

Finest 506

Chapter 506 The Song

"What's wrong with you, Brother Lin?" Gao Qiu was shocked, hurriedly catching Lin Wanrong as he stumbled. Lord Lin's face was pale, his expression weary, and his eyelids seemed almost glued together.

"What a formidable Seven-Step Powder!" Gao Qiu exclaimed in astonishment.

Lin Wanrong struggled to keep his eyes open, annoyed, "It's no Seven-Step Powder. She's bluffing. It's a sleeping drug on the needle! Pinch me, Brother Gao, I'm about to fall asleep."

Gao Qiu quickly pinched Lord Lin on his arm with some force. Yet, Lin Wanrong was so groggy that he hardly reacted to the minor pain. His mind was cloudy, and had Gao Qiu not been supporting him, he would have already fallen over.

Seeing the two men in disarray, Li Xiangjun laughed out loud, "How does it feel to experience the power of my Seven-Step Powder? That's what you get for not listening to me!"

"Miss, you are Brother Lin's sister-in-law. Even if you don't care for him, how can you resort to such malicious methods? I can't stand to watch this," Gao Qiu said, angered by Li Xiangjun's gleeful demeanor.

"What methods have I used?" Li Xiangjun's face turned cold suddenly, "So you two can insult me, but I can't strike back? What kind of logic is that?"

Lin Wanrong could hardly argue with her. Realizing her mood was not good, he hastily said, "Little Sister Xiangjun, actually, Brother Gao was joking. He's always like this, very humorous. Think about it, you're so young, why would I be interested in you—"

"What did you say?!" Li Xiangjun's eyebrows shot up, her eyes seemingly ready to shoot fire.

"Ah, no, no," Lin Wanrong hastily waved his hand, "What I mean is, I'm so much older, and you're so young. Why would you be interested in me? Brother Gao was talking nonsense; it's utterly baseless! Don't you agree, Little Sister?"

As he spoke, the effects of the sleeping drug grew stronger. His mind was clouded, his eyelids nearly sealing shut; he felt extremely uncomfortable.

"At least you have some self-awareness," Li Xiangjun snorted, glancing at him disdainfully, "Men in this world, not a single one is good. I don't know what my senior sister saw in someone treacherous like you! Just keep that needle in you, consider it revenge on behalf of my sister."

Despite her young age, Li Xiangjun possessed a certain cynical demeanor, always quick to defend her sister. Lin Wanrong, having been patient time and again, finally lost his temper.

"Little Sister, it's only out of respect for your sister that I have been so patient with you. Don't think for a moment that I am afraid of you," Lin Wanrong said menacingly, "You should know that I am armed!"

"You have a gun? Oh my, is that so?! I'm so scared!" Li Xiangjun slapped her chest and laughed gleefully.

Gao Qiu blinked, leaning close to Lin Wanrong's ear and whispered cautiously, "Brother Lin, do you really have a gun? Where is it? Hurry up and pull it out, shoot her!"

"Gao Qiu, she's just a child. I have my principles. How can I, as an adult, pull out a gun on a little girl?" Lin Wanrong said, his face stern with moral dilemma.

Li Xiangjun, who had overheard their conversation, couldn't help but let out a delicate laugh, scoffing, "Pull out a gun? Do you think you can fool me so easily? If you're so capable, then shoot —"

Before she could finish her sentence, a deafening bang erupted. The ground itself seemed to quiver, and the reverberating sound echoed among the mountains, unceasing.

"You, you—" Li Xiangjun's face turned pale. She pointed a trembling finger at Lin Wanrong's face, her eyes fixed on the smoking firearm in his hand, unable to utter a word as if she had been struck dumb.

It wasn't just Li Xiangjun; even Gao Qiu was shaken by the sudden explosion, the echoes still humming in his ears. "Brother Lin, you—you really brought a gun?!" Gao Qiu stammered.

The barrel of the gun, still pointing at the sky and emitting wisps of smoke, Lin Wanrong snorted menacingly. An aura of murderous intent radiated from him: "When I kill, I don't joke around! Once my steel gun is drawn, it commands respect, and it won't be sheathed without shedding blood. Heh heh, I warned her seriously!"

Even Fairy Ning almost suffered under Lord Lin's firearm sneak attack, let alone Li Xiangjun, a young maiden. After the gunshot, she seemed to be paralyzed with fear, standing still, tears accumulating in her big eyes, resembling a pear blossom after a rain shower. How pitiful she looked!

Young lady, finally scared into submission, huh? To deal with women, words are not enough, guns are necessary! Seeing the young lady cry in fright, Lin Wanrong blew some air at the muzzle of the gun, unspeakably smug.

"Brother Lin, you are truly brilliant. Your method for dealing with your sister-in-law is unique and ingenious. Admirable, truly admirable!" Gao Qiu praised with a wide smile.

"Really?" Lin Wanrong waved his hand proudly, "Not at all, Gao Qiu, you're too kind. If the sister-in-law doesn't obey, she needs to be disciplined! Wait until you get a sister-in-law of your own, then you'll understand!"

Gao Qiu sighed and shook his head with a bitter expression, "I'm afraid I won't have your good fortune. To have such a beautiful sister-in-law, I'd rather be pricked by her every day!"

Lin Wanrong shook his head in disappointment, finding Gao Qiu irredeemable.

After envying him for a while, Gao Qiu suddenly realized something, "Huh, Brother Lin, what happened to the sedative you were affected by? Why aren't you dizzy anymore?"

Reminded by Gao Qiu, Lin Wanrong was equally astonished. "That's right, why am I not dizzy anymore? Could it be that I've used sedatives on others so often that I've developed an immunity to them?"

As he was pondering, Li Xiangjun suddenly burst into tears, "I—I hate you! You bullied me—"

"Bullying you? So what?" Lin Wanrong waggled his eyebrows and chuckled, brandishing his gun with pride, "Who told us we have a gun?"

"Exactly, who told us to have guns! The young lady was poking her brother-in-law's butt, and now she's in trouble!" Gao Qiu walked beside Lord Lin, both men laughing lewdly, their expressions unspeakably smug and their demeanor indescribably sleazy.

"Ah—" Li Xiangjun had never seen such a scene and was instantly frightened into running away, crying out loud. "Master, Master, Lin San is bullying me!"

"This young lady really can't take a scare," Gao Qiu laughed heartily. "Even if you call your Master, it's useless. Brother Lin has a gun; maybe he'll even bully your Master too! Brother Lin, Brother Lin —"

He hurriedly patted Lin San's shoulder only to find Lin's mouth wide open, eyes bulging, and the musket in his hands trembling, as if he were under a spell.

"Brother Gao, what did she just say?" Lin Wanrong stammered a bit; his voice was calm, but there was an uncontrollable excitement in it.

"She said you're bullying her."

"No, no, the sentence before that!"

"She called for her Master—"

"Master?" Lin Wanrong muttered to himself, his facial muscles twitching intermittently. "Is Fairy Sister here?" He exclaimed excitedly, "Brother Gao, quick, let's go there! Yuxi, I'm coming—"

Upon receiving Lord Lin's order, how could Gao Qiu dare to dawdle? He quickly pushed Lord Lin's wheelchair and rushed into the thatched hut.

The room was simply furnished, but the sight of a white robe by the window caught Lin Wanrong's eye. A delicate woman was deeply contemplating something. This white robe was Fairy Ning's

favorite color. Lin Wanrong's eyes moistened and his palms trembled as he reached out, murmuring, "Yuxi, is that you?"

"It's not me!" The woman in the white robe giggled and turned around, swiftly disarming him of his musket.

Upon seeing the woman's face, Lin Wanrong was both embarrassed and angry, "You, you dare to trick me?"

"If I don't trick you, who will I trick?" Li Xiangjun stood up, laughing, and shook off her white robe. She gracefully turned around, "Look, do I resemble my master?"

This robe was indeed Fairy Ning's. Though Li Xiangjun was young and the robe was two sizes too big, she was so stunningly beautiful that she still looked charming in the oversized garment.

"You're far from it," Lin Wanrong disdainfully snorted, "You and Fairy Sister are as different as mud and the sky. Even if you cultivate for ten lifetimes, you won't be half as good as her."

"You, you—" Li Xiangjun was so angry that tears started to form in her eyes. She pointed the musket at his temple, warning sternly, "I warn you, be careful what you say. I have a gun!"

Gao Qiu screamed, "Slow down, slow down. This Western weapon can easily misfire. Young lady and brother-in-law, just playing around is enough, why go so far as to bully people?"

"Get out, you charcoal piece!" Li Xiangjun immediately became furious, pointing her finger and scolding Gao Qiu.

The young lady's face was full of rage, and with Lord Lin on her side, Gao Qiu couldn't do anything to her.

"Brother Gao, you should leave," Lin Wanrong said with a smile, "She's my relative; she won't bully me!"

"Bully me? So what?" As soon as Gao Qiu left the hut, Li Xiangjun giggled and proudly waved the pistol in her small hand. "Who can blame us for having a gun!"

It was indeed karma at its swiftest. Lin Wanrong shook his head and laughed. "Go ahead, bully me. I have never feared anyone. But before you do, there's something I must teach you."

"I have a Master. Why would I need you to teach me anything?" Li Xiangjun snorted.

"I'll teach you how to use that pistol!" Lin Wanrong chuckled, twisting her delicate wrist. "This weapon is from the West. The barrel should point inwards, and the bullet will shoot out from the other end. If you hold it like you are now, you'll end up shooting yourself." He shrugged and smiled casually, "If you pull the trigger now, bullying me would be the least of your worries. You'd end up bullying yourself!"

"I—I was holding it backward on purpose," Li Xiangjun's cheeks flushed red as she hastily corrected the gun's orientation. "What are you laughing at? Don't laugh! Do you believe I'll shoot?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled for a while, gazing at her without saying a word. Irritated by his intense stare, Li Xiangjun exclaimed, "What are you looking at? I'll shoot!"

"Take off that outfit," Lin Wanrong hummed lightly. "It doesn't belong to you."

"Why should I? This was left to me by my Master. Why should I listen to you?" Li Xiangjun retorted defiantly.

Compared to Ning Yuxi, Li Xiangjun's temperament was the complete opposite. Gazing at her pure white dress, Lin Wanrong sighed, as if seeing the celestial Ning Yuxi before him. "Brother Gao, let's go."

Hearing the acknowledgment from outside, Gao Qiu was about to enter. Annoyed that Lin Wanrong was disregarding her, Li Xiangjun shouted, "Stop! You think you can just leave like that?"

"So, little sister, are you inviting us to stay for dinner?" Lin Wanrong said with a smile.

Li Xiangjun's pretty face turned cold. "What is your relationship with my Master?"

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively. "It's a very important relationship. You're too young to understand now. But when you grow up, you will."

Though young, Li Xiangjun was quick-witted and not easily fooled. "Don't think I don't understand. You called my Master by her name just now, I heard it clearly. How dare you, Lin San? How can you face my Master and my senior sister?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Who should I be fair to then, your Master or your senior sister?"

Confronted with such shameless remarks, Li Xiangjun was clearly outmatched. Angry, she said, "Both my Master and senior sister are the most outstanding women in the world. If you dare to betray either of them, I will never forgive you!"

This young girl was indeed fair. Lin Wanrong chuckled and looked at her earnestly. "I feel the same way. Qingxuan and Yuxi—if I ever betray any of them, may I be cursed, never to die a peaceful death."

His voice was not loud, but it carried a unique force, piercing through the air with a resonant authority.

Li Xiangjun froze. Lin Wanrong wasted no time lingering, "Brother Gao, let's go!"

Gao Qiu pushed his wheelchair outside the room, and the young girl quickly snapped back to reality. "You wish," she seethed. "I'll tell my senior sister about today and see how long your smugness lasts!"

"Suit yourself," Lin Wanrong sighed. What had to come, would come; might as well face it all at once.

"You, you—" Seeing his indifference, Li Xiangjun's face flushed red. She brandished her pistol, "Believe it or not, I'll really shoot!"

Lin Wanrong didn't even look back, offering a dismissive wave of his hand as a response. As the two men moved further away, Li Xiangjun clenched her pistol, her face flushing and paling in indecision.

After a significant distance, Gao Qiu whispered, "Brother Lin, your little sister-in-law talks tough, but she's not a bad person. As for the sedative she mentioned, it was clearly minuscule. She was just trying to intimidate you."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I'd like to see if the needle would hurt as much if it pricked your buttocks instead. And don't forget, she's got my gun now. We're technically under her aim."

"Speaking of the gun," Gao Qiu frowned, puzzled, "when I walked in earlier, the way she was holding it was strange, unlike how you hold it. It was as if she was holding it the wrong way—"

"Shh—" Lin Wanrong hastily lowered his voice, smiling slyly, "Brother Gao, haven't I taught you? One shouldn't be too honest!"

Gao Qiu nodded in sudden realization.

Standing silently on the peak, a chain stretched to the heavens, heading towards the misty and enigmatic summit. He gently stroked the chain, a cold sensation flowing into his palms. Memories surfaced, but they felt like a warm current encircling his heart.

"Yu Xi—"

"Fairy Sister—"

Lin Wanrong cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled frantically across to the other peak.

"Yu Xi—"

"Fairy Sister—"

The echoes reverberated, unceasing, as if carried by the spring winds, filling the valley. The misty peak across remained serene, like a garden in the sky, its secrets veiled.

From the glaring daylight to the tranquil sunset, Lin Wanrong shouted, unrelentingly, mustering all the strength he had.

As night descended, a light drizzle began to fall, each drop piercing like a steel needle. Lanterns flickered to life below, their glow intermittent in the rain, ethereal as stars on a clear night.

The peak across remained as desolate as ever, devoid of any light. Soaked to the bone, Lin Wanrong refused to step back. He coughed lightly, his voice hoarse, as if some indescribable frustration was stuck in his chest.

"Yu Xi, Fairy Sister, where are you—where are you—" He shouted with all his might. The raw, quivering voice persisted, echoing through the valley, startling flocks of nocturnal birds into flight.

Silence.

Unbearable silence.

The isolated peak, like a reef in the dark night, remained mute and still.

Raindrops struck his face, chilling him to the bone. Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth, his eyes moist. Through the misty rain, a faint melody emerged, drawing nearer and nearer, slowly filling the silence:

"Drunkenly I stroke my spring robe, cherishing its lingering scent,

The heavens seem to torment me with separation and madness.

Every year on the roadside, autumn grass springs anew,

Day by day, the sun sets within these chambers.

The clouds are faint,

The waters endless,

How long can a traveler's tears sustain him?

Love itself lacks words to describe,

So why waste tears on flowered paper?"

The haunting notes carried across the distance, resonating in the depths of his soul, blending with the drizzling rain and his tears.

Chapter 507 Everyone Found Out

The ethereal music reverberated, as if coming from some celestial plane. Lin Wanrong couldn't contain his joy and murmured, "It's Fairy Sister, it's her. She heard me speaking."

"What Fairy Sister?" Gao Qiu didn't know who Lin Wanrong was talking about. But seeing his excitement, he knew that this person was of great importance to him. Gao Qiu chuckled, "Whose daughter is singing such good lyrics? Even a crude person like me can't help but be moved. Brother Lin, your lover is a true catch!"

Gao Qiu's words amused Lin Wanrong. Listening to this melody made the entire day's wait worthwhile.

The voice was crisp and elusive, swirling around the mountains, echoing in his ears. It felt like a gentle breeze brushing past his cheeks, though he couldn't tell where it originated. Looking up at the cloud-shrouded Thousand-Forsake Peak, he didn't care whether Ning Yuxi could see him or not. In a burst of excitement, Lin Wanrong waved vigorously, "Fairy Sister, I miss you, I miss you—"

His words were echoed back by the mountains, carrying his voice far and wide. Even the thin drizzle couldn't dampen his ardor. Time seemed to stand still, and gradually the song subsided. Its lingering notes faded away, and the ethereal voice he yearned for did not sound again.

'I am leaving for war soon. I wonder if the Fairy Sister knows. When will she come down from the mountain?' Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, his gaze lingering on the opposing peak. The night was shrouded in a fine misty rain, the top of the peak was tranquil, and there was no sign of Ning Yuxi. Was it she who was singing and dancing on Thousand-Forsake Peak earlier?

"Brother Lin, it's getting late," seeing Lin Wanrong lost in thought, his clothes soaked by the rain, Gao Qiu whispered cautiously, "We need to set out early tomorrow."

Lin Wanrong gave a hum of acknowledgment, feeling lonely. This journey to the northern border, he didn't know when he could return, let alone if he would return alive. This melancholy weighed heavy on his heart. Earlier, he had the opportunity to hear the ethereal voice of his 'Fairy Sister,' but the feeling of being worlds apart only deepened his loneliness.

Earlier in the day, he bid farewell to Madam Xiao, and later he would have to part with Fairy Ning. Tomorrow he himself would leave; Eldest Miss, Qiaoqiao, Xian'er, and Qingxuan would all be worlds apart, like ships lost in a vast ocean. The unspoken sorrow was too much to bear even for someone as cheerful as he was.

"Let's go." Raindrops formed and trickled down his cheeks. Lin Wanrong wiped them away and took a final, lingering look at Thousand-Forsake Peak, then turned around resolutely.

Gao Qiu acknowledged and turned his wheelchair, pushing him toward the mountain's base. They had only taken a few steps when they saw a young girl holding a gun, standing coldly in front of them.

"Brother Lin, what should we do? Your sister-in-law—"

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively, "Who cares what she wants. Let's just go around her."

Gao Qiu nodded obediently, following Lin Wanrong's guidance. Just as they were about to detour, Li Xiangjun suddenly reappeared, blocking their way, "Trying to avoid me? Not so easy!"

Lin Wanrong's face darkened, "Little sister, I'm not in a good mood today and I don't have time to play games with you. If you provoke me, I'll make sure you behave before I explain to Qingxuan!"

Upon hearing his threats, Li Xiangjun laughed out loud. "You want to hit me? With your maimed arms and legs? I am not my senior sister; I won't let you bully me. Hey, do you still want this firearm?" She playfully shook the firearm in her hand and hummed triumphantly.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "You can keep it. I have plenty of these at home. So many that I could use a new one every day and still not run out. Have fun with it."

"Scoff," Li Xiangjun snorted. "Why would I, who has no relation to you, want anything from a broken man like you? Without this firearm, you'd probably be knocked off your horse in one round

on the battlefield." She pouted and shoved the firearm back into his hands. "Take it back; I don't want your junk."

Gao Qiu let out a few sounds of acknowledgment and, with a sly smile, leaned close to Lin Wanrong's ear. "See, Brother Lin, didn't I tell you? Your little sister-in-law actually cares about you. Look, she's even returned the firearm to you, concerned for your safety!"

"What 'little sister-in-law'? Old Gao, your language is truly outrageous," Lin Wanrong muttered, somewhere between laughter and tears. He took back the firearm and smiled. "Thank you for your concern, Little Sister Xiangjun. Rest assured, when I go into battle, I'll kill plenty of nomads and won't let you down."

"Who said I was concerned about you?" Li Xiangjun's face flushed. "I'm just afraid that if something happens to you, it'll break my senior sister's heart. As for whether a thick-skinned person like you lives or dies, what does it have to do with me?"

Knowing her temper, Lin Wanrong wouldn't argue. He chuckled and was about to leave when Li Xiangjun spoke again, "Tell my senior sister that I'll come down from the mountain tomorrow to join her."

"Tomorrow?" Lin Wanrong sighed. "Little junior sister, why not come down with me now? We could look out for each other. If you wait until tomorrow, I'll be gone early, and you'll miss me. Wouldn't that be a pity?"

"Why would I want to see you?" Li Xiangjun huffed in embarrassment and anger. "I'm waiting for you to leave so I can come down. The less I see of you, the better for my peace of mind."

"Very well," Lin Wanrong resigned. "Then stay here and spend more time with your Master. If you see her, tell her I've gone north to fight. It won't be long, just eight or ten years. After the war, I'll come back to see her."

Li Xiangjun wanted to laugh but dared not. She muttered softly, "As if you'd need to finish the war... idiot."

Lin Wanrong looked at her curiously. "Little junior sister, what are you saying?"

Realizing her thoughts were almost heard, Li Xiangjun flushed with both shyness and irritation. "I said, you idiot, get lost! The more I talk to you, the angrier I get."

This girl was clearly not the docile type. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, waved at her, and headed down the mountain with Gao Qiu.

On their journey, a light spring rain sprinkled down, tapping against the carriage's curtain, making a rustling sound. The roadside lamps flickered dimly in the rainy mist, their light blurry and indistinct. Lin Wanrong was silent, his thoughts flying to places unknown.

"Brother Lin, Eunuch Gao from the palace is here." Just as they reached the entrance to the Lin Mansion, the carriage slowly came to a halt. Gao Qiu leaned his head in and whispered the news.

'Gao Ping? What could he want at this hour? Could it be that His Majesty wants to see me again?' Lin Wanrong's scattered thoughts were immediately gathered as he lifted the curtain. He saw Gao Ping wearing a raincoat, accompanied by two young eunuchs, all dressed as ordinary people.

"Eunuch Gao, what brings you here?" After Gao Qiu parked the carriage, Lin Wanrong alighted, expressing his surprise, "Why didn't you enter the mansion?"

Bowing deeply, Gao Ping lowered his voice, "Master Lin, His Majesty has sent me to convey an oral command."

Sensing the message was confidential, Gao Qiu discreetly stepped away. Lin Wanrong nodded, "Eunuch Gao, please go ahead and say what you have to say."

Gao Ping began, "His Majesty has two messages for you. Firstly, Prince Cheng's lands have been confiscated and his title revoked. Early this morning, he was escorted northward. His Majesty personally saw him off and chastised him for his crimes, but also granted him a sum of money for his retirement. This has been publicly announced, so His Majesty has fulfilled his duties of benevolence and justice."

He left today? Lin Wanrong was stunned. His Majesty acted swiftly. Yet, why did he send Gao Ping to inform me? What could be the meaning behind this? Lin Wanrong pondered but couldn't discern the Emperor's intentions. With His Majesty's inscrutable ways, it was rare for anyone to fathom his thoughts.

"The second matter is an exceedingly good piece of news," Gao Ping continued, smiling obsequiously. "Master Lin, do you remember the recent retirement of the Minister of Personnel?"

How could he forget, Lin Wanrong had played a role in that. He laughed, "Why would His Majesty discuss the personnel changes in court with me?"

"You'll know once you hear it," Gao Ping smiled, "Master Lin, what is your relationship with the former Governor of Jiangsu, Luo Min?"

"He's my father-in-law!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Eunuch Gao, could it be that His Majesty—"

Gao Ping nodded with a smile, "His Majesty personally drafted the decree. Early this morning, it was sent on an urgent eight-hundred-mile journey—Former Governor of Jiangsu Luo Min, is a clear and outstanding official. During his tenure, he made significant contributions to quelling the White Lotus rebellion. It is confirmed that Cheng De conspired with Prince Cheng, harboring rebellious intentions. Luo Min's execution of Cheng De, though perhaps mistaken, does not overshadow his merits. Luo Min was demoted to Jining but continued to govern diligently, benefiting the people of Jining. His reputation among the people of Shandong and Jiangsu provinces is excellent. In consideration of his high merit and humble nature, His Majesty orders him to appear in the capital immediately and take charge of the Ministry of Personnel. Master Lin, if I don't congratulate you, then whom should I?"

Luo Min is coming to the capital? Truly, this was momentous good news. Lin Wanrong laughed, cupping his fist in thanks, "Thank you for your good words, Eunuch Gao. I have no way to repay you now, but when I return from the north, I'll surely thank you with fine wine."

"Hardly dare, hardly dare," Gao Ping hastily bowed, cautiously saying, "When you return from the north, you will undoubtedly be the most esteemed person in the court. This old servant looks forward to your continued favor."

The most esteemed person in court? Gao Ping wasn't someone to make such a claim lightly. After pondering a moment, Lin Wanrong realized the Emperor's intentions. The Ministry of Revenue was under Xu Wei's charge, and now Luo Min would head the Ministry of Personnel. Both had close relations with him. In essence, they were like family. Lin Wanrong himself was no small figure; this expedition he was embarking on was against the northern nomads. As long as he showed a modicum of wit, his reputation in the military would surely soar. General Li was aging, and upon his return, Lin Wanrong would naturally assume military command, especially given his ceremonial title as Commander of the Loyal and Brave Army. With military power and a million strong troops in hand, the Ministry of War would be mere ornamentation.

Among the Five Ministries, Lin Wanrong practically controlled three of the most influential ones. Whether it was money, troops, or personnel, he had it all. What did the Ministry of Rites and the Ministry of Works matter? Who would dare obstruct whatever Lin Wanrong wanted to do?

The more he thought about it, the more apparent the Emperor's elaborate plans became. In silence, the Emperor had ousted Prince Cheng and reorganized the Five Ministries, effectively smoothing all roads ahead for him. No wonder even the cunning Gao Ping couldn't help but try to ingratiate himself with Lin Wanrong.

Damn, such fortune came too suddenly; he was hardly prepared for it. Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly and told Gao Ping, "Don't worry. As long as you serve the Emperor well, he won't treat you poorly."

Gao Ping thanked him and hastily returned to the palace.

Light rain drizzled down, and beautiful flowers in the garden bloomed vibrantly. The scent of earth in spring mingled with the chilly breeze, sending shivers down his spine.

"Wet blossoms in the apricot rain, a wind that chills not from the willows," Lin Wanrong mused, sighing at the sight of the blooming garden. "Such beautiful poetry, really damn beautiful."

A stifled giggle sounded behind him; a pair of warm, soft hands gently covered his eyes. "Guess who I am, and be warned, you have only three chances!"

"Lanlan?"

A sharp pain in his arm, the woman hummed, "Guess again!"

"Yuanyuan?"

"Who the hell is Yuanyuan?!"

Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Could it be Furong? Oh, let me die!"

"Irritating, so irritating. You can't even recognize my voice; I'm so mad I could die." The woman seemed on the verge of tears. Lin Wanrong quickly turned around to hug her, laughing, "This must be my dearest Second Miss. How could I not recognize you? The moment you approached, I felt a spring breeze against my face and heard your soft heartbeat. I didn't have to guess to know it was you. Yushuang, I swear, this kind of incredible mental resonance is only between you and me."

Hearing his sweet words, the Second Miss was no match for him. Her face flushed and her heart pounded as she was embraced by him. Between embarrassment and delight, she couldn't help but pinch his arm forcefully, "Who are Lanlan, Yuanyuan, and Furong? When did you get to know so many women?"

This young lady was certainly jealous, Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "Those young women are all outstanding. They bravely reveal their aspirations to save all men in the world. But rest assured, I have no relationship with them whatsoever."

Second Miss pouted, "You make it sound so nice. The way you called their names seemed so familiar; how many times have you spied on them?"

'What a misunderstanding! I've never spied on them,' Lin Wanrong thought, sweat trickling down his back. He gently stroked Yushuang's little ear and said, "Second Miss, what brings you here? Were you waiting specifically for me?"

Yushuang softly hummed in agreement, shyly saying, "You've been busy with important matters these days and I haven't seen you; I've missed you a lot. This morning when Mother left, I started crying and thought of you. Hold me, you rascal!" Her slender body snuggled into his arms, tightly hugging his waist, tears and raindrops falling together. She looked so pitiable and lovely in her tearful state.

Lin Wanrong hastily complied with her wishes, pulling her even closer into his arms. "I've missed you too. These past days while I've been busy, I've constantly thought of you, wondering why you weren't by my side. If you had been, I would have managed everything even better. Alas, it's all my fault."

This line might have fooled Second Miss, and indeed Yushuang was delighted to hear it. She lifted her face and said in a tender voice, "Really, you rascal? Swear it!"

"Ah, well, men shouldn't make promises lightly. I will always love my little Yushuang; there's no faking that." Lin Wanrong grinned, smoothly sidestepping the issue.

Second Miss only remembered his last two sentences. Her face flushed, she gently said, "You rascal, I'll always love you too; I swear it!"

Lin Wanrong nodded, somewhat ashamed. Xiao Yushuang pulled an envelope from her bosom and handed it to him, "This is from my mother."

From Madam? Lin Wanrong hastily opened it. The writing was graceful and gentle, accompanied by a faint fragrance—just like Madam Xiao herself: "Treat my daughter well; deceive her not. The journey is long; take care."

The letter contained only a few short phrases. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Madam Xiao is too polite. Why write so many words? It must have taken quite some time. The most important thing is the waste of paper and ink!"

Second Miss shot him a glance, "Mother said you're injured and didn't want to disturb your rest, which is why we didn't tell you. She worries for you, and you complain?"

"Indeed, indeed," Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly.

Seeing his dejected face, Second Miss laughed and began to push his wheelchair forward, casually asking, "Where did you go today? We've been looking for you for quite a while."

Lin Wanrong replied, "Ah, we're departing tomorrow, so Gao Qiu and I had to take care of some important matters. If you don't believe me, you can ask him."

Xiao Yushuang giggled, "Why would I ask him? What's there not to believe?—Weren't you just at the Fairy Hall and Thousand-Forsake Peak? Everyone knows!"

Chapter 508 Three Agreements

"What, you already know?!" Lord Lin almost jumped up in astonishment. "That's impossible. I've been very careful about keeping this a secret. How could anyone know except for me and Gao Qiu —"

Suddenly, Lord Lin slapped his forehead in regret. It must have been that young girl on the mountain who snitched. No wonder she willingly returned the musket; she had planned this all along.

"What's wrong with you?" Seeing his regretful demeanor, the Second Miss touched his forehead to check his temperature. Finding it normal, she said in confusion, "So what if you went to Fairy Hall and Thousand-Forsake Peak? What's the big deal that you had to hide it from us?"

Not a big deal? Second Miss actually saw it that way? Seeing her smiling with no sign of anger, Lin Wanrong grabbed her small hand and chuckled. "Actually, I never intended to hide it from you. I was just worried you'd be concerned. Second Miss, how did you find out?"

Xiao Yushuang blushed slightly. "This morning, when we said goodbye to Mother and you left us, my sisters speculated that you must be sneaking off to meet a young lady."

'What?! They guessed it just like that? Then what hope did I have for my future endeavors, considering I still had many young women expecting my help in their liberation?' Lord Lin sighed in anguish, his face filled with despair.

"—But I don't think you're that frivolous," Second Miss declared firmly. "I told my sisters that you must have important business to attend to, and that's why you left in haste."

Lin Wanrong tightly clasped her hand, grateful tears in his eyes. "Thank you, Second Miss. It's said that one has many acquaintances in the world but only one true confidant. Only today do I realize that the person who understands me best in this world is none other than you."

Xiao Yushuang gently patted his hand, offering some comfort. She continued, "Since you left without a word, and we had just said goodbye to Mother, everyone's spirits were low. To cheer everyone up, my Eldest Sister suggested we go to Fairy Hall, mentioning that a new school had been established there with you as the Head Scholar. Students from all around have enrolled, creating an enthusiastic atmosphere. The Fairy Hall Academy will be the cornerstone of our country's revitalization, and you, as the Head Scholar, will be celebrated as the foremost educator in the land."

Lord Lin nodded, a bit embarrassed. "So you all went to Fairy Hall?"

"Of course we did," Second Miss pouted her red lips. "The Fairy Hall Academy is where you will enlighten the world. The great scholars of the future will emerge from there. Naturally, we're very proud of you and excited about it. Even Sister Xian'er was clamoring to go see for herself."

Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, realizing he had failed miserably at keeping his activities secret. "Yushuang, when did you all climb the mountain? How did I not notice?"

"We didn't go up the mountain," Second Miss sighed slightly, shaking her head in a bit of disappointment. "By the time we reached the base, we saw your carriage. Sister Ning was very excited, saying you must have taken a fancy to some female student at the academy. Now, she said, she could also become a teacher."

She could be a teacher? Lord Lin was dumbfounded. What could Miss Luo possibly teach?

"And what happened next? Why didn't you go up the mountain?"

Yushuang shook her head and said, "Something unexpected occurred midway. The princess said she wasn't feeling well and felt dizzy. We became anxious at once. What's in her belly is the Lin family's heir. What would happen if there were any complications? So, we stopped at the foot of the mountain and hurried back to consult a doctor."

"Qingxuan is unwell?" Lord Lin's face turned pale. "What exactly is wrong with her? I must go see her immediately."

Seeing his flustered state, Xiao Yushuang quickly steadied his wheelchair and reassured him, "There's no need to worry. The Emperor has already sent the royal physicians for consultation. The princess is healthy, and the baby is growing strong without any abnormalities. Her morning discomfort was probably due to getting up too early and the exertion from the journey. A couple of days' rest will put her right."

Only then did Lin Wanrong heave a sigh of relief, rushing upstairs to find Miss Xiao. Entering the room, he found it brilliantly lit, with hanging palace lanterns and tall, red candlesticks casting their glow everywhere, turning the night as bright as day. The half-open window let in a light drizzle that danced on the windowsill, accompanied by a fresh, damp breeze. However, the room was empty; there was no sign of Miss Xiao.

"Qingxuan, Qingxuan—" Lin Wanrong called out anxiously, but there was no reply.

Just as he was about to push open a door on the side, he heard a soft giggle. The door swung open, revealing a graceful figure. The woman was dressed in a red satin robe; her brows gently curved,

and her lips slightly upturned. Her enchanting face, framed by the red robe and candlelight, was as beautiful as a peach blossom in March. A hint of determination occasionally crossed her eyes, adding an irresistible allure.

Even the well-read Lord Lin found himself entranced, almost drooling. Realizing she was the focus of his intense gaze, the woman coyly covered her cheeks and chided, "Fool, what are you looking at?"

"Eldest Miss, you, you look stunning," Lin Wanrong stammered.

Xiao Yuruo flushed, bit her cherry lips, and lowered her head, "You rascal, you only know how to say pretty words. Where am I beautiful—"

"The clothes are beautiful—"

Eldest Miss raised an eyebrow, only for the rascal to continue, "But you are even more beautiful than the clothes!"

"Flatterer—I fell for it all my life," Xiao Yuruo sighed softly, her long eyelashes trembling. Suddenly, tears cascaded down her face, each droplet gleaming as it rolled down her white cheeks. ǎ

Lin Wanrong quickly grasped her hand, "Yuruo, what's the matter? You're dressed so beautifully; why are you crying?"

"It's all because of you!" A crisp voice came from outside the room as Miss Xiao entered. She shot him a glare, then quickly pulled Eldest Miss aside, soothing her softly, "Sister, don't cry. He's just a blockhead who doesn't understand emotions or gratitude. You'll have to teach him a good lesson in the future."

Eldest Miss wiped her tears and softly sobbed, "How dare I teach him anything? When he was in our household, I was the young lady, and he was just a servant. I would glance at him, and he would glare back at me a hundredfold. The entire city of Jinling says that I am Xiao One, my sister is Xiao Two, and he is Xiao Three plus Lin San. Combined, my sister and I are no match for him. I've grown accustomed to being bullied by him."

Xiao One, Xiao Two, Xiao Three? Lin Wanrong stifled a laugh. Who was spreading such nonsense? Was he really that terrible? Gazing at the two extraordinarily charming women before him, he blinked, momentarily confused. He wondered what act Qingxuan and Eldest Miss were putting on.

"Sister, you're right; he's just a fool." Seeing her husband lost in thought, Miss Xiao shook her head and chuckled, "Don't worry, I'll go and enlighten this fool."

Xiao Yuruo hurriedly grabbed Miss Xiao's sleeve, tears streaming down her face, "Please don't, sister. If this rascal isn't willing to change, what can I do to make him?"

Eldest Miss looked solemn and forlorn, her face betraying no words. Lin Wanrong reached out to hold her hand, but she humphed and turned her head away, showing her capricious temperament. Lin Wanrong grinned, "Who says I'm not willing to change, Eldest Miss? Look, what's this?"

From nowhere, he had produced a small booklet, its red pages glowing faintly in the candlelight that filled the hall.

"How would I know what that is?" Eldest Miss exclaimed, quickly lowering her head, her cheeks redder than the candles.

"Let me have a look." Miss Luo, who had appeared out of nowhere, snatched the small booklet from Lin Wanrong's hand and giggled, "Hmm, these two characters are weird. I don't recognize them. Sister Qingxuan, will you teach me?"

Miss Xiao smiled and shook her head, "As Eldest Miss said, these characters must be read by him alone for it to be sincere. We can't do anything about it."

All eyes turned back to Lin Wanrong. Lord Lin cleared his throat awkwardly and read aloud from the booklet, "Marriage Contract! Eldest daughter of the Xiao family, in the prime of her life, unparalleled in beauty. Noble son of the Lin family, of upright character, universally praised... The gentleman wishes to marry, the lady is yet unmarried, universally acclaimed, a match made in heaven. Ah! Ah! A pair of lovebirds sharing wings, standing together like two plum blossoms!"

This marriage contract was filled with hundreds of words, and even Lin Wanrong felt a little dizzy after reading it all in one breath. Yet Luo Ning and Miss Xiao seemed to enjoy every word.

"Eldest Miss," Lin Wanrong took Xiao Yuruo's hand and shoved the red booklet into her palm, "Every word in this paper is from the depths of my heart! I don't know what you're thinking—do you accept? Accept? Or do you accept?"

Hearing his words, Xiao Yuruo let out a small yelp, hurriedly covering her flushed cheeks before darting out of the room.

Quick as lightning, Miss Xiao grabbed her and took the marriage contract from Lin Wanrong's hand, smiling, "Dear sister, I will propose on behalf of my husband. If you accept, call me 'sister.' If you do not, well, there's nothing that can be done—you can just call him 'My Dear!'"

Ning'er listened and covered her lips with a soft laugh. After following her husband, it seemed even her sister had learned these sly tricks.

Eldest Miss let out a small sound of complaint and blushed as she nestled into Xiao Qingxuan's embrace. "Sister, even you've come to tease me."

"My dear sister, he really is fortunate," Miss Xiao chuckled as she pulled Eldest Miss back to her side.

Excellent. Master Lin's face broke into a broad grin, and he gave Ning'er a surreptitious wink. Miss Luo whispered in his ear, "Big Brother, when did you write such an impassioned marriage letter? How come I didn't know?"

'Embarrassed, truly embarrassed. If it weren't for Qingxuan slipping this little booklet into my hand, I would've almost missed out on Eldest Miss's deep affections.' Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, gazing at Yuruo, who was dressed in a bright red bridal gown. His heart was unspeakably moved. Eldest Miss had specially chosen the eve of his departure for battle to set their lifelong fate. Such profound love would even melt a stone.

Lin Wanrong took hold of Yuruo's hand and lowered his voice, whispering furtively, "Eldest Miss, come over here for a moment!"

At a time like this, this was the most bashful moment for a girl. Even if Eldest Miss was willing in her heart, how could she express it? She turned away, her eyes and brows flushed, pretending not to hear him, but involuntarily moved closer to him.

"Touch my leg," Master Lin leaned into Xiao Yuruo's ear, speaking in a mysterious manner.

"I won't—" Eldest Miss obstinately made a sound but couldn't help extending her soft, delicate hand. After feeling around a little, she said with embarrassment, "What is this, it's so hard."

Master Lin snorted, "Don't let your mind wander; it's plaster. How could it not be hard? A little lower, go a little lower."

This scoundrel! Eldest Miss felt unbearably embarrassed. Just as she was about to slap him, she saw a faint red string appear at his ankle.

Eldest Miss paused, her small hand touching the soft red string, memories of the past flooding back like a beautiful dream. She smiled slightly, lifting her long gown to reveal a translucent ankle, bound tightly by a bright red string that was identical to the one on Lin San's foot.

"Thankfully, this one can't be severed," Master Lin thought about those thrilling yet somewhat sweet past events and cautiously glanced outside, speaking as if still shocked.

"Idiot!" Xiao Yuruo playfully scolded him and then could no longer hold back. She threw herself into his arms, and somehow, tears began to flow.

The time they had spent together was filled with both quarrels and laughter, but also mutual dependency. The taste of it, only they themselves knew. Under the lamplight, Xiao Yuruo's beautifully made-up face was more enchanting than flowers, and her crystal-like teardrops shone like pearls. Even Miss Xiao was overshadowed in that moment.

Seeing her own beloved in the embrace of another woman, although Miss Xiao was generous, she felt somewhat uncomfortable. Fortunately, Miss Xiao knew that Eldest Miss was not an outsider. She chuckled and said, "Sister, don't cry anymore. Today is a joyful day; those tears should turn into wine."

Eldest Miss quickly rose from his arms, her face flushed like burning embers, and shot him a reproachful glance. "It's all your fault, using all sorts of tricks and making my sister laugh at me."

Master Lin chuckled heartily a few times, but then suddenly recalled something and exclaimed, "Oh my! What about Yushuang? How could I have forgotten about this?"

"By the time you remember, the moment has passed," Luo Ning giggled. "Early this morning when the Madam left, my sister had already promised Second Miss on your behalf. However, Xiao Yuruo has a rather strong character and insists on hearing it from you. Otherwise, do you really think Madam Xiao would be comfortable letting her two precious daughters stay in our home without any formal commitments?"

So that was the case. No wonder Yushuang was eagerly waiting at the door for him. Her life's most important matter had already been settled, and he, the very person involved, was kept in the dark. The silly girl. With this thought, his affection for the Second Miss increased a few notches.

Miss Xiao smiled faintly, "Xian'er, Ning'er, Qiaoqiao, and I have already gone through the formalities of becoming your wives. But it's different for the two young ladies from the Xiao family. They have a large extended family in Jinling. This was also Madam Xiao's wish before returning to Jinling. To finalize the relationship, so that we can proceed when you return from the North."

"Yes, yes, it must be well-arranged and grandly carried out," Lin Wanrong looked at his wives apologetically. "I've been overly busy lately, not even having time for the weddings. My apologies to you all."

Qiaoqiao peeked her beautiful face in from outside the door and giggled, "Is everyone here? Big brother, Xian'er is getting impatient. We're ready to start the feast!"

Start the feast? Seeing everyone waiting for his word, Lin Wanrong hastily nodded, "Let's start, let's start, a family reunion for us all! Goodness, it's not easy to gather the whole family around a table for a meal before heading off to battle."

Though it should have been a moment for joy, his voice carried a hint of sadness. Busy as he was, rushing about all day and hardly ever at home, he wondered what it was all for.

Both Ning'er and Miss Xiao softly called out to him. Eldest Miss also tightly held his hand, their eyes teary as they gazed at him, empathizing deeply with his state of mind.

The preparation for the meal was so grand that even Xian'er was helping Qiaoqiao in the kitchen. This first family gathering of the Lin household was in fact a farewell dinner for him, which made the occasion somewhat ironic.

To his left sat Qiaoqiao, Xian'er, and Luo Ning; to his right were Xiao Qingxuan and the two Xiao sisters. Master Lin sat at the head of the table, looking at his wives and wife-to-be. Each was more delicate and beautiful than the next. He suddenly broke into a broad smile, "Very good, very good! Add two more, and we can have two tables for playing Mahjong."

Second Miss, dressed in a brand-new red robe, sat next to her sister with her head lowered in shyness. "You bad man, I don't know how to play Mahjong. You have to teach me."

This young lady, once so outgoing, had now become so shy. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Mahjong? I used to play solo, but now with you all, it's different. Solo play is too basic. From now on, I'm only going for the win! Ah, Second Miss, why is your face so red? This is just the beginning; there are even more embarrassing things to come. Be more open; look at how open I am!"

"Who can compare with you? Just a slight contempt from the ladies here," the Eldest Miss huffed. "Don't speak nonsense. Yushuang is still a child. You should be teaching her better ways." The Second Miss winked slyly at him and chuckled behind her hand.

Miss Xiao smiled softly, "Sister, don't blame him. Today, he's gained the favor of two new beauties. And he'll soon play the groom again. Can you blame him for feeling elated?"

The laughter of Qiaoqiao and the other maidens rang through the air, and the Eldest Miss's cheeks flushed instantly.

"As for playing the groom, I am quite eager," Lin Wanrong sighed deeply. "But could the wedding night be postponed by a few days? Ah, don't look at me like that. I must clarify that it's not that I can't handle it; I'm quite capable. It's just that Qingxuan won't allow—"

"Can't you just shut your mouth?" Miss Xiao said, both embarrassed and annoyed, as she stuffed a spoonful of hot soup into his mouth. Qiaoqiao and the other ladies laughed heartily, already familiar with such scenes, while the Eldest Miss kicked him hard under the table, her cheeks still red.

Lin Wanrong suddenly turned serious, "Actually, going to war is not that big of a deal. I was born with a restless fate; I won't die so easily—"

"Don't talk nonsense!" several of the ladies shouted in unison. Even the Second Miss wore a stern expression.

Lin Wanrong quickly nodded with a smile, "Yes, yes. What I mean to say is, I'm not worried about going to war; I'm worried about all of you."

Miss Xiao gripped his hand softly, "The sisters here are willing to live and die with you, sharing weal and woe. What have you to worry about?"

"Qiaoqiao is busy running the tavern, Ning'er is passionate about charity, and the Eldest and Second Misses are rebuilding the Xiao family. Everyone has something to do, so naturally, I'm not worried," Lin Wanrong sighed, "Actually, the ones I worry about the most are you and Xian'er."

"Dear husband—" Xian Er bit her red lips, her eyes misty with tears.

"Xian Er, blood is thicker than water," Lin Wanrong gently patted Miss Qin's hand and continued, "You and Qingxuan are biological sisters; this is an unalterable fact. The strife between Sister An and Fairy Ning is temporary. Must this enmity continue forever? Think about it, Qingxuan will bear children, and you will too. Should the Lin family have two sons who fight each other? Why disregard this invaluable blood bond over some ephemeral hatred?"

Qin Xian'er hesitated, her eyes filled with contemplation. She and Miss Xiao were both married to the same man; would their future children also fight like they had? The thought was troubling.

Seeing Xian'er wavering, Lin Wanrong took her hand and coaxed, "As the saying goes, 'take a step back and the sea becomes boundless.' You and Qingxuan don't share a deep-rooted enmity. In fact, you have a bond that cannot be severed. Now you are even closer than real sisters. What grudges can't be resolved?"

Miss Qin hesitated for a long time before cautiously huffing, "Only if she promises never to bully me again!"

Qingxuan quickly grabbed her hand, passionately saying, "Sister, we share the same blood. If I ever bully you, may I suffer a fate worse than death!"

Qin Xian'er swiftly covered her sister's mouth and turned her head aside. "Don't go making rash oaths. It makes me uncomfortable. I'm only acknowledging you because of my husband, so you are my—"

She hesitated, her cheeks flushed, and finally whispered "sister," her voice as soft as a mosquito's hum.

"My Dear—" Miss Xiao was overcome with joy, clutching Lin Wanrong's arm tightly and bursting into tears. Her outburst prompted the two other young ladies to shed tears as well, even Qin Xian'er's eyes were moistened.

"What's going on here?" Lin Wanrong suddenly sterned his face, "Enough, stop crying."

The authority of the head of the family had an immediate effect. The ladies instantly ceased their crying. Lin Wanrong looked solemn, "While I'm off to war, everyone must love and take care of one another, and don't make me worry. Also, eat more meat and fish. I want to see everyone chubby and healthy when I come back, ready to bear sons."

The ladies blushed, and the atmosphere became lively. Miss Xiao wiped her tears and said, "Don't just instruct us. Before you go north for the expedition, we have some conditions for you as well."

Lin Wanrong smiled and nodded, "I'm all ears."

"First, battles are unpredictable. For the sake of all of us, you must take good care of yourself and avoid any harm. Can you do that?"

Miss Xiao was extremely serious. Lin Wanrong quickly nodded, "Of course, that's also my wish. Don't worry. In battles, if I can win, I'll fight; if not, I'll run. No one can outdo me in that."

"Second, at least every fortnight you must send a letter home," Miss Xiao's eyes were reddening. "So we'll know where you are, whether you're eating well or keeping warm. No omissions or deceptions. Remember, you have a family and dependents now..."

Was this even a condition? Lin Wanrong sighed but nodded in agreement.

"As for the third point, it's something Ning'er specifically added, and it's the collective sentiment of all of us," Miss Xiao huffed before saying seriously, "Go off to war, but don't get distracted. Don't bring back a nomad woman!"

"How could that happen?" Lin Wanrong quickly responded with a smile, "I'm going to war, not on a vacation. How could I get involved with a nomad woman? Qingxuan, Ning'er, you're overthinking this."

"It's not overthinking," Ning'er adjusted his clothes and solemnly said, "Big brother, look at us. Any of us could be something you didn't expect. Those nomads have never seen a fine gentleman like you. If you were to take a wife there, we—we would rather die."

The ladies all looked gravely serious; it seemed they had reached a unanimous agreement on this matter. Left with no other choice, Lin Wanrong reluctantly agreed to their terms.

Family conversations continued until midnight. Qingxuan didn't even bring up the events of the day, leaving him to ponder deeply before finally drifting off to sleep. Early the next morning, while he was still in a daze, he heard Gao Qiu's coarse voice shouting from downstairs, "Brother Lin, it's time!"

Chapter 509 Farewell

The sky was still dark, a gentle spring rain pattering against the loquat trees in the courtyard, making a rustling sound. The lantern light inside the tower was dim, and several young ladies had already risen, silently packing his travel bag for him. The atmosphere was unspeakably stifling.

Luo Ning helped him put on his inner garment and armor, then looked him up and down before carefully straightening the armor plates.

"Big Brother, this package contains winter clothes, and the other one has summer clothes. All are newly made for you. I've heard that beyond the border, the wind and sand are fierce, and the temperature varies greatly between day and night. You must change your clothes on time and don't be lazy," Qiaoqiao pointed to a few large parcels in front of her and advised, "Here are also toiletries I've packed for you—towels, salt, soap—and more than ten pairs of new shoes I've made for you. I don't know if it will be enough—"

She had thought of everything possible and packed everything that could be packed, fearful of omitting anything. While speaking, her eyes reddened and tears swelled at the corners.

Lin Wanrong shook his head with a bitter smile. This hardly felt like he was going to war; it was more like going on a vacation. The days with wives truly couldn't compare to his bachelor days. Nevertheless, he couldn't refuse their good intentions, so he held Qiaoqiao's hand and reassured her,

"You've all prepared so much for me. It's more than enough. Don't worry, the conditions beyond the border are not as bad as you imagine."

"My Dear, wear this," Xiao Qingxuan carefully hung a small jade Buddha around his neck and softly said, "This was left to me by my mother. She will surely protect you along the way."

Xiao Yuruo's cheeks flushed as she stepped forward, holding an amulet made from red string. "This is called the Heart Lock. One for me, and one for you." Her hand gestured over her own full, uplifted chest before pointing at Lin Wanrong's chest; her eyes began to moisten.

Ning'er, Xian'er, Qiaoqiao, and the Second Miss—none of them wanted to be outdone. Gold locks, jade pendants, and safety amulets; everyone had a personal trinket to send him off with, leaving his neck laden.

The affection of these beauties was too overwhelming to bear. Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed. If he continued to linger, he might find himself unwilling to leave at all.

Qin Xian'er fastened a treasured sword in front of him and Gao Qiu had already prepared a carriage waiting at the mansion's entrance. As he boarded and the horse was about to gallop...

"Lin San—" Eldest Miss let out a cry of sorrow. Gathering her courage from somewhere, she lifted her long skirt and leapt onto the carriage, burying herself forcefully into his arms.

Seeing Xiao Yuruo's behavior, the young ladies below were filled with melancholy, their tears mingling with the falling rain.

Holding Eldest Miss's soft, boneless body in his arms, Lin Wanrong's heart was indescribable, "Be good, don't cry, don't cry. I'll be back soon."

Eldest Miss murmured softly, "Is that the only comforting phrase you know?"

Lin Wanrong paused, then laughed, "You know my nature, don't you? I've never been good at comforting people. My darling, once the war is over, we will go back to Lingyin Temple to fulfill our vows. Didn't the marriage fortune I got for you there come true? That monk at Lingyin Temple is quite reliable!"

"Ugh!" The young lady exclaimed softly, her face flushed as she playfully pinched him. Seizing a moment when no one was looking, she overcame her shyness and planted a quick kiss on his cheek. In a gentle voice, she said, "Come back soon, I'll be waiting for you!"

Blushing, the young lady hopped off the carriage. Her tender words, "I'll be waiting for you," melted Lord Lin's heart.

Suddenly, he burst into laughter and shouted to the teary-eyed ladies, "Come, let's have a hug! Remember to queue up. Hey, Second Miss, I said a hug, not a kiss!"

The carriage had traveled quite a distance when Gao Qiu looked back. He saw the ladies standing still in the rain, their oil-paper umbrellas nowhere in sight. They resembled statues, waiting for their husbands. Gao Qiu sighed, "Brother Lin, I truly envy you. The deep affection these ladies have for you is deeper than the East Sea."

"Yes, their affection is indeed deep," Lord Lin replied, wiping off the lipstick and rouge from his face. "But they're a bit too enthusiastic. Ning'er's rouge... she must've wanted the whole army to laugh at me, haha!"

The drizzle continued as they traveled. Before they reached the city outskirts, the rain intensified, stinging their faces.

"Green bamboo hat, green raincoat, with the slanting wind and fine rain, there's no need to return," Lord Lin mused, gazing at the distant mountains and rivers through the misty rain. It looked like a beautiful ink painting. He sighed, "With all this wind and rain, perhaps today wasn't the best day to set out."

Gao Qiu snorted, "The Imperial Astronomers chose this day after observing the stars for months. In my opinion, they just wanted to swindle the Emperor's silver."

Lord Lin laughed heartily but didn't respond. By the time they reached the northern camp, the sky was still overcast. The camp was brightly lit, as if it were daytime.

"General, you've arrived!" At the camp entrance, Hu Bugui, Du Xiuyuan, Li Sheng, and Xu Zhen were all present, fully armored. Seeing his carriage, they hurried over with joy.

Lord Lin greeted them with a smile, "Ah, everyone's here. Were you worried I wouldn't come? When have I ever deserted?"

The men laughed. Noticing the bandage on Lord Lin's leg, Du Xiuyuan whispered, "General, how's your injury?"

Lord Lin reassured him, "Don't worry, I'll recover in a few days. Once we reach the front lines, I'll be racing with the steeds again."

As they were about to enter the camp, a figure dashed out, blocking their path. "Lin San, you broke your promise!"

The person was a boy of about thirteen or fourteen, his eyebrows furrowed and fists clenched, seemingly aggrieved. Lord Lin looked at him in surprise, "Ah, isn't this Little Li? What did I promise and not deliver?"

Li Wuling grunted but remained silent. Hu Bugui said, "General, Wuling is eager to join our army on the northern expedition. The Marshal has left the decision entirely to Advisor Xu, but Miss Xu simply won't allow it. Our army is about to depart today; how can he not be anxious?"

Lin Wanrong recalled, 'Ah, I remember now.' The last time he visited the camp, Li Wuling was set on joining my forces on the front lines. However, he's young and the only direct grandson of Li Tai, so no one dared to make a unilateral decision. Li Tai was also noncommittal and left the matter to Xu Zhiqing. 'So, Wuling wants me to speak to Xu Zhiqing on his behalf?'

Seeing Li Wuling's irritated expression, Lin Wanrong laughed and patted him on the shoulder, "So, your Aunt Xu still hasn't agreed?"

"As if she would!" Li Wuling fumed, "I've begged her countless times. She's as stubborn as you are. General Lin, Brother Lin, you initially promised to help me with this. What do we do now?"

Lin Wanrong was in a cold war with Miss Xu and felt reluctant to approach her. "How about this," he pondered, "you first depart with our army. Once we've crossed the border, it'll become a fait accompli. Miss Xu won't have any other options then."

"That sounds good—" Li Wuling was about to clap his hands when Du Xiuyuan interrupted urgently, "General, this is not advisable. Advisor Xu runs a tight ship, and she keeps an accurate

count of the troops. If Wuling sneaks in and gets caught, given her temperament, she'll enforce military law strictly, even potentially beheading him."

Hu Bugui and others, who had served under Xu Zhiqing for a long time, nodded in agreement. Lin Wanrong drew a sharp breath. "Is she really that severe?"

"Therefore, if Wuling truly wishes to join the army, you'll have to speak to Advisor Xu," Hu Bugui winked at Lin Wanrong, his expression rather suggestive. He had accompanied Lin Wanrong to Shandong and witnessed first-hand how General Lin had both hugged and held Xu Zhiqing, who had been angry but never really reprimanded him. The relationship between the two was quite evident.

"Let me think about it. Ah, nature calls. I need to visit the restroom," Lin Wanrong said, looking troubled. The relationship between him and Miss Xu had already reached a point of no return.

Li Wuling grabbed him anxiously, "General Lin, Brother Lin, I beg you. In less than half an hour, the oath-taking ceremony will be over, and the army will truly set off. I'll have no hope left then. Quickly, let me take you to see Aunt Xu, please."

Tears and snot mixing, the young man pushed Lin Wanrong's wheelchair toward the camp. Disabled as he was, Lin Wanrong was no match for him. Despite his protests, Li Wuling's pace only quickened.

Xu Zhiqing's tent was situated in the center of the camp, adjacent to Li Tai's command tent. The oath-taking ceremony was about to begin, and soldiers were being deployed. Weapons clashed and soldiers rushed by, filling the air with a palpable tension as Lin Wanrong watched.

"I say, Little Li, can we discuss this matter further?" The thought of meeting Xu Zhiqing made Lin Wanrong's skin crawl. "How about this? I'll go directly to the General. He is the Supreme Commander; whatever he says goes."

Li Wuling shook his head, "My dear Brother Lin, we've come too far for that. The Marshal has already entrusted the arrangements to Aunt Xu and won't intervene anymore. What's the big deal about talking to Aunt Xu? Are you afraid of her?"

Provoked, Lin Wanrong chuckled bitterly, suppressing a wry smile.

Near Li Tai's tent was a smaller one, its curtains slightly lifted, allowing a dim light to filter out. Muffled voices could be heard from inside.

"We're here," Li Wuling whispered softly, clasping his hands in sincere entreaty. "Brother Lin, you must accomplish this task for me. My entire life is in your hands. Please, I beg you!"

The young man was earnest, his fervor for serving his country undeniable. At this point, refusing was no longer an option, so Lin Wanrong braced himself and stepped forward.

Li Wuling gently nudged him to the entrance of the tent. Lin Wanrong gave the curtain a hypocritical knock, his voice a raspy whisper, "Excuse me, is anyone in there?"

"Who dares make a racket?" A commanding male voice emanated from within the tent.

'This Li Wuling, leading me astray,' Lin Wanrong thought, chuckling as he was about to step back. But the curtain was already lifted, and a formidable man stepped out. Tall and majestic, he wore a full suit of armor, exuding authority. Upon seeing Lin Wanrong, he paused, and then burst into laughter, "Isn't this General Lin? Have you returned to camp to see Advisor Xu?"

It was Yu Zongcai, the young general who had once volunteered to challenge Lin Wanrong for the right to lead the troops on the right flank. Lin Wanrong had a good memory; he recognized him instantly.

"Ah, General Yu," Lin Wanrong greeted with a fist-and-palm salute, "My apologies for not recognizing you earlier. You look very dashing in that armor. Is this Advisor Xu's tent? I wish to discuss some matters with her."

"Hush," Yu Zongcai lowered his voice, "Miss Xu is currently contemplating the army's future actions. Don't disturb her. Whatever business you have, tell me first, and I can relay it to her."

'Relay it through you?' Lin Wanrong was dumbfounded. Miss Xu's airs were growing by the day, even enlisting General Yu as her secretary. He elongated his "Oh," and said, "Actually, it's nothing major. Just a little matter concerning the fate of our great nation for the next hundred years. I was hoping to discuss it with Miss Xu. Could you perhaps inform her? Ah, but if it's inconvenient, I can always go talk to the Marshal. It's the same either way."

Lin Wanrong's tone was grandiose, invoking matters concerning the fate of the nation for a hundred years. Yu Zongcai couldn't afford to be careless. "General Lin," he said cautiously, "Miss Xu is truly exhausted. Could you share the details with me first? I will inform her accordingly."

The general was young and handsome, and he had repeatedly protected Xu Zhiqing. His feelings seemed to extend beyond mere subordination and respect for his military advisor. Lin Wanrong chuckled and patted him on the shoulder, "My dear brother Yu, the matter at hand is crucial. If I could disclose any details, our brotherly bond would certainly allow me to give you a hint. However, this is a matter of great importance, and I can't act recklessly. I hope you'll understand."

Though Lin Wanrong was much younger than General Yu, he insistently called him "brother" with a cheeky grin, annoying the general. "What brotherly bond do you speak of?" General Yu was about to retort when a tired female voice emerged from the tent, "Who's making a commotion out there?"

General Yu quickly responded, "Miss Xu, it is General Lin of the right wing vanguard. He says he has urgent matters to discuss with you."

A dull thump echoed from within the tent, followed by a long silence. Finally, Xu Zhiqing's indifferent voice came forth, "Brother Yu, please tell General Lin that His Majesty will arrive shortly and the army's oath ceremony will begin. Any discussions can wait until after we depart."

General Yu gave Lin Wanrong a knowing look, signaling that he had passed along the message and that Xu Zhiqing refused to see him.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "If Advisor Xu doesn't wish to listen, so be it. It's only a matter concerning the future stability of our great nation for the next century. Clearly, it's not something Advisor Xu is concerned about."

With that, he turned his wheelchair to leave. A momentary silence lingered in the tent before Xu Zhiqing's voice softly emerged, "Please, have General Lin come in to talk."

'Do you think I'll come in just because you asked?' Lin Wanrong snickered. Before he could step away, he was stopped by General Yu, "General Lin, Miss Xu has invited you in."

Showing deep respect for Xu Zhiqing, General Yu hastily ushered Lin Wanrong into the tent. It was a small space, with a desk and oil lamp in front, and a curtained area at the back that seemed to be Xu Zhiqing's makeshift boudoir.

The dim light of the oil lamp revealed Xu Zhiqing's pristine, radiant face. She wore a light purple dress that accentuated her graceful figure. Bloodshot eyes hinted at sleep deprivation. As Lin Wanrong entered, she spared him a glance; despite the dirt on his face, he looked rather imposing in his armor—a stark contrast to his usually jocular demeanor. His legs, however, were still heavily bandaged, indicating his wounds had not yet fully healed.

Seeing some lipstick marks still faintly visible on his face, Xu Zhiqing lowered her eyes and spoke softly, "General Lin, your timely return adds strength to our forces. This is truly a matter for celebration."

This was their first meeting since their heated confrontation. Days apart seemed to have slimmed Xu Zhiqing's cheeks, making her figure even more captivating. Lin Wanrong stole a few glances before forcing himself to look away.

"Miss Xu, you're too kind," Lin Wanrong laughed, "Actually, I came to discuss a matter of great importance that concerns the future of our great nation."

He paused, and Xu Zhiqing, picking up on his implication, glanced at General Yu, "Brother Yu, go inform the Marshal that I'll be there shortly, and it won't delay the oath ceremony."

Yu Zongcai let out a disappointed sigh and stole a glance at Miss Xu before bowing his head and leaving the tent. Only the two of them remained, and the atmosphere turned somewhat tense.

"Now, General Lin, you may speak. What is it that concerns the future prosperity or decline of my Great Hua?" Xu Zhiqing's expression remained indifferent. Her slender fingers delicately pinched the lamp wick, causing the oil lamp to emit soft crackling sounds. Her hand shimmered with a jade-like luster in the lamplight.

Lin Wanrong's gaze returned from her hand, and he lowered his voice, "It's actually about Li Wuling —"

As his voice trailed off, Xu Zhiqing let out a cold laugh. "Is this what you consider a matter affecting the rise and fall of Great Hua? Your words are alarmist. Are you mocking me by making light of our military affairs? General Lin, this is a military camp, not the imperial court. Even if you are protected by the most esteemed princess of Great Hua, you can still be subject to military law."

The girl seemed as if she had swallowed gunpowder; her words were so harsh. Lin Wanrong's stubbornness flared up as well; he snorted coldly and darkened his face. "What an invocation of military law! If Advisor Xu thinks I'm being alarmist, then go ahead and execute me—"

"You—" Xu Zhiqing suddenly stood up, her eyebrows raised slightly, and her pretty face flushed with anger. Lin San, unyielding, wore a cold smile at the corner of his mouth, as if ready to confront her to the end. A few words were all it took for their faces to redden and their tempers to flare, almost like a replay of their previous encounter.

Neither spoke. The tent was eerily silent, save for the crackling sound of the oil lamp, which slightly eased the tense atmosphere.

"No matter what you say, I will never allow Wuling to go north," Xu Zhiqing finally broke the silence, her tone filled with unshakable resolve.

Lin Wanrong wore a lukewarm smile, "The legs are his own. If he wishes to go to the battlefield, what right do you have to stop him? Give me a reason!"

What she hated the most was his indifferent demeanor, devoid of emotion, like a wooden stump. Xu Zhiqing gritted her teeth, "What reason do you need? Simply because his surname is Li, and he's the only heir to the greatest martial family in Great Hua. He cannot go! Not to mention his youth; even if you consider that the Li family is an unwavering banner in the hearts of our soldiers, if he rushes to the north and something goes awry, do you understand the blow it would deal to our military morale? How emboldened would it make the nomads feel?"

Tears shimmered in Xu Zhiqing's eyes, though whether they were caused by a painful memory, she did not know. Nevertheless, she held them back, refusing to let them fall.

"The greatest martial family in Great Hua?" Lin Wanrong scoffed, "Miss Xu, that's a thing of the past. That title will no longer exist in the future."

"Nonsense! Why?" Xu Zhiqing stubbornly questioned.

"Miss Xu, are you feigning ignorance, or are you truly naive?" Lin Wanrong snorted, "An heir to the Li family who has never seen a battlefield, a nobleman who lives peacefully in the capital—is this great martial family of yours worthy of inheritance? What a joke! Protected and sheltered by you, the greatest martial family of Great Hua will be ruined in your hands. Do you think not just the ancestors of the Li family, but even General Li Tai, would agree to this?"

Miss Xu spoke coldly, "Even if I'm being overprotective, have you considered the consequences if something happens to Li Wuling? The nomads will be overjoyed, and our own troops will be disheartened. With low morale, defeat in the great war is inevitable. Have you thought of that?"

Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, shattering the silence in the tent. Xu Zhiqing felt both embarrassed and irritated. "What are you laughing at? Can't win the argument against me?"

"Miss Xu, why don't you think about it the other way around?" Lin Wanrong repressed his laughter and sighed slightly, "My point of view is precisely opposite to yours. If Li Wuling doesn't go to the battlefield, the nomads would be the ones to celebrate because they would have one less formidable opponent. And our soldiers would be missing a future commander. It's like sabotaging ourselves. How is this any different from harming our country's future prospects for hundreds of years to come? Am I still being alarmist?"

He was eloquent, and what he said wasn't without merit. Xu Zhiqing retorted, full of concern and indignation, "Even if you aren't being alarmist, what if something happens to Wuling? The Li family only has this single line of descent left!"

Lin Wanrong grew furious, "Miss Xu, tell me, why can everyone else's sons and brothers die in battle, but Li Wuling cannot even face a mishap? Is it because he is the legitimate grandson of General Li Tai? This elitist attitude of yours is unacceptable!"

"I have never thought like that," Miss Xu was also angered, raising her voice without realizing.

"You might not have thought it, but you're acting like it. You've unwittingly distinguished him from everyone else just because he's General Li Tai's grandson. Others can die, but he can't? Have you considered that all these soldiers are also someone's sons and someone's treasures? Whose life is more valuable? If Li Wuling dies in battle, it may be sad, but that's a soldier's honor. There's nothing more to say. We have plenty of noble families in our great country—Wang, Qian, Zhou—we are not lacking in backbone! It's okay to benefit from your ancestors; you've earned it. But don't act as if you're somehow entitled, as if everyone owes you something. Frankly, Miss Xu, you are jeopardizing the foundation of our nation with your selfishness! Hey—don't hit me—I'm leaving!"

"Get out! Just get out!" Miss Xu's shoulders trembled as she fiercely scolded him.

Lin Wanrong had been too engrossed in making his point to consider how it would affect Xu Zhiqing, a proud woman. Anger drained the color from her face, almost making her bite her red lips

through. Tears rolled down like pearls cut from their strings. She picked up the oil lamp, ready to throw it at him.

Yu Zongcai, who had been waiting outside the tent, rushed in upon hearing the commotion. Seeing Xu Zhiqing's tear-streaked face, he looked panicked and charged at Lin Wanrong.

"Brother Yu, what are you doing?!" Xu Zhiqing was alarmed, not even bothering to wipe her tears as she quickly stepped in front of Lin Wanrong, berating Yu Zongcai.

Yu Zongcai was taken aback. "Miss Xu, did General Lin mistreat you?!"

Xu Zhiqing's eyes were filled with a quiet depth as she looked at the flickering candlelight. "You misunderstand, Brother Yu. Why would he mistreat me? I was simply reminded of something sorrowful earlier and cried of my own accord. What does he have to do with it?"

Yu Zongcai was uncertain whether she was telling the truth or not, but when he glanced at Lin San, the man's eyes were darting around and his appearance was suspicious. He snorted, then offered Lin Wanrong a fist-and-palm salute with a smile. "General Lin, please forgive my earlier misunderstanding. I hope you can excuse it."

"Do you really think I'm that bad?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, tucking the hidden weapon back into his robe. He warmly patted Yu Zongcai's shoulder.

Xu Zhiqing's expression slowly returned to normal. Seeing the two men in front of her putting on airs, she hummed, "Brother Yu, General Lin, please go ahead and leave. The swearing-in ceremony is about to begin."

Lin Wanrong let out a low "Oh," and smirked, "About what I was discussing with Miss Xu earlier —"

That was precisely what she didn't want to hear. Xu Zhiqing's face changed immediately. "I've already given you my answer. Do I need to repeat it? I have important matters to attend to. Brother Yu, please escort General Lin out."

'This girl's stubborn temperament really does match my own,' Lin Wanrong thought. Seeing her cheeks as cold as frost, he knew that the matter was settled. He grunted and left the tent.

The army had not even set out yet, and already the vanguard of the right wing had clashed with Advisor Xu several times. If this got out, no one would believe it. Lin Wanrong returned to his own camp in a somber mood, where Du Xiuyuan and others had already lined up neatly, waiting for him. But there was no sign of Li Wuling.

"Was it successful?" Hu Bugui cautiously asked, noticing his displeased expression.

"Women, ah, women," Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed, answering a question with another question. "They are so hard to understand. Brother Hu, go inform Little Li to stay at home and enjoy being a noble."

Realizing that the matter had fallen through, everyone felt disappointed. Since they had started following General Lin, this was the first time he had failed, and that too at the hands of Miss Xu. It felt strange to them all, but no one could put it into words.

A drizzling rain continued to fall, and as the sky gradually lightened, a large platform was erected on the northern side of the training ground. Huge logs were used to construct a tall pavilion on the platform. Golden dragon flags fluttered, and the atmosphere was grim amidst the misty rain.

On either side of the platform stood gigantic drums, as tall as a man. Wooden stakes were erected in front, bound with numerous cattle, all for the ritual of flag offerings.

The old Emperor stood solemnly, unfeeling as the rain struck his face.

"The auspicious time has arrived!" The official from the Imperial Observatory announced. The Emperor gave a slight nod to Li Tai.

The general took robust steps forward, his white hair appearing especially tragic and heroic in the wind and rain. Sweeping his gaze over the crowd, he bellowed, "Swear to vanquish the nomads and defend our great nation. Where are the men—beat the drums, assemble the troops—"

"Beat the drums, assemble the troops—"

"Beat the drums, assemble the troops—"

The orders echoed from north to south, layer upon layer, resounding endlessly.

"Boom—Boom—" The heavy, immense drumming broke the silence of the sky, startling the slumbering birds in the forest. At once, the military camps in all directions erupted into a cacophony of bugles, hooves, footsteps, armor clashing, and weapons colliding, each sound like a great wooden hammer pounding the earth, creating an overwhelming momentum.

Within the camp, the army had long been poised to strike. With just two drumbeats, the troops had already fully assembled. The drill ground was packed, a sea of human heads as far as the eye could see. Tens of thousands of elite soldiers stood, their armor gleaming, faces stern, and weapons gleaming coldly. In the middle were the elite troops of the Divine Machine Unit, tens of thousands of archers and crossbowmen, and over a hundred cannons, all pointing skyward. On the right were the cavalry troops, infantry in formation, each with a blade or a spear that emanated a cold, forbidding glow. Despite the large number of soldiers and officers, the entire field was eerily silent, not even the neighing of the horses audible. Li Tai's reputation for military discipline was indeed well-deserved.

The Vice Minister of the Ministry of Rites read aloud the imperial edict for the campaign, detailing the menace of the Turks and their barbaric intent against the people and fertile lands of the Empire. Angering both heaven and man, the Emperor had mobilized a million-strong army to crush the Turks, retake the frontier, and manifest the Empire's might.

Lin Wanrong listened to half of the dense and cryptic edict before losing interest. His gaze wandered through his own ranks, suddenly spotting the figure of Li Wuling. The young man was suited in armor, standing amidst the ranks, listening to the edict with such enthusiasm that his cheeks were flushed with excitement.

"You're asking for trouble, aren't you?" Lin Wanrong urgently motioned for Gao Qiu to drag him over, and then gave him a firm slap on the head. "Sneaking into my Right Wing Camp—if your Aunt Xu finds out and applies military law, who could save you?"

Li Wuling grinned without a care. "General Lin, Brother Lin, you're so mighty; are you really afraid of my Aunt Xu?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled dismissively. "Talk is cheap; I've done all I can. I can't tolerate your aunt's temperament. You should go back and stay put. When I have time, I'll catch a Turk wife for you to play with."

Li Wuling snorted disdainfully, "Even Aunt Xu let me come. Why would I go back?"

"Who, who allowed you to come?" Lin Wanrong hurriedly cleaned his ears and asked earnestly.

"What, you didn't persuade Aunt Xu?" Now it was Li Wuling's turn to be surprised. "She personally asked me to join your army!"

With the campaign about to commence, Li Wuling would never joke about such matters. So, it really was Xu Zhiqing's wish. Lin Wanrong was momentarily stunned, frantically looking for Xu Zhiqing in the ocean of hundreds of thousands of troops but failing to find her.

"Crush the nomads! Defend our Great Empire!" The voices of hundreds of thousands of soldiers rose like a boundless ocean. Every face was flushed, every weapon raised high, all screaming in unison. The sheer heat of that collective fervor seemed to subdue even the continuous spring rain.

Lin Wanrong looked up to see the old Emperor addressing the assembly: "—He who advances shall be richly rewarded; he who retreats shall be executed. All my words boil down to this one sentence—those who dare trespass against our Great Hua shall be punished, even if they are far away! I will stand here on this platform, and on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, when the moon is full, await the triumphant return of all you soldiers and generals. Cheers!"

The Emperor drained a large bowl of strong wine in one gulp and then forcefully smashed the bowl to the ground. Tens of thousands of soldiers simultaneously raised their bowls and emptied them. The sound of shattering porcelain reverberated continuously.

"Raise the flag!" General Li Tai bellowed. Instantly, thousands of cavalries burst forth, their horses neighing and their long spears and swords clanging.

"Charge!" Over a thousand cavalymen galloped frenetically toward the platform, eyeing the bound sacrificial oxen atop the altar. With swift, synchronized movements akin to a glinting cold light, they severed the heads of the thousands of animals. Blood splattered across the parade ground. The cavalries hoisted the dripping heads high and quickly rode back, the sight further fueling the soldiers' killing intent.

"Charge!"

"Charge!"

Hundreds of thousands of men brandished their weapons and yelled in unison, their cries piercing the heavens, shaking the earth. The eyes of Xu Zhen, Hu Bugui, and others near Lin Wanrong were bloodshot, their overwhelming fervor causing Lin Wanrong's ears to buzz.

The Marshal's white hair fluttered in the sporadic drizzle. Standing against the wind, he swung his longsword forward. "Men, march!"

The drums of war began to pound, resonating like spring thunder in everyone's hearts. The hundreds of thousands-strong army, lined up like a long snake, braved the spring rain as they headed north. The high-flying banners seemed to echo the emotions of each departing soldier—both excited and mournful.

Thousands upon thousands of civilians gathered along the roadside, running along with the troops. The endless column of soldiers mingled with the people, together forming a colossal dragon.

This departure likely meant parting life from death. Elderly mothers, newlywed wives, children at their parents' knees—they all called out the names of their loved ones over and over, their tears long dried, hoping to catch one last glimpse of the faces they would see in their dreams. Those who found their family held tightly onto each other, unwilling to part. Bag after bag of dried fruit and rations were thrust into the soldiers' hands, whether they knew them or not.

"The hardest part is saying goodbye," the solemn, tragic atmosphere even brought tears to the eyes of Hu Bugui, a veteran general who had fought against the nomads for many years.

Lin Wanrong had never experienced a scene like this before. This was a true farewell, a life-or-death parting. Looking at the countless wives and mothers with children in tow, yearning and weeping, their intestines nearly torn from grief, he felt a sense of awe that was difficult to articulate. He despised war now more than ever.

"Big Brother, Husband!" A delicate cry came from the crowd. It was Ning'er, dressed in her brightest gown, standing atop a carriage. She looked like a butterfly adorned in flowers. Her eyes filled with tears, she furiously waved her small hands, having already turned into a weeping mess. Qingxuan, heavily pregnant, and the Eldest Miss tightly embracing her—along with Qiaoqiao, Yushuang, Xian'er—they all jostled among the crowd, moving step by step, waving to him over and over.

"Take care, Ning'er, Qingxuan, Xian'er, Yushuang, Yuruo, Qiaoqiao—take care!" Lin Wanrong waved his hand frantically as if possessed, tears falling like a floodgate had burst open, pouring down uncontrollably.

Through his tear-blurred vision, those familiar faces slowly vanished into the sea of people, receding farther and farther away.

Chapter 510 The Art of Forging Soldiers

It was rather peculiar. Ever since they had left the capital, an unrelenting spring rain had persisted, turning the roads into a muddy mess. The late spring chill, accompanied by cold winds and rain, made it feel as though they were back in the depths of winter. Marching in such weather was disheartening, not just for the common soldiers but also for the battle-hardened veterans. It seemed like an ominous sign sent by the heavens.

Lin Wanrong had led troops in Shandong, but that had been to suppress bandits. Back then, they had been well-supplied and vastly outnumbered the enemy, fighting with both psychological and numerical superiority. But the situation now was entirely different—they were up against the Turks, who were nothing like the outclassed opponents they had previously faced. One look at the solemn expression on General Li Tai's face was enough to understand the gravity of the situation.

However, General Lin had a steady hand and entrusted the entire training program to Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan, who were both well-versed in his methods. To sum it up, General Lin's approach involved a ruthless system of elimination combined with motivational rewards that stirred the soldiers' passions. Even the weakest of soldiers could be transformed into a fervent fighter under their guidance. This strategy had proven effective during their time in Shandong, so there was little cause for concern.

Among the Right Wing Camp, General Lin was the most laid-back. While his subordinates were busy training troops, he roamed the camp leisurely with his senior aides. His favorite activity was to engage in casual conversations with ordinary soldiers. Come mealtime, he'd join them, competing to grab the best portions. He was approachable, down-to-earth, and could easily mingle with everyone, from high-ranking officers to the lowest kitchen helpers. The camp was always lively.

Sometimes, on a whim, General Lin would gather everyone to sing folk songs, a mix of tunes from both north and south. These singing sessions left everyone both cheerful and sentimental.

Most unique of all was General Lin's invention—the "Reading Family Letters" competition. The Right Wing Camp consisted of fifty to sixty thousand soldiers, and each day brought countless letters from home. General Lin would assemble a group and encourage soldiers to read these letters aloud before their comrades. These were the moments when the troops were happiest.

Over time, these activities became routine. General Lin's Right Wing Camp trained the hardest but laughed the loudest, creating a vibrant atmosphere in stark contrast to the unending spring rain.

After several days of marching north, the army changed course, moving from east to west along the southern foothills of the Great Wall. Gradually, the weather began to dry up.

"General, it's time for the army's central meeting. Will you be attending today, or shall I go in your stead?" Du Xiuyuan reported with a smile, only to find his superior scribbling on a piece of paper with an odd-looking pen.

Lin Wanrong put down his pen with finality before yawning lazily. "These daily meetings are always the same, aren't they? A roll call for each camp, reports on training details. Then listening to General Li or Miss Xu give a speech. Ah, it's torture for a disabled man like me. It's a journey of several miles, back and forth, you know."

The army continued its steady advance, the atmosphere growing increasingly tense. After the briefing from Li Tai, Xu Zhiqing convened daily military councils to discuss the enemy situation and marching routes, making it a routine practice. General Lin's right-wing army was positioned twenty miles away from Li Tai's command post. The back-and-forth journey took at least an hour, a taxing ordeal for General Lin, who pretended to be lame. Consequently, Du Xiuyuan had been his representative in these briefings for some time.

"People with disabilities, huh? Your injury healed up just fine. Just yesterday, you rode around on your prized horse, and even Hu Bugui couldn't catch up with you. Do you think we don't know?" Gao Qiu, who spent much of his time around General Lin, chuckled at the man's laziness.

Du Xiuyuan nodded, "Alright, I'll go then. But what should I tell Miss Xu if she asks again today? You haven't reported to the command post for several days, and she seemed rather annoyed last time."

"She gets annoyed quite often; it's not the first time." General Lin shook his head, putting on a troubled expression. "It's not that I don't want to go, but my injury hampers me. Every day I lead the troops through the pain of a 'broken leg,' so Miss Xu should be understanding of us 'disabled' people. I'll take a couple more days to rest and then report to her in person."

Du Xiuyuan and the others suspected something odd between him and Xu Zhiqing. Seeing him continue to make excuses only confirmed their suspicions. Du Xiuyuan bowed and laughed, "Understood, understood. If General Lin intends to personally report to Advisor Xu but is hindered by physical constraints, I'm sure Miss Xu will understand. I'll go and inform her now."

"Exactly, that's precisely the situation," Lin Wanrong chuckled, praising Du Xiuyuan's intelligence. Once Du Xiuyuan had ridden off, Lin Wanrong took the piece of paper in his hand and passed it to Hu Bugui, "Brother Hu, you're an expert on horses and military drills. What do you think of this idea? Is it feasible?"

Hu Bugui took the paper and his expression immediately changed, "General Lin, who came up with this idea?!"

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively, "Never mind who thought of it. Just tell me if it's feasible or not."

Hu Bugui pondered for a moment before cautiously responding, "If soldiers are required to carry five-pound sandbags on their legs while marching seventy to eighty miles per day, in addition to training during camp, the intensity is too great. I fear the men won't be able to endure it."

"And what about you, Brother Hu? If you carried these sandbags while marching and training, would it be a problem?" Lin Wanrong asked sternly.

Hu Bugui burst into confident laughter, shaking his head, "What's the big deal? Years ago, I chased down a horse with my own two feet. Five pounds is nothing. Not just me, I'm confident that every brother in the battalion I brought from Shandong can handle this."

"That settles it then," Lin Wanrong snorted, "We're all human; there's no reason one should be inferior to another. Issue the orders, starting tonight—not tomorrow—everyone in my right-wing army, from officers to soldiers, whether from the cavalry, infantry, or artillery units, whether marching, eating, drinking, relieving themselves, or sleeping, must wear five-pound sandbags. Without my orders, nobody is allowed to remove them. Violators will be subject to military law!"

"Understood!" Hu Bugui barked out and immediately summoned the scribe to disseminate the announcement through the night.

"There's another matter," Lin Wanrong thought for a moment, stopping Hu Bugui who was about to step out of the tent. "Bind sandbags around the legs of each warhorse, whether they are used for carrying goods or riders."

"With such weight, the warhorses will increase in strength, but their lifespan will probably shorten by half a year."

"Better the horses live half a year less than men losing their entire lives," Lin Wanrong said with a bitter smile, noticing the stunned looks from Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu. "Brother Hu, Brother Gao, do you think I'm being cruel?"

Gao Qiu spoke earnestly, "General Lin, you've never made a mistake; we trust you."

"Actually, the idea occurred to me when I was riding that fine steed yesterday," Lin Wanrong sighed. "Whether we admit it or not, the Turks' horses are far superior to ours. Just on cavalry strength alone, we're at a disadvantage. So we must resort to unconventional methods. Even if it means sacrificing the horses."

Hu Bugui, a cavalryman by training with a great love for horses, could only sigh in silence.

Lin Wanrong pulled two sandbags from under his pillow and tied them tightly around his legs. "Brother Hu, go and gather the men; I'll speak with them."

By dinner time, the air was thick with the aroma of food as the cook pots were set up. The usually bustling camp was unusually quiet tonight.

When Lin Wanrong stepped out of his tent, he saw the setting sun casting a beautiful glow on the horizon, illuminating the young faces of tens of thousands of soldiers. They had finally seen the sun, yet it was setting—was their expedition to the north truly a doomed cause? Shaking off such thoughts, he ascended a makeshift wooden platform. Surveying the sea of warriors, he began to speak.

"Brothers," Lin Wanrong's voice echoed through the valleys, resonant and clear, "you've all received the order. Yes, it came from me. Starting now, regardless of your rank or position—whether cavalry, infantry, or archers—each man is to bind five pounds to each leg. Without my command, no one is to remove them. Defy this and you will be executed."

The word 'executed' reverberated through the valley, striking a chord in the hearts of the soldiers. The atmosphere became thick with tension.

"In truth, I've been stimulated," Lin Wanrong sighed heavily, and the crowd fell silent. "During our march, memories of farewells in the capital keep flashing before my eyes. I see our aging mothers,

tear-streaked wives, and helpless children. I believe every one of you will remember such scenes for a lifetime."

"Whenever any of us brothers read letters from home, we all feel the same surge of emotion. Our loved ones wish for the simplest things. They don't seek wealth or luxury, only that we return safely. I hope every one of you will remember this: in the eyes of your family, you are not a mere wave or a blade of grass. What are you then? You are the majestic Helan Mountain, sheltering from wind and rain, as noble as the sky itself, unyielding forever!"

Tens of thousands of soldiers stood in formation, yet it was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop. Countless young faces flushed red; fists clenched as if about to explode; and tears in eyes were surreptitiously wiped away.

Lin Wanrong took a deep breath, and his voice calmed again. "Please look at my legs. These are two sandbags, each weighing five pounds. It's something any of you can easily do. Xu Zhen, step forward—break the wooden stake."

"Here!" Xu Zhen, along with a dozen other robust soldiers, stepped out of the ranks. Their legs were already bound with heavy sandbags, each weighing far more than ten pounds.

"Strike!" At the shout, the group simultaneously lashed out at the vertical wooden stakes before them. With a loud crack, the sturdy stakes were broken into two pieces. Xu Zhen and his men appeared relaxed, as if they had barely exerted themselves.

"As you can see," Lin Wanrong shouted, "with hard work, you can also achieve this level of skill. All the hardships today are for the joyful reunions with our loved ones tomorrow. Brothers, what are you waiting for?"

He was indeed a born orator. His impassioned speech was both logical and emotionally stirring. Even Gao Qiu was convinced, let alone the soldiers who revered General Lin. Tens of thousands of troops eagerly began strapping on the sandbags, making the scene incredibly lively.

During the subsequent drills, the soldiers, weighed down by sandbags, naturally moved less agilely than usual, but this was a necessary discomfort. Lin Wanrong lowered his voice and asked Gao Qiu, "Brother Gao, how long will it take for this training to show results?"

Gao Qiu was an extraordinary martial artist, and in his eyes, the sandbags were child's play. "We'll see improvements every day. The legs will probably swell and ache for the first few days, but these

are the elite soldiers of our great nation, strong and robust. I estimate that within ten days, they'll be walking as usual. Within a month at most, we'll see tangible results."

"A month? I hope that will be soon enough," Lin Wanrong said with a bitter smile. It was a bit late to think of this method, but it was better than not having thought of it at all.

"Huh, isn't that Du Xiuyuan?" A lone rider galloped toward them from a distance. Gao Qiu had keen eyes and recognized him as Du Xiuyuan, who had gone to the main camp on behalf of General Lin. He expressed his confusion, "Did today's meeting end so soon?"

Lin Wanrong was also puzzled. Had Miss Xu finished her briefing so early? Du Xiuyuan arrived, sweat still on his face. Lin Wanrong laughed and asked, "Brother Du, has the meeting ended? What did Advisor Xu say?"

Du Xiuyuan quickly shook his head, "No, when I arrived at the camp, I didn't even see a trace of Advisor Xu. I asked General Zuo Qiu of the Left Wing Army, and he said that Advisor Xu is inspecting the camp today."

"Inspecting the camp?" Lin Wanrong blinked his eyes and suddenly exclaimed, "Oh no, she must be coming to catch me out, and I might even face military discipline or corporal punishment. Brother Du, hold the fort here; I have something to attend to. Gao Qiu, prepare me the fastest Blood Sweat horse; I need to step out for a moment—"

"Shameless!" A delicate voice, tinged with a touch of anger, rang in his ears, making the hairs on Lin Wanrong's skin stand on end.