitted a soft sound, lowered her head to expose her long and white neck, blushed a few brilliant shades of red, "Young Master, you're always teasing me." They had already shared a bed in Longhong village in Hangzhou, whispered sweet nothings, and done everything except the last act. Therefore, a rekindling of their dream was not too bold.

Lin Wanrong pulled her down to lie with him, and Qin Xian'er's body snuggled tightly against him. The two of them squeezed together on the campaign bed, but it had its own charm.

Lin Wanrong gave her a soft kiss on the ear, "Oh, Xian'er, the bed is a bit small. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Would you like to sleep on me? Or perhaps, I should sleep on you?"

Qin Xian'er lightly pounded her small fists against his chest, blushing as she said, "Young Master, don't misbehave. It's not that I am unwilling to give myself to you, but I fear you may not want me."

Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered the 'Love Bug' curse she was afflicted with; she was a beauty he could gaze upon but not consume. Ah, he didn't know when he would find a solution. If he couldn't consume, was he not allowed to touch? Lin Wanrong's hands slowly moved beneath her clothes, cupping her delicate breasts. After a moment's fondling, he sighed, "I apologize, Xian'er, I must confess. Every time I'm with you, seeing your beautiful face, your splendid figure, I have these unspeakable thoughts... I want to hold you, to touch you, to take advantage of you..." As he gently squeezed her tender buds, a wave of soft pleasure flowed through him, and he moaned indecently, "Can you forgive me?"

Seeing his shameless actions and hearing his unscrupulous words, Qin Xian'er found herself without the slightest bit of annoyance despite his hands wandering all over her body. On the contrary, she felt elated, lightly biting her lip and blushing as she said, "Since the day I met you, I knew what kind of person you were, but I like you as you are, Young Master."

Lin Wanrong smirked, caressing her smooth and slender stomach, he asked softly, "Among the White Lotus Sect, who else, apart from you, could infiltrate our camp so easily?"

Her cheeks flush, Qin Xian'er pressed her ample bosom against his arm, panting, "Apart from me, only Master could... Oh, Young Master, please..."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong felt reassured, his hands exploring her smooth and exquisite long legs, reaching for the inside of her panties. Qin Xian'er let out a soft yelp, her jade-like legs clamping onto his hands. She looked at him, her face as red as a sheet of paper, and sighed lightly, "Coming to find you, Young Master, I've been thinking about you every day, each passing day felt like a year. Despite your impertinence today, I have no regrets."

A rosy hue rose to her smooth, white neck. She parted her legs slightly, closed her eyes, surrendering herself to him for exploration.

Yet, Lin Wanrong simply held her in his arms, giving her a gentle kiss on her forehead, "Silly girl, do you think I'm a man without restraint?" Damn, if it weren't for your 'Love Bug' curse, I would have restraint... Not!

Her face lit up in joy, Qin Xian'er opened her eyes wide and gave him a quick peck on the lips, laughing, "Thank you, Young Master, for your kindness. You're wonderful."

Lin Wanrong coughed awkwardly twice to cover his embarrassment, "Xian'er, how come you're here in Chuzhou?"

Qin Xian'er sighed, "We've been trying to rescue Senior Brother Lu recently, so I stayed in Hangzhou and didn't come back."

"You're trying to save Lu Zhongping?" Lin Wanrong nearly burst into laughter. This girl probably didn't know that Lu Zhongping, out of fear, had already confessed everything.

Qin Xian'er nodded, "Indeed, Master told us to save Senior Brother Lu at all costs. However, he was imprisoned by Xu Wei in a high-security prison. We've been waiting for a long time but haven't found a solution. Recently, we heard that the military in Shandong was making strange movements, and an army was passing by Chuzhou, so we detoured here hoping to investigate. But we were a step late. Only tonight did we get news that tens of thousands of troops from Zhejiang and Shandong have surrounded Jinan. I fear they intend to wipe out our White Lotus sect."

She received this news far too late. It seemed that Xu Wei's secrecy was quite effective. It will be hard for the White Lotus cult to escape this time.

Seeing him deep in thought, Qin Xian'er leaned her face against his chest, "Young Master, weren't you at the Xiao family's residence? How did you end up here in the military camp?"

Lin Wanrong was a bit troubled. Xian'er was a member of the White Lotus cult, the very group he was ordered to exterminate. He represented the imperial army, the embodiment of justice. Didn't this create a dichotomy between good and evil? Would he have to stand in opposition to Xian'er? This was a troubling predicament; Xian'er, with her beauty, couldn't be evil. He sighed, "It's a long story. Why don't you tell me first how you found me?"

Qin Xian'er glanced at him with a smile, "Have you forgotten my origins?"

Lin Wanrong's mind lit up, "The Lixiang Pavilion?"

Xian'er nodded, "The brothels of several provinces like Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui are mostly our informants. I got the news about the siege in Jinan tonight and was about to depart, but then I saw you entering Lixiang Pavilion."

Lin Wanrong broke out in a cold sweat. He would need to be cautious if he ever married Xian'er; otherwise, he might be discovered if he ever visited a brothel.

"Xian'er, I went to Lixiang Pavilion for official business. You know, I am always serious." Lin Wanrong chuckled.

Qin Xian'er covered her mouth and laughed, "I know very well what kind of person Young Master is. How could you possibly have interest in those courtesans when you have women of incomparable beauty by your side?"

"Well, that might not be true. Remember when I visited Miaoyu Pavilion? Didn't the most beautiful courtesan there take a fancy to me?" Lin Wanrong took her hand and looked at her with a smile.

Upon hearing his reference to their past, Qin Xian'er was both shy and delighted. She softly said, "It wasn't that I took a liking to you. You somehow deceived me, and I've been unable to free myself from you ever since."

Of all the women Lin Wanrong had been intimate with, Qin Xian'er was the one he thought of least. Seeing her so attached to him, he felt both touched and a little guilty. He looked at her small face and seriously said, "Xian'er, you shouldn't go back to Jinan this time."

"Why?" Xian'er glanced at him, her voice low.

Lin Wanrong sighed, "You see, I am now in a military camp, commanding hundreds of soldiers."

Qin Xian'er nodded. Lin Wanrong continued, "And these are just the third-rate reinforcements. Ahead, there are elite infantry and cavalry, as well as the Divine Machine Unit. Tens of thousands of troops have already surrounded Jinan. The court has made up its mind to eradicate your White Lotus Sect this time. If you go back now, it will be a path to self-destruction."

Tears sparkled in Qin Xian'er's eyes as she said, "Young Master, are you worried about me?"

"Of course I am, Xian'er. This is war, not a game. I cannot bear to see you get hurt. Otherwise, I will live with heartache for the rest of my life."

Upon hearing this, Qin Xian'er fell into his arms, sobbing, "Young Master, thank you. With your words, even death would leave me content."

"Dear, don't cry. Listen to me, don't go back," Lin Wanrong tried to console her.

However, Xian'er shook her head in his embrace. "I can't. My master is still there. She raised me for many years, her kindness heavier than a mountain. I cannot abandon her. Young Master, you need not worry about me. You know, my martial arts skills are good; no one can hurt me."

Frantically, Lin Wanrong patted her on the shoulder, "Silly girl, even with your good martial arts skills, they will be useless against our dozen or so giant cannons bombarding the area. Our cannons are very powerful, even more powerful than the cannon I carry."

Tears poured down Xian'er's face like rain, but a sweet smile graced her features. Through her sobbing laughter, she said, "With your words, Young Master, Xian'er can die without regrets. But I cannot leave my benefactor. Without her, there would be no Xian'er today."

"What about me then?" Seeing Xian'er's stubbornness, Lin Wanrong resorted to charm. "You know, this time I am with the official army, and you are with the White Lotus Sect. Once we begin fighting, we become enemies. If we meet on the battlefield, what then? Although I enjoy being physical with you in bed, how could I raise my hand against you in battle? Xian'er, you're asking for my life. Better you kill me with your sword right now one strike, two if the first doesn't do it, three if two don't"

Xian'er, terrified, quickly covered his mouth, exclaiming, "Young Master, don't talk nonsense. Even if it costs me my life, I could never harm you. If we meet on the battlefield, I would rather die under the bombardment than draw my sword against you." She held Lin Wanrong tight, softly but firmly declaring, "Young Master, you are my lifeline. Without you, I wouldn't want to live."

This stubborn girl, Lin Wanrong sighed in resignation. Though she was outwardly gentle and obedient, Qin Xian'er had a strong will of her own, something he had experienced firsthand. No matter how much he persuaded her, it was all in vain. She had already made up her mind.

"Xian'er, you really do want to take my life," Lin Wanrong gently said, stroking her silky hair.

Tears had soaked his chest as she held him tighter, "Young Master, could you hold me tighter?"

Lin Wanrong held the delicate woman in his arms, caressing her smooth back. Thinking of her lonely fate and her profound love for him, he felt an intense surge of emotion. Holding her soft, boneless body, he found no lust arising within him.

My realm had elevated once again. As he gazed at Xian'er, who had fallen asleep in his arms, her lovely mouth curved into a slight smile. Dewy tears clung to her long eyelashes, and her delicate eyebrows furrowed faintly. It seemed as if some unresolved matter weighed on her even in her dreams, causing one's heart to ache at the sight. He couldn't help but sigh deeply, holding her body closer. An inexplicable sense of unease welled up within him.

"Xian'er, you mustn't get hurt! I will not allow anything to harm you!" He softly kissed her forehead and said with determination. The two of them then fell asleep, nestled together on the narrow military cot.

In the lonely silence of the midnight, he felt a sudden chill, as if something was missing. Hurrying to open his eyes, he saw the gentle moonlight streaming in, illuminating the bed. But where was Xian'er? Her faint fragrance lingered on the pillow, a few strands of her long hair evidence that the previous moment wasn't merely a dream.

A small piece of paper slipped from the head of the bed, on it a line written in delicate script, "I would rather die than see you hurt!"

Lin Wanrong held the piece of paper, silent for a long time. Xian'er had left! The silly girl!

A sudden wave of frustration hit him. Noticing that the hour was past the fourth watch of the night, he gritted his teeth and barked, "Gao Qiu, gather everyone. Everyone, assemble now."

Chapter 240 Fire the Cannon

Gao Qiu, startled by the sudden commotion, hurried over from his quarters nearby. Though he had just woken up, his face bore no trace of sleepiness. In a rush, he asked, "Brother Lin, what is it?"

Lin Wanrong spoke in a deep voice, "Have Zhao Liangyu lead the Divine Machine Unit, Du Xiuyuan take charge of the army of Zhejiang, and Hu Bugui lead the Shandong troops, to assemble urgently at the Divine Machine Unit's camp. There can be no mistakes."

Seeing Lin Wanrong's serious demeanor, Gao Qiu assumed there was an emergency military situation. Not daring to delay, he agreed and went out to deliver the orders.

Lin Wanrong rose to his feet and paced back and forth in the tent. The thought of Qin Xianer's predicament gripped his heart. Qin Xianer was bound to enter the battlefield to defend her master, but she was virtually invulnerable to blades and swords due to her martial prowess. The most lethal threat was the artillery. He had no idea how powerful the upgraded Cannon would be. Damn, he thought, I should have known better than to improve the cannon when I knew I might have to face Xianer.

The sounds of commotion from outside indicated that Gao Qiu had already delivered the orders to the Divine Machine Unit. The soldiers in the camp, roused from their sleep before dawn, naturally complained.

Displeased with Zhao Liangyu's lax defenses, Lin Wanrong spent the night in the Divine Machine Unit. If not for Xianer's timely warning, an assassin could have easily infiltrated the camp to target General Lin.

Upon the call for an emergency assembly, the quality of the three camps became evident. Although Hu Bugui's Shandong Camp was the last to be notified, they were the first to arrive. The soldiers, despite their varied appearances, were uniformed and their weapons were gleaming. Their ferocious and fearless demeanor demanded respect from anyone who saw them. The bearded Hu Bugui was indeed a seasoned commander, superior in the art of training soldiers.

Du Xiuyuan's Zhejiang Camp arrived second. While they could not compete with Hu Bugui, their marching and defensive formations were meticulous.

In contrast, the Divine Machine Unit, despite being the closest, was the last to assemble. By the time Zhao Liangyu managed to organize his troops, both Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan had already led their teams through an exercise. Seeing Lin Wanrong's stern expression, Zhao felt a sense of foreboding, but did not dare to voice it in front of the silent General Lin.

With Gao Qiu's help, Lin Wanrong had donned a suit of armor and battle boots. His angular face, coupled with his attire, made him appear intimidating and imposing. The armor he wore was unusually light, and under normal circumstances, he would have been interested in studying it. But his mind was consumed by distress that day. With his face as dark as charcoal, he had no mind for such things.

Seeing General Lin's grim expression and the urgency of the assembly order, the three commanders were filled with anxiety. They couldn't help but wonder if something had gone terribly wrong at the front.

Lin Wanrong climbed to a higher vantage point and surveyed the area. He saw that the soldiers of the three camps before him were most imposing in Hu Bugui's formation, followed by Du Xiuyuan's, while the Divine Machine Unit was in disarray. The Divine Machine Unit was the Imperial Guard from the capital, with soldiers selected for their exceptional qualities. Compared to the ragged troops of Hu and Du, these soldiers were physically superior several times over. Yet, their sloppy and fatigued appearance was a sight hard to believe of an Imperial Guard.

With a cold smile, Lin Wanrong walked a few steps forward to the stage, declaring loudly, "Some of you may not know me yet. I'm Lin San, a Military Strategist under Marshal Xu, and I've been assigned by him to come to Chuzhou to reorganize the army for war. Some of you should have already remembered my name from last night."

The news of General Lin disciplining more than twenty soldiers from the Divine Machine Unit by breaking five planks had spread the night before. Today, seeing this Military Strategist commanding six to seven hundred men in person, the soldiers were astounded to find him to be in his twenties.

"Brothers, you may be wondering why someone as young as me is responsible for commanding the army. Honestly, I've asked the same question to Marshal Xu. Marshal Xu said, although I don't excel at anything in particular, I do have three excellent traits: loyalty, strategy, and ruthlessness."

Lin Wanrong surveyed the crowd, a smile creeping onto his face, "Upon careful consideration, I realized Marshal Xu's words were absolutely precise. I used to loaf around in Jinling, where I had a bit of a reputation. For those who are interested, feel free to ask around about what kind of person I, Lin San, am. Find out how I treat my brothers. Once you understand that, you'll know why I prioritize loyalty."

The three commanders exchanged glances, unable to suppress their amusement as they listened to General Lin's frank speech. It sounded as if they were dealing with a gangster. Only Gao Qiu, having interacted frequently with Lin Wanrong, wasn't surprised anymore.

"Today, as soldiers, there's no distinction between north and south, old and young among us, we're all brothers. We need to look out for each other. On the battlefield, to protect your brothers is to protect yourself. If anyone dares to stab their comrades in the back, I, Lin San, have a myriad of ways to deal with such treachery. If you think I'm ruthless, just try me," Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth, radiating a deadly aura. Gao Qiu broke a steel blade in two with a snap, and then crushed one piece in his hand, leaving everyone in awe. His demonstration was shockingly effective, silencing the previously raucous soldiers of the Divine Machine Unit.

"While serving under me, I don't demand much, just two simple things. First, you need to master your skills as a soldier. I don't expect you to shatter boulders with your strength that's nonsense. I want you to perfect the basics. How do you do that? It's simple. If you hold a sword, slash fiercely. If you hold a spear, thrust firmly. If you operate a cannon, aim accurately. This isn't for my benefit it's for your survival on the battlefield. Brother Gao, show them," commanded Lin Wanrong.

Gao Qiu took a half-foot length of wood and set it upright on the ground. With a light shout, his blade shimmered, splitting the wood straight down the middle. The soldiers looked on, awestruck. If they could master such a skill, it would indeed prove invaluable on the battlefield.

Seeing Gao Qiu stun the crowd with a single move, Lin Wanrong felt immensely satisfied. Despite knowing countless methods for training soldiers, he realized that under the circumstances of this era, ideas about advanced training ideologies or creating firearms, high-tech training, or making a technologically advanced nation, though they sounded impressive, were in reality utter nonsense. Cold weapons were just that: cold weapons. Mastering sword and spear combat, this was the hard truth of survival on the battlefield, there was no alternative.

"The second point is also simple," Lin Wanrong's voice rang out, resonant and loud. "You must obey the commander's orders. If I command you to charge, you must charge. If I command you to retreat, you must retreat. If I command you to visit a brothel, even if you're a eunuch, you'd better manage to produce a cock."

Laughter erupted from the soldiers in the three camps below the stage. Their general was utterly crude, but they found it endearing.

"I will not gamble with your lives. On the battlefield, if we can't beat them and I order you to run, you'd better run like hell. If you run too slow, I well, there won't be a need for me to do anything, you'll have been chopped down already."

Laughter echoed again from the audience as General Lin continued: "When I order you to retreat, you must not hesitate. All responsibility falls to me alone. To survive in this world, righteousness stands central, with morality on both sides. Your lives, my brothers, are as precious and valuable as those of any officials. I will not let you sacrifice needlessly."

These soldiers, sons of poverty, were roused by Lin Wanrong's words, their blood boiling as they erupted into cheers. They felt that this general was truly different, caring for his soldiers like his own children.

The three company Commanders exchanged glances. Even just this speech before the formation was enough to make them willing to die for him. This Military Strategist was no ordinary general.

"To promote the enthusiasm of my brothers in training, I will now announce some new military regulations." Lin Wanrong announced loudly. "Effective immediately, the Divine Machine Unit, the two hundred Zhejiang soldiers, and the two hundred Shandong soldiers will train together. Every morning, each brother will be provided with ample food, but only ninety percent will have lunch, and only eighty percent will have dinner. These brothers will be those who pass the evaluations after their training. As for the brothers who don't pass, they'll have to go hungry and train harder the next day."

Upon hearing this, the crowd was taken aback. It was practically a devil's regulation, wouldn't everyone have to struggle to be in that ninety and eighty percent? Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan hurriedly protested, "General Lin"

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively. "There's no need to say more. Our troops are weak. If we don't resort to harsh methods, I fear we will collapse before we even reach the frontline."

The harsh measure proposed by Lin Wanrong was akin to the elimination system of modern companies. He was all too familiar with this method and intended to apply it to the training regimen, weeding out the weak from every drill. Though it seemed extreme, was there a better approach for such a group?

Next up was the live training that had been agreed upon the night before, featuring the Shandong soldiers and Zhejiang soldiers. Hu Bugui's meticulously trained elite cavalry of forty played the role of the attackers, while Du Xiuyuan's Zhejiang army acted as defenders.

According to the assumptions of Lin Wanrong and others, Hu Bugui's troops were robust and far superior in individual combat ability than Du Xiuyuan's soldiers. It should have been a quick defeat for the Zhejiang Battalion.

However, the reality proved otherwise. The formation set up by Du Xiuyuan was very effective against Hu Bugui's trained cavalry. Although his soldiers were physically weaker, the formation was tightly knit. Whenever a man fell, another quickly took his place, maintaining the integrity of the formation and confining Hu Bugui's cavalry within a narrow space. This had undeniably seized the cavalry's lifeline. After a standoff of an hour, the Zhejiang Battalion was eventually dispersed due to the vast difference in combat strength by the elite cavalry.

As a modern man, Lin Wanrong had initially scoffed at such battle formations. But after witnessing this exercise, he realized the profound wisdom in these ancient strategies which had been passed down through the ages. This discovery gave him a fresh perspective on Du Xiuyuan and Hu Bugui. One was skilled in training soldiers, and the other in orchestrating formations - a perfect duo.

Next was the drill of the Divine Machine Unit. Lin Wanrong ordered the construction of two earthen mounds at a distance from each other, with about thirty meters in between. Then, a large Shenji cannon was set up in the distance aimed to fire specifically at the rear mound.

Loading ammunition into the cannon was cumbersome, and the cannonballs were solid, unlike the shrapnel of later times, thus, their destructive power was much less. As Lin Wanrong watched, he grew impatient, shouting, "The first shot from this cannon must be precise and effective. There can be no slack."

Zhao Liangyu hurriedly said, "As the commander of the Divine Machine Unit, allow me to operate this first shot."

Lin Wanrong nodded, standing behind him to observe the operation. Once Zhao Liangyu had adjusted the cannon's elevation and distance, and was satisfied, he lit the fuse. Everyone covered their ears, waiting for the loud bang.

Lin Wanrong waited for a while but heard nothing. He began to wonder if the first shot was a dud, which would be an incredibly inauspicious start. Just as he was about to instruct Zhao Liangyu to inspect the cannon, a soft whistle was heard, followed by a loud boom. Smoke and dust rose in the distance as the cannonball exploded, but it was a hundred or two hundred meters away from the mound.

"Commander Zhao, what happened?" Lin Wanrong asked with a stern face.

Sweat broke out on Zhao Liangyu's forehead. This cannon had been recently improved and was said to have greatly increased its precision, but he had never tested it. Today, the first shot was far from satisfying, which was bound to anger General Lin. Recalling being caught in the brothel the day before, he feared that this new Military Strategist was about to take this opportunity to settle the score.

Lin Wanrong was seething inwardly. He demanded the cannon to be accurate in its trial fire for a significant personal reason. If they were to enter the battlefield in the future, he was bound to encounter Qin Xian'er. He had no desire to hurt that girl, so the least he could do was ensure the cannon was well-calibrated and accurate. As long as he was in command, the shots would never hit Xian'er. This was his primary motivation for practicing the cannon. As for the ordinary members of the White Lotus cult, if they chose to participate in revolutionary activities without remorse and were subsequently blown to pieces, it was not his concern.

Seeing how incompetent Zhao Liangyu was, Lin Wanrong snorted, then walked to the first mound and shouted, "Damn it, I'll stand here now, and you aim at the small mound behind me. If you hit it, you're a hero. But if you accidentally hit me, you're guilty of murdering a superior officer. Marshal Xu will report to the Emperor, and your whole family, nine generations, will be punished!"

Zhao Liangyu was terrified. He rushed over and said, "General Lin, this can't be done. Cannon fire is indiscriminate. If it harms your valuable body, I can't bear the responsibility."

Lin Wanrong glanced at him and said, "Commander Zhao, by your meaning, my body is more precious than yours, isn't it?"

Zhao Liangyu hurriedly nodded, "Yes, yes! You are the commander of the troops, naturally, you're more precious than me."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Well, since I am more precious than you, Commander Zhao, I'll trouble you to stand in my position as a target, and I'll try firing a few shots."

Zhao Liangyu was so frightened that he almost collapsed. To be a target for General Lin? With the General himself shooting? This was akin to suicide.

"Stand still, it's a military order. Don't move around, or else I might miss and hit who knows where," Lin Wanrong sneered. You have yet to be punished for your misconduct yesterday, and today your cannon fire is inaccurate. If I don't give you a hard time, you might think I'm easy to be pushed around.

Lin Wanrong returned to the cannon platform. Zhao Liangyu, trembling all over, dared not move an inch on the mound. He turned to the Divine Machine Unit soldiers and loudly asked, "Who is the most proficient with this cannon?"

The soldiers all pointed at one man, a man in his thirties. The respect in their eyes was evident. The man held considerable prestige among them.

The man saluted Lin Wanrong and said, "Reporting to the General, my name is Li Sheng, and I participated in the modification of this cannon."

"Oh?" Lin Wanrong asked joyfully, "You've been to Hai'an and seen the French ironclad ships?"

Li Sheng respectfully replied, "Yes. Marshal Xu mentioned you to us. He said that the improvements to the cannon were all thanks to General Lin."

"Good, good, you try to fire a shot," Lin Wanrong said with delight.

Li Sheng nodded, climbed onto the platform, and calmly loaded, aimed, and lit the fuse. With a thunderous boom, the cannonball soared through the air and hit the mound behind accurately. As the cannon roared, Zhao Liangyu was so scared that he collapsed and fainted on the mound.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Good. By my command, Li Sheng is promoted to a hundred men Commander, leading the two hundred soldiers of the Divine Machine Unit. This shall be reported to Marshal Xu immediately." Li Sheng's skill was exceptional, and he held a high prestige within the Divine Machine Unit. When Lin Wanrong gave this order, everyone, except for a few of Zhao Liangyu's close followers, cheered.

Du Xiuyuan and Hu Bugui had long lost their respect for the uneducated and incompetent Commander Zhao. They were pleased to see Lin Wanrong's decisive action and immediately came forward to congratulate Li Sheng.

Lin Wanrong looked at Du Xiuyuan and Hu Bugui, speaking seriously, "Brother Du, Brother Hu, I am entrusting the training of the soldiers to both of you. Brother Hu is responsible for individual training, and Brother Du is responsible for formation drills. I hope you won't quarrel. See each other's strengths, cooperate sincerely, and guide these six to seven hundred brothers. It is not about

how many enemies they kill, at the very least, they should have the ability to save themselves on the battlefield."

Both Du Xiuyuan and Hu Bugui were competent men. Although they disapproved of each other, it was only academic disagreement, not a despising of character. Seeing that Lin Wanrong's words were simple but sincere, they saluted together, "Rest assured, General Lin, we will do our best."

Lin Wanrong sighed, "That's very good. Actually, it's not that I don't want to train the soldiers myself, it's just that there are more important things to do." His face showed a look of sorrow, like a man burdened with the worries of the country and people. Du Xiuyuan and Hu Bugui were quite impressed.

Gao Qiu came to his side and whispered, "Brother Lin, what is the more important thing you have to do?"

Lin Wanrong grinned, "To take a nap, drink some tea, visit the brothel, take a bath. Which of these is not more important than training soldiers?"

Gao Qiu was stunned for a moment, then burst into hearty laughter. This Brother Lin was indeed the most amusing person under the heavens.

The orders from Xu Wei finally arrived. The troops from Chuzhou immediately set off, heading to the boundary between Shandong and Anhui. Lin Wanrong's gaze was fixed in the distance, where the direction of Suzhou and Xuzhou lay. The flames of war at the frontline had already started to burn.

Am I really going to fight against Xian'er? He sighed lightly, a sense of loss he had never experienced before creeping into his heart.