

I. Dynasty 232

Chapter 232: A Humbling Demonstration

Pfft!

Zhao Kuan spat out the tea he had just sipped.

“Twenty thousand taels? That’s enough to equip four hundred elite armored cavalry!” he blurted out.

Zhao Yuanliang’s brow furrowed deeply. “Your Highness, this price is far too steep. We cannot afford it.”

When discussing the cannon price with Emperor Wenxuan, Xiao Ming had specified that the eight thousand taels was a special rate for the imperial court. He had also discreetly requested the Emperor not to disclose this figure. At the time, Emperor Wenxuan had agreed.

Thus, apart from the Emperor, no one knew the actual production cost. However, Xiao Ming was aware Prince Zhao wasn’t foolish—he must have estimated a reasonable price range.

“What do you believe would be a fair price then?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Six thousand taels should suffice, with transportation handled by us,” Zhao Yuanliang proposed.

Xiao Ming stood up. “Let me propose this: Yuanliang, you may have only heard of the cannons’ reputation without witnessing their power firsthand. Allow me to show you.”

“That was precisely my hope. Please lead the way, Your Highness,” Zhao Yuanliang said eagerly.

Xiao Ming nodded and escorted Zhao Yuanliang and Zhao Kuan to Qingzhou’s military camp.

A dedicated artillery range had been established beside the camp, featuring three training cannons—their destination.

Luo Xin was currently conducting artillery drills there. The hasty deployment during the Battle of Cangzhou had revealed poor accuracy, with cannonballs scattering wildly across the battlefield.

Had it not been for the psychological shock of facing cannons for the first time, their effectiveness would have been far less impressive.

Post-battle, Xiao Ming had tasked Luo Xin with specialized training—teaching soldiers proper aiming, angle adjustments, and ricochet techniques to maximize firepower.

“Your Highness!”

Spotting Xiao Ming’s arrival, Luo Xin and the soldiers immediately saluted, their armor clanking in unison.

Zhao Yuanliang and Zhao Kuan scanned the soldiers' distinctive plate armor, their eyes flickering with interest.

While cannons had played a major role at Cangzhou, they suspected these full-body armors contributed significantly as well. The city gates hadn't allowed close inspection earlier, but now they studied the unique design carefully.

"Isn't this the young master?" Luo Xin greeted Zhao Yuanliang after saluting.

"Luo Xin." Zhao Yuanliang had actually met Luo Xin more frequently than Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming interjected, "Since you're acquainted, this simplifies matters. Luo Xin, the young master has come to learn about our cannons. Demonstrate a firing sequence for him."

"Yes, Your Highness." Luo Xin acknowledged.

Military protocol demanded absolute obedience to Xiao Ming as supreme commander here—a rule enforced with iron discipline. Even Lu Fei had been disciplined multiple times before falling in line.

Zhao Yuanliang studied the cannon before him with growing anticipation, while Zhao Kuan's gaze burned with intensity.

The Battle of Cangzhou had made cannons legendary across the Great Yu, overshadowing Xiao Ming's personal achievements—partly due to Cui Hao's faction downplaying his role, but also because Xiao Ming had deliberately emphasized the weapons to boost arms sales.

Under Xiao Ming's guidance, each cannon now had a four-soldier crew: one cleaner, one loader, one aimer, and one igniter—maximizing firing speed.

The crew efficiently loaded and aimed their weapon, leaving only ignition remaining.

"Your Highness, today's target is at two hundred paces," Luo Xin reported.

Xiao Ming nodded approvingly. His men understood—for visitors, only the most spectacular demonstrations would do.

The current target was a stone wall specifically built for artillery practice.

"Yuanliang, you might want to cover your ears. The report is quite loud," Xiao Ming advised.

"No need, Your Highness. If we're purchasing cannons, we should experience them fully," Zhao Yuanliang declined.

The artillery crew exchanged glances that plainly said idiots. They knew exactly how deafening the blast could be—prolonged exposure had already damaged some soldiers' hearing.

Xiao Ming didn't insist. Maintaining surface courtesy sufficed—these quasi-independent princes were no friends of his.

"Ignition!" Luo Xin commanded, plugging his ears with cotton.

Xiao Ming also stepped back as the crew inserted earplugs. The igniter touched flame to fuse.

BOOM!

A blinding flash accompanied an earth-shaking detonation.

"Mother of—!"

Zhao Yuanliang and Zhao Kuan shrieked in terror, stumbling backward and nearly falling.

"Are you unharmed, Yuanliang?" Xiao Ming inquired.

Both men stood pale-faced. Having seen fire lances on city walls, they'd assumed similar noise levels. Now they regretted their bravado—and the humiliation before Xiao Ming.

“Fine, Your Highness,” Zhao Yuanliang managed weakly, while Zhao Kuan’s legs trembled uncontrollably.

The artillery crew struggled to suppress grins. Luo Xin barely contained his amusement—they’d brought this on themselves.

Noticing their expressions, Zhao Yuanliang seethed internally but maintained composure. “Indeed thunderous, Your Highness. But what of its destructive power?”

“Observe the target,” Xiao Ming pointed.

Following his gesture, Zhao Yuanliang and Zhao Kuan gasped. The stone wall that had stood intact moments ago now lay in rubble.

“Your Highness, perhaps the wall was poorly constructed? This doesn’t fully demonstrate the cannon’s might,” Zhao Yuanliang challenged.

Xiao Ming had anticipated such skepticism. “Then let’s change targets.”

He led them deeper into the range until, at four hundred paces, they encountered a line of clay cavalry statues.

“These are modeled after barbarian riders—thirty total, spaced ten meters apart. The clay is extremely durable,” Xiao Ming explained. “Now observe from four hundred paces.”

After returning, they watched as the crew fired.

At this extended range against smaller targets, the first three shots missed. The fourth struck home.

When Xiao Ming brought them close again, the sight of thirty shattered statues left Zhao Yuanliang speechless.