



《《 2 · *Blades and Banners* 》》

❦ 火 ❦

From the Collected Writings of Bai Xu

“On Storms That Do Not Shout”

The qiāng (枪), spear, is a herald of distance - long, reaching, clear.

But some are forged for silence, and silence alone.

I once saw such a spear in the hands of a man called Wei Jian.

*Its name was **Soul of the Wind**.*

It was no ornament of warlords. It was made to vanish, then strike.

To fold like breath and unfold like the edge of winter.

In his hands, it was more than a weapon.

It was whisper. It was wind.

It was the quiet promise that not all storms roar before they strike.

— notes from the fireside scrolls of Master Bai Xu

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The friends dismounted and stood side by side now: Chen Long, Xu Lin, and Xiao Di with swords drawn, their blades gleaming ghostly silver in the moonlit rain, while Zhao Ming, Wei Jian, and Jin Hua held their bows at the ready, their movements calm and precise. No words were needed. They had fought together too often to waste breath when steel would speak for them.

At the edge of the clearing, the warhorses circled in restless silence, their dark shapes shifting like ghosts through the rain. They held their ground against the pull of fear, waiting, steady and unyielding, as if they, too, knew the battle was not yet done.

“Guess I’m not dying alone after all,” Xu Lin said, relief threading through his voice like a warmer current in the rain-soaked night.

Xiao Di flashed him a grin without taking his eyes off the darkness ahead. “I told you he’d bring trouble,” he muttered to Chen Long, who stood next to him at the centre of the group. “You owe me thirty coins, brother.”

The tall one gave a low chuckle, the kind that rumbled in his chest, and adjusted the strap of his quiver with a slow, deliberate gesture, like a man who had all the time in the world. Xu Lin's mouth twitched in a brief, knowing smile. Trust, after all, was not built on calm days.

"Here they come," Zhao Ming, wiry and sharp-eyed at twenty-five, stated matter-of-factly as he nocked an arrow and pulled back the bowstring. He shifted his stance with the casual confidence of a man who trusted his aim more than luck.

They readied their weapons and waited. The enemy's arrows whistled through the night air, striking the ground only feet away from the group.

"Why do they all shoot like women?" Wei Jian, the oldest among them, broader through the shoulders and wearing the years like a badge rather than a burden, muttered dryly. "Present company excluded, of course," he added with a wink before turning back to face the approaching riders, just as another volley hit the dirt.

"Careful," Jin Hua said deadpan. She stood poised beside him, a steady presence barely twenty-three, her bow already half-raised and waiting. "Your aim's not exactly legendary either." The others chuckled, quiet, sharp, the kind that slipped through tension like a blade through silk.

"Steady now," Chen Long said calmly, his gaze fixed on the shadowed shapes closing in; a dozen, maybe more.

Xu Lin held his sword in his left hand and now drew a dagger from the sheath at his side. He always fought left-handed, an advantage most didn't expect. If needed, he could switch to his right and be just as deadly.

"Shoot when you see the white of their eyes." Chen Long hadn't even finished the sentence when Zhao Ming's arrow zipped through the night, a blur of motion and string-song. The others followed, releasing in unison. Arrows struck with brutal precision, thudding into muscle and flesh. Several horses screamed, stumbling as they fell, flinging their riders into the mud. One rider hit the ground with a sickening crunch, his scream piercing the air as his arm bent the wrong way.

More arrows rained down, slicing into the dirt, whistling past ears. Those still alive scrambled to their feet, mud-slicked and furious, and charged toward Chen Long's group, howling like men who had forgotten fear.

Xu Lin didn't wait. He stepped forward into the chaos, sword flashing as the first of the charging men reached him. Steel clanged against steel, sharp, brutal. He ducked a wild swing, slipped inside the man's guard, and drove his dagger deep into his side. The man crumpled with a grunt, but already another attacker was on him. Before Xu Lin could raise his blade again, an arrow hissed past his ear - Zhao Ming's shot, perfect and deadly, thudding into the enemy's chest and throwing him back.

To Xu Lin's left, Wei Jian met a heavysset man head-on, sidestepped a clumsy blow, and swung his bow like a club across the attacker's face. Teeth and blood flew as the man went down hard.

Jin Hua flowed past them both, a blur in the rain. Her bow was gone, lost somewhere in the mud, and in its place, Twilight Fang and Silent Bloom gleamed in her hands, her two favourite daggers. A soldier lunged at her, sword raised high.

She slipped sideways beneath the blow, the rain sliding off her like silk, and drove Twilight Fang upward into his throat in one smooth, powerful motion. Before the man could even gasp, she twisted free, Silent Bloom flashing outward to slice across the next attacker's wrist, sending his blade spinning from numb fingers. She moved like a shadow loosed from the ground: silent, deadly, inevitable. The rhythm of battle shifted around her, a dark pulse in the rain, fierce and unbroken.

They fought scattered but close, drawn by habit more than plan, each one orbiting Chen Long's steady presence without thinking. Chen Long stepped into that rhythm without hesitation, his movements crisp and final. He blocked a sword with the back of his armguard, pivoted, and opened his opponent's throat with a single, economical cut.

Mud churned underfoot. Arrows split the air. Steel sang. More enemies pressed forward, faces twisted with rage and fear, swords raised.

Xiao Di, still almost too young to carry the weight of a sword with such ease, moved with fluid precision, every motion a blur of speed. He stepped lightly, almost dancing, weaving through the enemy with fluid strikes. But speed had its price. A blade nicked his upper arm as he slipped past a too-slow block, not deep, but enough to leave a hot line of pain along his skin. Xiao Di gritted his teeth and kept moving, faster, sharper - as if outrunning the sting.

Xu Lin parried a heavy blow with his sword, and answered with a slash across the ribs with his dagger. The man dropped without a cry. Xu Lin's gaze swept the shifting lines, catching the subtle push of enemy riders trying to break them apart. Years of battle sharpened his instincts and he saw the trap forming as clearly as if it had been drawn in the dirt before him.

"Stay together!" he shouted over the clash, the call passing through their line like a spark through dry grass. Zhao Ming stepped closer, firing another arrow into the melee. Jin Hua ducked beneath his shot, rolling across the slick ground and coming up behind a staggered foe, her dagger finding a gap in his armour.

The rain thickened, no longer a soft mist but sharp, slanting spears that hammered the clearing, turning the mud into a treacherous sea beneath their boots. It drummed against leather and steel, blurred the edges of sight, filled every breath with the taste of iron and wet earth.

Wei Jian laughed, sharp and wild, and leapt forward, catching a sword blow on his bracer before driving his knee into his enemy's gut. Slipping his bow into the quiver, he drew his favourite weapon: the retractable spear he trusted more than any blade. It was the folded soul of the wind itself, no longer than a sword in its current state. A twist at the centre ring, sharp and certain, and the compressed shaft shuddered in his hands. With a hiss of released tension, two sleek segments snapped outward, locking into place with the solid, final click of a promise made. Soul of the Wind unfurled between his palms, its reach long, its balance perfect.

Just then, a pursuer came charging toward him, sword raised. The swordsman lunged, a snarl tearing from his throat. The blade gleamed, so close Wei Jian could see the notch along its edge. The sword came down. Wei Jian met it not with a shield, but with the living spear, driving the haft upward to catch the descending blade. Wood and metal collided with a crack that rattled the air. Momentum spun him sideways. He used it. Pivoted. Slipped inside the

guard of the swordsman, the Soul of the Wind flashed forward in a tight thrust. It struck true. The enemy gasped and crumpled.

Another foe lunged at Xiao Di, who sidestepped sharply, sweeping his sword low to slice through the man's calf. Before the man hit the ground, Xiao Di had already pivoted, his blade flashing again to cut another attacker across the ribs, sending him sprawling. His movements were a blur: quick, deadly and relentless, making sure the others had space to fight.

The six held their ground, backs brushing, blades flashing, moving as one.

Xu Lin blocked another sword-stroke, but the force of it drove him a step backward into Zhao Ming. The archer grunted, just as a blade slashed past his face, leaving a shallow, burning line across his cheek. He barely flinched, firing another arrow point-blank into the next attacker's chest.

"How many bloody friends did you bring with you, Xu Lin?" he shouted, half furious, half laughing. Xu Lin's mouth twisted in a grim smile. "Not nearly enough," he muttered, twisting at the last second to block another strike. But a second blade slipped through, catching him low and slicing a hot, stinging line across his thigh. He bit back the pain and drove his sword forward, cutting down his attacker before the sting could slow him.

Wei Jian parried a blade low but missed the second attacker rushing from his blind side. Chen Long moved fast, dragging him aside just in time, though not before the bandit's blade raked across Wei Jian's upper arm. Blood bloomed beneath the tear in his sleeve. "Thanks," Wei Jian growled through gritted teeth, but his grip on his spear never wavered.

Jin Hua had her own troubles. Two foes circled her, trying to cut her off from the others. She slipped between them, agile as a shadow, but the gap was closing fast. Chen Long saw it, but he was pinned down himself, his blade locking against another's. He whistled, sharp and clear through the rain, and Hei'feng answered. The black warhorse came thundering out of the gloom, mane flying, hooves striking like falling stars. He reared high, iron-shod hooves lashing out. The man crumpled into the mud without a sound. Hei'feng lashed out once more, a final stamp of heavy hooves, before tossing his head and wheeling away into the rain.

Jin Hua moved in the same breath. As the second attacker's sword grazed her hip, slicing cloth and skin, she sucked in a sharp breath, twisted away, and slammed her elbow into the man's jaw. He dropped like a stone. Mud splattered up her legs, cold and heavy, but she didn't falter.

Chen Long barely had time to turn before another attacker lunged from the side. He caught the blade on his own, but the second man came at him low, a vicious kick slamming into his ribs. The impact stole his breath for a heartbeat, pain lancing through his side. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself upright, forced the world to steady, and met the next blow with steel and fury.

The clash of steel thinned, the rhythm of battle faltering. Blood and rain soaked the ground, the air heavy with the stench of iron and mud. A few of the surviving attackers staggered back, clutching wounds, desperate and broken. Two tried to scramble toward their horses, limping through the churned mud. Zhao Ming's bow sang once, twice. Two riders toppled from their saddles before they could flee.

But one, just one, managed to spur his horse into the storm, disappearing into the night beyond the clearing.

"Damn," Zhao Ming hissed, his hand brushing against an empty quiver. "I'm all out." He threw an annoyed glance around the group. Chen Long gave him a firm pat on the shoulder. "It's alright. You did well. You all did."

Xu Lin's sword lowered slowly. Around him, the night held its breath again, broken only by the rain and the ragged sound of men remembering how to breathe.

For a moment, none of them moved. The battle had left new scars: Across the land, upon their bodies, and in places no one could see.

Chen Long straightened with visible effort, one hand brushing his side where the kick had landed.

Xiao Di wiped blood from his face, his own or someone else's, he wasn't sure, and shot a quick glance at the others.

Zhao Ming stood steady, bow in hand, a thin line of blood cutting across his cheek.

Jin Hua pressed a hand to her hip, her shoulders sinking slightly as the fight's strain caught up with her.

Wei Jian leaned briefly on the shaft of his spear, breathing hard, but a grin still flickered through the rain.

"Some fight, eh?" he said, walking over to Xu Lin, who seemed to have trouble keeping his balance. "Need a hand, brother?" "Look who's talking." Xu Lin jabbed him lightly in the arm, where a thin stream of blood still ran. Both men burst out laughing, and soon the others joined in.

Meanwhile, Xiao Di had started checking the fallen for signs of affiliation or hidden notes. "So," he called over his shoulder, "what did they actually want from you, Xu Lin?" Chen Long joined him in the search, though bending down hurt like hell and every breath was a pain in the neck.

All eyes turned to Xu Lin. "Yeah, brother, who did you piss off this time?" Zhao Ming asked, strolling over to Jin Hua and steadying her with an easy grip until her horse, Baiyu, trotted up beside them.

"I know where the Tang Army is hiding," Xu Lin said dryly, whistling for his horse, Yelong. Chen Long looked up, a dangerous flicker in his eyes. "Where?" His voice was ice. He had a personal score to settle with one of the Tang Army's commanders, Liang Kui.

For two months, Chen Long and his little band of brothers had chased shadows, burned every favour, risked every spy. And now, at last, they had a lead. A chance to strike back. A chance to repay blood with blood. The Tang Army had butchered an entire camp in spring. Soldiers, women, children. No mercy. No survivors. Now, it would be their turn to show none.

"Not here." Xu Lin shook his head and mounted his horse. "Let's get back to General Wang first." Zhao Ming helped Jin Hua onto her horse before mounting his own. He patted his horse's neck. "Steady, Tushan. You did good, old boy."

"Found something!" Xiao Di called, snapping Chen Long's attention back to the present. He held up a jade pendant, gleaming wetly in the rain. Chen Long walked over, wincing with

every breath, one hand pressed against his side. He reached Xiao Di and took the pendant for a closer look.

"Tang family pendant," he said coldly, handing it to Wei Jian, their expert on family crests, for confirmation. Wei Jian examined it briefly and gave a nod. Chen Long's jaw tightened. His fingers curled into a fist around the empty air. "Then Tang Zijun still leads them," he said. "And he's coming for us." "Let's go, brother. The general needs to hear this as soon as possible." Wei Jian patted Chen Long's shoulder and mounted up.

Xiao Di's horse was still standing stubbornly at the edge of the clearing. Xiao Di had called him twice already, but Mo Yin, true to his nature, just flicked an ear and stayed exactly where he was. Chen Long chuckled lowly as Hei'feng trotted up without even needing a signal. He grabbed the saddle, bracing himself, and hauled himself up with a sharp hiss of pain. Man, that kick was worse than I thought.

Settling into the saddle, Chen Long turned to Xiao Di with a grin. "Walking home, little brother?" Xiao Di pouted as he trudged off. "Very funny. Really." "I wonder who's more stubborn, Xiao Di or Mo Yin?" Xu Lin said, grinning, before they all burst out laughing again.

As Xiao Di finally reached his horse, Zhao Ming finished helping Jin Hua bandage her hip more tightly, using a strip of cloth torn from his own sleeve. Xu Lin, meanwhile, wrapped a fresh piece of linen around the gash on his thigh with rough, practised hands. Chen Long tugged his own bandage tighter. They had no time for proper healing, just enough to stay in the saddle.

Xiao Di mounted at last, muttering darkly at Mo Yin. Once he was settled, he gave the stubborn horse an earful.

"Let's go!" Chen Long spurred Hei'feng forward, and the others followed close behind.

The rain had finally stopped, and the clouds were beginning to break. The group rode at a steady pace, leaving the clearing behind.

"So, how did you get the map, Xu Lin?" Xu Lin glanced over and noticed how Chen Long's breath still came short and pressed. He looked at his friend with concern but kept it to himself.

"Remember I told you about my old friend, Gong Wei?" Chen Long nodded. "He runs a network of spies, so I had high hopes he'd dig up something." Xu Lin paused, then added with a small grin, tapping the pocket inside his tunic, "And he did."

Chen Long nodded again. He and Jin Hua groaned in unison as the ground turned rougher and the horses struggled to keep a steady pace. Zhao Ming spurred his horse closer to Jin Hua's, ready to steady her if need be. She gave him a grateful nod. They were seasoned fighters, but riding while injured was no child's play and they had already been on the road for a full day.

The ground beneath them grew more treacherous, each step heavier than the last. The wind had died away, and the moon had surrendered its vigil, retreating before the pale advance of dawn. The path to General Wang's camp was long, but each hour stretched endlessly, as if time itself had slowed. They rode in silence, the only sounds the weary clatter of hooves on wet earth and the soft creak of saddles beneath them.

"I suppose we could reach the camp by noon," Xu Lin said, his voice rough from disuse. He lifted a hand to shield his eyes, gauging the sun's slow ascent as it edged past the mountains. Zhao Ming caught his glance and gave a subtle nod.

They had taken turns resting in pairs, one sleeping lightly while the other kept watch. It was an old habit from battles past, yet true rest had eluded them. Weariness lay heavy in their bones, beyond mere tiredness, gnawing at strength and spirit alike. Even the horses showed it: heads bowed, hooves dragging slightly in the sodden path, moving forward only because their riders willed them to. Yet they pressed on, silent and steadfast, each carrying the weight of survival and what it would cost to see the journey's end.

Chen Long had thought about Xu Lin's advice, not to speak of the map or the Tang army's position so soon after battle. Yet the longer they rode, the harder it became to heed that caution. He didn't just want to know. He needed it. The whereabouts of his arch-enemy gnawed at him like a thorn buried deep beneath the skin. "Tang - Zi - Jun". He spoke the name under his breath, pausing briefly between each syllable, as if summoning the man into the light.

Xiao Di rode alongside him. It was his turn to rest, but he dared not close his eyes. Something about Chen Long's posture kept him alert. Xiao Di glanced over, voice low but laced with worry. "Everything alright, brother?" He wasn't sure whether Chen Long had said something or merely breathed. Chen Long simply gave a curt nod and turned his attention to the rider ahead.

"Xu Lin," he called out, his voice steady despite the strain. "We need to talk." Xu Lin had expected it. Without slowing immediately, he gave Zhao Ming a quick, exasperated glance, rolling his eyes in a gesture of long-suffering brotherhood. Zhao Ming only smirked and nudged his horse forward, leaving the two behind. Xu Lin eased his mount to fall in line with Chen Long, while Xiao Di pressed ahead to join Zhao Ming, casting a last backward glance before riding on.

"The weather around this time of year is especially wet. Wouldn't you agree?" Xu Lin knew perfectly well why Chen Long had called him, but sometimes, a little humour was the only shield left against exhaustion. The others chuckled, grateful for the break in tension. Only Chen Long remained silent. He turned his head and fixed Xu Lin with a look so sharp it could have split stone. A silent warning. "One more word about the weather and you'll be on night watch till winter."

Xu Lin's grin faltered. He cleared his throat, shifted in the saddle, and decided to retreat while he still could. "Guessing this isn't about the weather after all," he said, a touch more serious now. Chen Long said nothing. He simply nudged his horse closer, enough that their mounts brushed shoulders. The silent signal was clear: Speak. Now.

Xu Lin began to recount the positions and the routes, every detail etched into his memory. "All right. Here's what we know..." he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. Not because he didn't trust his comrades, but because he was always like this, overly cautious when it came to matters like these.

Xiao Di had turned in his saddle to glance back at his big brother. "Don't you think Chen Long's grumpier than usual?" he whispered to Zhao Ming.

"Xu Lin's been holding something back, waiting for the right moment, and Chen Long's not the kind to wait patiently," Zhao Ming muttered, casting a quick look toward the two men now speaking in hushed tones. "I'm just glad it's not me who has to fill him in," he added with a wry smile.

"Just mentioning the name 'Tang' makes his blood pressure spike, and that little vein on his temple start to throb." Zhao Ming tapped his own temple for emphasis. Xiao Di tilted his head, thinking about it, then grinned. "You're right," he giggled under his breath.

At the front of the group, Wei Jian slowed Muyan down and let the others catch up. He fell in beside Xiao Di, curiosity glinting in his tired eyes. "What's so funny, little brother?" he asked. Xiao Di bit his lip, glanced at Zhao Ming, who needed no more prompting. With a smirk, Zhao Ming repeated his observation about Chen Long's famous temple vein. Wei Jian chuckled quietly, shaking his head.

"Hey, what about me?" Jin Hua called from a few paces ahead, reining her horse back to join them. "If anyone deserves a laugh, it's me." She pointed at her injured hip with a wry grin. "Shhh," Wei Jian murmured, laying a finger to his lips. Not that Xu Lin or Chen Long would likely notice, but you never knew. Jin Hua repeated her request, whispering now, and the four of them put their heads together, muffled giggling bubbling up once more.

"So, Fengliu Valley is our destination," Chen Long said after Xu Lin had finished recounting everything he knew. Xu Lin nodded. "But first, we need to get you and Jin Hua to a doctor," he added dryly, pointing at Chen Long's ribs and neatly ignoring his own wound. "That should be Jin Hua and yourself," Chen Long replied, deadpan. "I'm fine. A warm meal, a good night's sleep, and I'll be ready to pick a fight again." Xu Lin bit back a remark. Chen Long's stubbornness was legendary, and he didn't feel like getting drawn into a pointless debate.

"Eh... what are you lot whispering about?" Chen Long's brow furrowed slightly as he noticed the others riding close together, muffled giggles breaking free from the cluster now and then.

Wei Jian was the first to turn, a mischievous glint in his eye. "We were just talking about Mei Mei. You remember her, right?" He gave Zhao Ming a nudge. Zhao Ming picked up the cue without missing a beat. "Mei Mei. You know, the whore with only one eye and a missing big toe."

He elbowed Jin Hua, who caught the baton smoothly. "Her brother was the stable boy at the brothel," Jin Hua added with an innocent look, pausing just long enough to bait Chen Long's attention. "And he's the one who spilled a bucket full of piss all over that captain from... err..."

Xiao Di leapt in, grinning wide. "...from the Ox Brigade! The one who swore you were destined to marry into their family." Chen Long blinked once, then gave a slow, tired chuckle. He looked from one to the other, a spark of amusement kindling in his eyes, the first in what felt like days. "How could I forget? The girl with a face only her mother, and maybe a blind goat, could love."

The others roared with laughter, and Chen Long wasn't far behind this time. He nudged Xu Lin with his elbow, playing along. "Wasn't she the one with that dog? You know, the one missing a leg but still faster than half her suitors?" The group burst out laughing, the tension

melting like mist under morning sun. Even Chen Long allowed himself a real smile, fleeting but genuine.

The sun was climbing steadily toward her highest point, accompanied by a few featherlight clouds drifting lazily across the blue. Cicadas hummed in the grasses beside the path, and the smell of warm earth mingled with the faint tang of pine. The mood of the group had lifted over the last hour, brighter now, lighter, like cloaks shrugged off.

"I can't wait to get my hands on one of Meng Baoxu's hotpots," Zhao Ming said, licking his lips. "Brother, you haven't tasted real food until you've had his glazed pork ribs," Wei Jian replied, closing his eyes and breathing in deeply, as if the scent might drift toward him on the wind.

A bird took flight from a tree nearby, startled by a sharp snort from one of the horses. And then, as if on cue, Jin Hua's stomach growled. She lowered her gaze quickly, hoping the others hadn't heard. "Sounds like Sister Jin wants the whole pig, not just the ribs," Wei Jian teased, grinning. Laughter rose, mingling with the rustle of wind in the branches above. Jin Hua pouted and gave his arm a solid punch. "Ouch!" he cried theatrically, rubbing the spot and winking at her in the same breath.

"How much longer, Xu Lin?" Zhao Ming urged his horse forward until he was level with him. Xu Lin raised a hand to shield his eyes from the light. Dust shimmered in the air around them, stirred by the breeze and the steady clop of hooves. He tilted his head slightly, squinting at the sky. "Hmm." A low, thoughtful sound rumbled in his throat. Then he nodded, more to himself than to the others. "Another hour, maybe less. If the path stays clear."

A bee buzzed past Chen Long's ear, and a second later his stomach let out a low, resentful protest. "I think we could all do with some proper food," he muttered, then gave Hei'feng a firm nudge. The stallion, sensing his rider's mood, broke into a gallop with a joyous huff and a flick of his tail.

"First one to The Split Oak gets the first drink!" Chen Long shouted over his shoulder, already several lengths ahead. Forgotten were the injuries. Forgotten the fatigue. For now, there was only sunlight, hoofbeats, and the road ahead.

They had been galloping for nearly half an hour when, out of the dense forest to their left, a small inn appeared: *The Split Oak*. "Come on, Hei'feng!" Chen Long urged, spurring his companion forward. Xiao Di was gaining ground, and Xu Lin wasn't far behind either. Jin Hua and Zhao Ming followed, their horses beginning to tire. Wei Jian brought up the rear. Muyan had thrown a shoe and limped with every step.

"YEAH! We did it! Well done, Hei'feng!" Chen Long bent low and patted the stallion's neck. Both of them were breathing hard, flanks heaving. Xu Lin had overtaken Xiao Di in the final stretch.

A voice called out. Warm and familiar. "Chen Long! How good to see you again. What can I bring you?" The waiter came jogging out from the shade of the inn, wiping his hands on his apron. The Split Oak wasn't far from the camp, and Emberguard stopped by often when they could. "Just a quick drink for us and the horses, Feng Lun," Chen Long called down. Feng Lun nodded and disappeared back inside.

The group didn't dismount. Instead, they loosened the reins and let the horses walk freely toward the trough, where cold water shimmered under the midday light. A moment later, Feng Lun returned with six small glasses filled with his best liquor: a clear amber spirit that caught the sun like fire. They each took one.

Chen Long raised his glass. "To Emberguard... and General Wang." The others echoed the toast: "To Emberguard and General Wang!" and drank.

Once the horses had finished, they thanked Feng Lun, offered a wave, and turned back to the road. The camp wasn't far now. And the general would be waiting.

"I bet old Wang's worn a groove around his war table by now," Wei Jian said dryly. He had known the general longer than any of the others. He had followed him through more battles than he could count. And despite his teasing, his respect for General Wang ran deep. Only Chen Long came close. "No one is going to bet against that, Wei Jian," Xu Lin replied, falling in next to Chen Long again. "You and the general are cut from the same cloth."

For a brief while, Chen Long had forgotten about his ribs. Now, they reminded him. Each breath was a quiet protest from the bruised bone. He shifted in the saddle, a slight grimace betraying him. Xu Lin gave him a worried look. "I'm okay. Don't worry, brother." Chen Long gave him a reassuring nod and managed a smile. Xu Lin returned the gesture, then lifted his head slightly, sniffing the air.

"Ahhh... I can already smell meat roasting on the rack. The camp is near," he said, and a slow grin spread across his face. "Finally. Muyan needs a break, and a new shoe," Wei Jian muttered, patting the horse's neck. They rounded a bend in the path, which now opened onto a wide, green valley. And there it lay: their camp.

Hundreds of tents dotted the landscape like pale stones scattered by a careless hand. But if you didn't know an army was stationed there, you might never guess. There was no shouting. No clashing metal. No bustle. The camp lay still, as if caught in a deep sleep.

Then, movement.

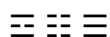
A sentinel stepped from the undergrowth, followed by another. Both carried spears and wore short swords at their hips. The spears now pointed directly at the group. From the opposite side of the path, two more guards emerged, mirroring the first, spears held steady.

"Who goes there?" The first sentinel addressed Chen Long directly, though it was clear he knew exactly who he was speaking to. But orders were orders. And drink's still drink, he thought.

Chen Long spurred his horse forward until its nose almost brushed the spearhead. His voice was calm, clipped. "Chen Long and Emberguard, returning from scout mission. We carry urgent news for the general." The sentinel's eyes swept over each member of the group, measuring injuries, assessing posture, taking in every detail. Then, with a nod: "Pass. Friend."

He stepped aside, and the others followed suit, clearing the way into camp. Behind them, one of the sentries muttered, "If it's urgent news, why are they riding so slow?" "Didn't you see they were injured?" The first scoffed. The inquirer shook his head and received a sharp smack to the back of it. "Calling yourself a soldier," the elder grumbled. "You're on night shift. That might teach you something."

They returned to their posts, slipping back into the underbrush, watching as Emberguard made its slow descent into the silent heart of the camp.



General Wang moved along the edge of the war table, a heavy, waist-high slab of dark wood, its surface carved into a detailed relief of hills, roads, and valleys. Thin lines marked mountain paths and riverbeds. Towns were represented by small clusters of polished stone.

With one hand, he lifted a black flag, mounted on a thin wooden base, and shifted it across the terrain, placing it at a narrow pass along the eastern ridge. The little piece scraped faintly against the carved surface, settling with quiet finality. Wang leaned forward, arms braced on either side of the table, eyes sweeping across the miniature landscape as if it might finally surrender its secrets.

“Any word from Emberguard?” His voice cut through the tent. Low, but edged. “No, General.”

Commander Wu Chenglei stood close, shoulders square, tone clipped. He was Emberguard’s commanding officer. “The last report came seven days ago. From Wei Jian.” General Wang grunted, muttering into his short grey beard as his eyes swept the map again. “I want to be informed the moment anything moves,” he said. Each word landed like a drumbeat. “Yes, General.”

Wu gave a tight nod and turned to the aide at the tent’s entrance. He bent close and murmured a brief order. The young man responded with a crisp nod, then disappeared into the sunlit camp. The flap fluttered shut behind him with a sigh of canvas.

Emberguard, Chen Long’s unit, was the last to return. The others had already made their way back, but none had brought the message the general had been hoping for: The location of Tang’s army.

And as the general stared down at the map, memories stirred, of how it had all begun.

For twenty years, the country had known peace. There had been the occasional raid along the northern frontier, skirmishes rather than wars, but overall, the land had rested in a fragile stillness, like breath held too long.

That stillness shattered the day the old emperor of Baiguo died. In Yunxia’s annals, it would later be recorded as the Year of Falling Banners. The sixteenth year of Jinghe’s reign, 933. His third son, Yan Zhaoren, seized the throne. Though his older brothers had vanished long before their father drew his final breath.

Whispers had followed. Of locked doors. Of muffled screams in palace corridors. Of servants who disappeared without a trace. By the time his coronation was announced, the people already knew what kind of man now ruled Baiguo.

Some say the gods turned their faces away that day. Emperor Yan Zhaoren, known as Jiushi, *Saviour of the World*, ruled with fire on his tongue and blood on his hands. His most trusted weapon was not a blade, but a man: General Tang Zijun, leader of the Tang army and advisor in all matters of war and destruction.

It was Tang Zijun who first urged him to invade the neighbouring realm of Yunxia, Wang’s homeland. A land ruled by Emperor Duan Zeming, known as Jinghe, Keeper of Harmony. The army of Baiguo flooded the border towns with ruthless precision and merciless force.

They struck mostly by night, swift, silent, and deadly. Emperor Jiushi didn't crave more subjects. He wanted land. Resources. And gold, of course. Warfare was costly, and his treasury was running dry.

Emperor Jinghe was a wise and benevolent ruler, but even he could not shield the border towns from the onslaught of Tang soldiers. Jinghe's armies were fewer in number and far less trained than those of the enemy.

General Wang had been retired for a year when the imperial edict reached him, calling him back to action. And he had answered, bringing his most trusted commander, Wu Chenglei, back with him. Now they stood in the general's tent with the other commanders, studying the war table for what felt like the hundredth time.

Outside, the wind tugged at the canvas walls, making the oiled fabric sigh and shift like an old man breathing in his sleep. The smell of dust, ink, and cold steel lingered in the air. "Where are they hiding?" the general muttered, more to himself than to the others. His fingers absently traced the edge of the sand-filled map, where tiny flags marked towns, passes and guesses.

Then, a stir. Footsteps. Voices. The flap of the tent drawn back with urgency.

"Let me through... I have a message for the general!" General Wang turned, his hand pausing mid-gesture. Wu and the other commanders straightened, boots shifting softly against the rugs laid over hard-packed earth.

"Let me through!" A soldier burst into the tent, breathing heavily, the flap falling shut behind him with a muted thump. Beads of sweat ran down his temples. He raised both hands in a formal salute, one fist wrapped in the other, head bowed low. "Report, General!" His voice was hoarse but steady.

"Go ahead," Wang said after a beat, his tone calm but expectant. The soldier looked up, his gaze respectful but carrying the weight of urgency. "Emberguard has been sighted, Sir. They have just passed the sentinels." Wang exhaled slowly, the lines around his eyes deepening.

"Thank you, soldier."

He waved the man away, already turning back to the table. The soldier bowed once more, then rose and slipped out. The tent flap shivered briefly behind him in the wind.

"I hope they bring good news," the general murmured. Then, louder: "Let's take a short break until they're here, gentlemen." His commanders nodded in unison, gave shallow bows and stepped outside. Their boots faded into the murmur of the camp.

Wang remained behind, his gaze fixed on the carved terrain. Lost in thought, he hadn't noticed how long he'd been staring at the map. His mind had drifted, not in fatigue, but in the weight of decisions yet to come. The lantern flickered beside him, casting long shadows across hills and riverbeds.

Outside, muffled voices grew louder, several men approaching. One of them was limping. General Wang had excellent hearing, even at his age. He was well into his fifties, grey streaks showing in his hair and beard, but there was nothing soft or slowing in the way he moved. His soldiers knew better than to underestimate him.

As the footsteps drew nearer, he straightened slightly, his eyes never leaving the map.

Maybe they would succeed where others had failed. Maybe Emberguard would bring the news he needed to turn this war around.

“General, Emberguard reporting back from scouting mission,” came the voice of the general’s aide. “Bring them in.” A breath of fresh air moved through the tent as the flap was drawn back, and the long-awaited leader of Emberguard stepped inside. General Wang turned to face the entrance. The aide entered first, followed by the commanders. Chen Long and Xu Lin were the last to step in. The latter joined the meeting in person. It was he who had found the crucial piece of information. And Chen Long thought he should be the one to report it.

“General Wang,” both men said in unison, offering the formal salute, gaze lowered, hands folded. “At ease.” The general approached them and placed a hand on each of their shoulders in turn. “What news do you bring?”

Together, they walked over to the war table. “We found them, General.” Once they reached the edge, Xu Lin pulled a small folded map from inside his tunic and laid it carefully on the table. Everyone leaned closer, eyes drawn to the modest scrap of parchment, a piece of ink and fibre that could decide the fate of Yunxia.

Xu Lin smoothed it with one hand and stepped aside. General Wang’s gaze moved along the familiar contours, hills, rivers, ridgelines, until it halted.

“Fengliu Valley?” He looked up sharply. “They’re in Fengliu Valley?”

His eyes flicked to the carved map before him. He reached for a small flag marked with a red phoenix, the emblem of Emperor Jiushi, and placed it on the valley carved into the wood. A hush settled over the group. Commander Wu’s jaw tightened, just slightly. His eyes narrowed on the spot where the flag now stood, as if weighing the distance, the terrain, the odds. One of the younger commanders exchanged a glance with his neighbour. The message passed between them without a word.

Chen Long remained silent. His arms were folded behind his back, shoulders set, gaze fixed on the red symbol now seated in Yunxia’s heartland. Xu Lin stood still beside him. He had expected the reaction, but still, the silence pressed down like snowfall before a storm.

“Yes, General. And they’ve fortified both the entrance and the exit.” Xu Lin didn’t say it aloud, but his silence spoke clearly enough, *as if Fengliu Valley weren’t hard enough to enter in the first place.*

The general’s fist struck the table with force, sending several markers skittering across the carved wood. Commander Wu flinched inwardly, concern etched across his face, but said nothing. His eyes drifted to a symbol marked near the edge of the valley. He raised a brow, then pointed to the spot on Xu Lin’s parchment. “What is that?”

“Ah...” Xu Lin paused, letting the moment stretch just long enough. “That,” he said slowly, “might be the only way to sneak up on the Tang army.” Another pause. Chen Long gave him a small bump with his shoulder, a wordless *Get on with it*. The tension in the tent pulled tight, brittle and ready to snap.

“Speak, man!” One of the younger commanders blurted it out, unable to bear the silence any longer. Commander Wu turned his head and fixed him with a look. It said one word, and one word only: *Patience, Xing Peng.*

Xu Lin took in a deep breath. "In the villages around Fengliu Valley they tell a story of how, if you are brave enough, you can follow the snake's body through the mountain and exit at the mouth, a hidden opening."

One of the commanders shifted uncomfortably. Another frowned. "And how many brave men ever returned?" Commander Xing muttered. Wang raised a brow. "We're not chasing shadows, Xu Lin. Is this a path or a story?"

"It's both," Xu Lin said quietly. "But my source swears the Tang don't know it exists. They've fortified every obvious path and overlooked the one only a story remembers." A hush settled.

Commander Wu broke it. "So they're guarding every gate, and still left something behind. Chen Long stepped forward. "They think we'll come through the front. But we move through that cave and attack from within. Quiet. Fast."

Wang's expression darkened with thought. "They won't expect that," he said at last. "The question is: Does that cave really exist and how many will be able to go through it?" His gaze lingered on the map a moment too long. As if listening to something no one else heard.

Then he gave a sharp nod. "We'll move the command post to Lánchén Valley". He picked up the tent marker and placed it between Língyīn and Xuěhàn Mountain, close enough for a strike, far enough to stay hidden. "It puts us within reach, but not within their sight."

The commanders murmured in agreement. "In the meantime, Emberguard..." He looked up at Chen Long and Xu Lin. "You will be our vanguard. We need to know if that cave exists, and whether our army can pass through it. We can't move blindly on this." General Wang turned to his other commanders. "Commander Wu. Commander Xing. Begin preparations. The main camp moves in three days."

Then he looked back to Chen Long. "You and your men, rest. Heal. We'll need your strength intact if you're going to find that hidden path for us." Chen Long hesitated, then gave a tight nod. "Understood, General."

Wang folded the parchment with care, and returned it to Xu Lin, glancing around the table one last time. "We strike like a blade through silk. Let's hope the silence holds."

One by one, the commanders offered shallow bows and stepped back from the war table. Xu Lin tucked the parchment into his tunic, bowed, then left the tent, leaving Chen Long behind. The lanterns flickered as the flap opened again, letting in the cool dusk air. Outside, the camp had begun to stir: boots on packed earth, whispered orders, and the quiet rhythm of things being moved. But within the tent, the world remained still for a moment longer.

Chen Long lingered. His eyes rested briefly on the tiny red phoenix now perched in the carved valley. "They won't see us coming," he murmured. Then he turned and left, the canvas shifting behind him with a sound like breath.