

## Finest 511

### Chapter 511 The Situation

Turning around, Lin Wanrong found himself facing a beautiful female general. She wore cloud-stepping boots and a silver-white battle robe. Her figure resembled a willow swaying in the wind, graceful and exquisite. Her eyebrows were slightly furrowed, and her eyes shimmered like reflective pools of autumn water. A touch of rosy fatigue colored her porcelain-like cheeks. She gazed intently at Lin Wanrong, and it was hard to tell whether she was smiling or annoyed.

"Ah, if it isn't Miss Xu," General Lin said, a smile gathering on his face. He waved his hand hurriedly. "Brothers, quickly salute Advisor Xu!"

"Advisor Xu!" The soldiers under his command were evidently well-trained. At General Lin's single command, thousands raised their weapons and shouted in unison, their voices piercing the heavens.

This seemed like the theatricality of a mountain bandit, and Xu Zhiqing slightly furrowed her brows, casting him a few glances. "General Lin, I heard from Du Xiuyuan that you're still recovering from injuries and resting in camp. Even the matters of the council are being led by others." She paused, her eyes darting to his leg, her expression tinged with irritation. "Indeed, General Lin, your 'serious' injuries seem to have healed remarkably."

The irony in her words was so obvious that even Gao Qiu could catch it, let alone a clever man like Lin Wanrong.

"Oh, really?" Lin Wanrong looked at his leg in feigned surprise, a joyful expression filling his face. "Had it not been for Miss Xu's keen observation, I wouldn't have noticed. Seems like these continuous marches and exercises have paid off; my injuries should be mostly healed. Ah, I've been so busy these days that I even forgot something as crucial as my recovery. Your visit is well-timed, Miss Xu. I'd like to host a feast today, just a few small dishes among the troops, to celebrate."

Annoyed by his nonchalance, Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but huff. "The army is near Xingqing Prefecture, approaching the border between Great Hua and the nomads. War is imminent, and you're still in such high spirits? Not to mention that gambling and drinking are prohibited in the army—have you not read the military regulations?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Miss Xu, you misunderstand. I've always despised wine and gambling. Celebrating with my brothers over some tea shouldn't violate any rules, should it?"

She had long experienced his cunning logic and bit her teeth in annoyance. "Even if you haven't violated any prohibitions, faking injuries is a serious offense. Once we return to camp, I'll report this to the Marshal—"

"That's a bit unreasonable, Advisor Xu," Lin Wanrong interrupted. "What do you mean by 'faking injuries'? You were well aware of the state of my leg before I joined the army. As the old saying goes, it takes a hundred days to recover from a bone injury. The fact that I've recovered this much in just ten days is a blessing. My family and my comrades, including Brother Gao, have poured in a lot of effort. How can you accuse me of faking injuries? I really don't understand."

His expression turned sour, and he refuted her allegations openly. Both Gao Qiu and Du Xiuyuan exchanged puzzled glances. They knew there was a grudge between General Lin and Advisor Xu, but they hadn't expected an argument to break out after just a few words.

Quick to catch Xu Zhiqing's brewing anger, Hu Bugui gave Lin Wanrong a meaningful glance and interjected, "Advisor Xu, you've come a long way. How about this—our right-wing cavalry is currently training, and General Lin has invented a new method for training the troops. Would you care to observe and offer your advice?"

"Tying sandbags for training? I've already seen that." Xu Zhiqing sighed softly. "While it's an innovative idea, it might be too late to implement it now."

Her words were clearly intended for someone. Hu Bugui glanced at Lin Wanrong but did not dare to speak.

'Why am I arguing with her again?' Lin Wanrong found it amusing; encounters with Miss Xu had always been far from peaceful.

"You shouldn't think like that," he shook his head, locking eyes with Xu Zhiqing, and spoke generously, "A good method is never too late to implement. I've discussed it with Gao Qiu. We'll see results within a month if we train this way. We must look to the long-term. Fighting the nomads isn't a matter of a day or two. Even if the current batch of soldiers starts training late, what about the ones who come later? If we begin with the new recruits practicing with sandbags, I refuse to believe that our valiant men of the Empire can't catch up to the Turkic forces!"

Hu Bugui slapped his thigh, suddenly enlightened. "Exactly! Why didn't I think of starting with the new recruits? General Lin, you've awakened me from my dream. The nomads didn't come out of their mothers with those strong legs; they acquired them from horseback riding. Our Empire has plenty of elite soldiers. If we persevere, whether it takes one year, three, or even five, there's no reason for us to lose to the Turks."

Although Lin Wanrong was not extraordinarily skilled in battlefield tactics, his vision and wisdom were unmatched. Coupled with the tactical insights from aides like Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan, the fighting capacity of his army was not to be underestimated.

That was precisely what Xu Wei and Li Tai admired most about him. Xu Zhiqing was no exception. Despite their arguments, his few words had the power to part the clouds and reveal the sun.

Hu Bugui's enthusiasm spread to the others. Even Miss Xu couldn't help but smile, dissipating the earlier tension.

The drill ground was bustling with activity. As Xu Zhiqing watched soldiers fall and rise again during their sandbag exercises, she thought back to Lin Wanrong's impassioned speech. When it came to rallying people, no one was better than Lin San. If everyone had such fighting spirit, what could stand in the way of vanquishing the nomads and rejuvenating the Empire?

She stood still, lost in her thoughts, when she suddenly felt someone gently tugging at her clothes. Looking up, it was Lin San with whom she'd just argued.

"What are you doing?" Her cheeks, as smooth as white jade, flushed a shade of crimson. She lowered her voice, irritably saying, "This is a military camp, you know!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I know this is a camp. If it weren't, I wouldn't have pulled you aside. The army has finished its drills and is about to eat. What are you still doing here?"

Xu Zhiqing looked around and realized that she had been so lost in thought that she hadn't noticed the soldiers dispersing. The army cooks had already brought out big pots of steaming food, filling the air with inviting aromas.

Her cheeks turned even redder, but she snorted defiantly, "I was observing the terrain to mark it on the map. What are you doing here?"

"It's not that I want to stay here," Lin Wanrong lamented. "Advisor Xu, I just want to remind you—you're stepping on my foot, and I happen to be disabled!"

Xu Zhiqing glanced down and realized she had been so engrossed in watching the troops drill that she had stepped on his new boots, leaving half a dainty footprint embroidered onto them.

Witnessing this, Hu Bugui, Gao Qiu, and the others couldn't help but stifle their laughter. Xu Zhiqing's cheeks flushed as she snorted indignantly. "That's not my fault. Your feet are as big as palm-leaf fans. Stepping on them is almost like stepping on the ground."

"If having big feet is my fault, then having a large chest must be yours," Lin Wanrong hummed under his breath. His eyes quickly darted over her voluptuous bosom, reminding him of a sensuous moment in Ning'er's room in Jining, making him feel a tingling sensation.

Xu Zhiqing took out a sealed letter from her clothing and handed it to him expressionlessly. "This is an urgent message from the Emperor, just delivered to the army. Take a look."

Lin Wanrong tore open the letter and quickly scanned its contents. His expression underwent several changes before he sighed deeply and handed the letter back to Xu Zhiqing, rendered speechless.

"Prince Cheng was en route to his exile in northern Sichuan when he took his own life by hanging himself at midnight, overcome by shame and unable to face the world. In his final moments, he left a long suicide note claiming that he had failed both the late Emperor and the current one, and that death was his only way of atoning for his crimes. The handwriting has been verified by Mr. Gu Shunzhang to be that of Prince Cheng. Upon hearing the news, the Emperor wept bitterly on the Golden Throne, his eyes red and swollen. He has not eaten for three days and nights. Despite public opposition, the Emperor personally saw to the prince's burial next to the tomb of the late Emperor."

Having read the royal decree, Hu Bugui spat out, "Finally, he felt some shame and killed himself out of fear of punishment. The Emperor is indeed too compassionate to bury this traitor in the imperial tombs."

Lin Wanrong gave him a wry smile and patted his shoulder. "Don't be too harsh, Brother Hu. He's dead now; does it really matter where he's buried? Who knows where our bodies will be covered by the sands when we are deployed beyond the Great Wall?"

"What nonsense are you talking about?" Xu Zhiqing shot him an irritated glare. "A great battle is imminent; don't shake the soldiers' morale. You've also been absent from our strategy meetings lately. You probably don't even know where we are heading."

"The person who trusts me the least in the whole army must be Advisor Xu here," Lin Wanrong said with a wry smile. "Miss Xu, I make my living with my brains. The lives of tens of thousands of soldiers are in my hands. Do you think I'm that incompetent?"

He took out a blank sheet of paper and a pencil from his pocket. With a few simple strokes, he sketched an outline. "We left the capital city and have been moving along the southern side of the Great Wall, heading from west to east. We crossed Yanmen Pass, passed through Mayi, and reached Shuofang. We're currently stationed north of Yanchuan, just a few hundred miles from Lingwu, Xingqing, and Helan Mountain. Technically speaking, once we cross the Great Wall, we'll be able to see traces of the nomads."

His sketch was simple, but precise in its details, marking the routes and key points with great clarity. At critical junctions, he even thickened the lines for extra emphasis. In this one skill alone, aside from Xu Zhiqing, no one could match him.

"Brother Lin, I must say, I'm impressed," Gao Qiu slapped his forehead and said. "Every day I see you eating, sleeping, frolicking around. Never once have I seen you study military tactics or maps, yet you already know them like the back of your hand."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "You're too kind, Brother Gao. I don't have any particular talents; I simply use the time you spend sleeping to read and the time you spend reading to sleep."

Having long known that beneath his playful facade, Lin Wanrong was as transparent as a sheet of window paper, Xu Zhiqing finally let her guard down. She scolded, "Don't think that just being able to draw some maps is enough. The real work must be put into practice."

She took the pencil from Lin Wanrong's hand and traced over the directions he had marked on the map. "Look here," she said softly, "there's no need for me to stress the importance of Xingqing and Helan Mountain. They serve as natural barriers, holding back the desert sands and the nomadic cavalry. Xingqing is our focal point."

"Two hundred miles north of Xingqing is Wuyuan, far beyond the frontier and bordered by Yulin and Dingxiang north of the Great Wall. These three locations are isolated beyond the border, enduring years of wind and sand. They are the first line of defense against the nomads. 'Ten years of wind and sand, eight years of dust, two years of calamities that rip the soul,' so goes the ballad

among our border troops. Over decades, we've had hundreds of battles here, and Wuyuan is still in enemy hands. Tens of thousands of our valiant soldiers have found their eternal rest here."

She sighed, tapping the map lightly with her pencil, her mood somewhat somber.

Lin Wanrong had already examined this map; aside from a sense of lament, there wasn't much he could do about the situation. Isolated and with harsh climate, even the formidable Turks hesitated to linger there. And this 'first line of defense' that Miss Xu spoke of was largely already in enemy hands; for the Empire, this defense line had virtually ceased to exist.

"And the second line," Xu Zhiqing drew a few more lines on the map, "stretches from Mayi, Yanmen Pass, with Xingqing in the middle, to the Qilian Mountains in the west, extending northward to Kunlun Mountain and Dunhuang. This is the lifeline on which our empire depends."

She drew a heavy circle in the northwest direction of Xingqing, "Right now, the Turks have assembled two hundred thousand elite cavalry in the Qilian Mountains and Wuyuan. They aim to capture Xingqing and Yulin directly. If this line is broken, the nomads will sweep through the land, and it would be an unmitigated disaster for our empire."

Xu Zhiqing spoke for a while, but the last two sentences were the crux. The Turkic elite troops were already amassing in force; the Empire had only this last natural defense to rely upon.

What's more, the nomadic cavalry, numbering two hundred thousand, were highly mobile. They could attack the foot of the Great Wall or retreat deep into the grasslands. As for the Empire's defense line, it stretched thousands of miles from west to east. A single lapse could cause the entire line to collapse, leading to an irrevocable disaster.

The situation was far more complicated than he had initially thought. How could this war be fought? Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, his eyes glazing over.

## Chapter 512 The Earth-Shattering Suggestion

General Lin had been absent from the military council for several days. Xu Zhiqing's explanation was ostensibly for everyone, but secretly it was tailored to him, to enlighten him on the current situation. She didn't want him, the carefree general, to be clueless and bewildered. The state of affairs at hand was so troubling that it furrowed the brows of those listening, including Gao Qiu who was not well-versed in military matters. He too sensed that things were gravely amiss.

Lin Wanrong glanced again at the map Xu Zhiqing had sketched. Starting from Wuyuan in the east to Yiwu in the west, and northwards beyond Kunlun Mountain, all the vast and boundless lands were under the control of the Turks. Although Great Hua boasted of being a celestial empire with abundant resources, when compared with the Turks solely on geographic size, it had no advantage. The only difference was that while the Turks mostly had grasslands and deserts, Great Hua was a land of fish and rice—two places as different as heaven and earth.

"Miss Xu, there's something I've never understood," Lin Wanrong pondered, then asked earnestly, "The Turks have such a vast land, almost equal to our Great Hua. How many citizens do they actually have?"

Xu Zhiqing sighed softly, waving four delicate, jade-like fingers in front of him. Lin Wanrong stared in amazement. "Four hundred thousand citizens? That many? This war could last for years then!"

Xu Zhiqing was both annoyed and amused. "Do you even think? If the Turks only had four hundred thousand citizens, would they dare to invade the heartland of Great Hua?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly, realizing her point. Before they could argue further, Hu Bugui quickly interjected, "What Miss Xu means is, the Turks have around four hundred thousand able-bodied men. The general population could easily be several millions. And these numbers are from a few years ago. They have recently defeated the Tiele and Qiuci tribes, dominated the grasslands and deserts, and rapidly expanded their population."

"Four hundred thousand able-bodied men?" Lin Wanrong stuck out his tongue. This was drastically different from the Turks he knew in his previous life. It was clear they were a formidable nation that could go toe-to-toe with Great Hua.

"Brother Gao," he lowered his voice cautiously, "Considering the Turks have so many people, how many troops do we have stationed at the border? I presume it must be at least six or seven hundred thousand?"

Gao Qiu shook his head with a look of embarrassment, while Xu Zhiqing snorted. "Do you think these are clay figures that you can just shape as you wish? Great Hua has to contend with Dongyin harassment in the south, requiring at least a hundred thousand stationed troops. North of the Great Wall, we have three camps totaling over three hundred thousand soldiers. Add another three hundred thousand elite troops led by the Marshal to the north, and you get six hundred thousand.

Great Hua has already committed all its resources and manpower, and is prepared for a decisive battle with the Turks."

Compared to four hundred thousand Turkic cavalry, Great Hua's six hundred thousand elite troops hardly had an advantage. Lin Wanrong shook his head and chuckled bitterly.

Noticing his resigned expression, Xu Zhiqing spoke softly, "If we only consider numbers, Great Hua does have the upper hand, especially since we're on the defensive. It's not easy for the Turks to engage us in battle. However, the disadvantage lies in our overly extended battle lines. The Turks' cavalry is agile and unconstrained by rear concerns. If they break through at any point, our entire defense would collapse. That is what I worry about the most."

She let out a soft sigh, her radiant cheeks shimmering in the fading twilight, a subtle look of concern in her eyes that deeply affected everyone around her. The immense responsibility weighed heavily on her, a delicate woman, and it was clearly taxing for her.

"Agile and flexible?" Miss Xu's words seemed to strike a chord in Lin Wanrong. His gaze fell upon Xu Zhiqing's charming cheeks, and for a moment, he was spellbound.

"Brother, what's wrong? Ah, you're drooling—" Seeing General Lin's eyes widen and his mouth agape, as if he resembled an underdeveloped chimpanzee, Gao Qiu quickly tugged at his sleeve, whispering a reminder.

"Oh, is that so," Lin Wanrong came to his senses, hastily wiping the corner of his mouth with his sleeve and laughing. "Brother Gao, you love to jest. These are merely dewdrops that fell during the night, what does it have to do with drooling? Normally, I only drool when I see a beautiful woman. Don't get it wrong."

Gao Qiu and the others burst into laughter. Xu Zhiqing slightly lowered her head but did not forget to glare at him. A faint blush arose on her delicate neck, accentuating her radiant and charming cheeks.

When the laughter had subsided, Lin Wanrong regained his composure. "Advisor Xu, there's something I don't understand. You mentioned that the Turkic cavalry are agile and flexible, which is fine, but why did you say they have nothing to worry about in their rear?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Xu Zhiqing glanced at him, speaking softly. "Our Great Hua soldiers are holding strong in the cities, hesitating to move an inch in order to protect our land. Meanwhile, the Turkic people roam deep into the desert and grasslands, without any concern for borders or



defending territory. With hundreds of thousands of cavalry, they need not defend their homeland. They can attack and retreat freely, keeping the initiative firmly in their hands. What do they have to worry about?"

The Turks were a nomadic people; Miss Xu's comments about their freedom were reasonable. Lin Wanrong nodded, speaking calmly, "Advisor Xu speaks wisely. The nomadic tribes have shifting borders and indeed have no need to defend territory. However, to say they have absolutely nothing to worry about, I don't quite agree."

Seeing the glint in his eyes, Xu Zhiqing knew Lin San must have some scheme in mind. A flicker of hope arose in her heart, yet her expression remained as serene as still water. She nodded slightly, "I would like to hear more."

Lin Wanrong sighed, "Miss Xu mentioned earlier that these nomadic tribes come and go as they please, treating our Great Hua territory as if it were no man's land. But why is that so?"

"It's probably because they are formidable," Gao Qiu muttered.

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "No matter how formidable, they wouldn't treat Great Hua like low-hanging fruit. In my view, the reason they can come and go as they please is because of our own conservative decisions. We persistently take a defensive stance—so who else would they take advantage of? To put it bluntly, this is the result of our own indulgence; we have brought it upon ourselves."

The words were indeed harsh. Du Xiuyuan nervously glanced between General Lin and Xu Zhiqing, his mind in turmoil, fearing the two might start arguing again.

Gao Qiu looked puzzled, "Brother Lin, I don't understand what you're saying. When the Turks invade our border, shouldn't we defend our cities? They have great power; avoiding their cutting edge and sturdily defending our cities should be a good strategy, shouldn't it?"

The eyes of Hu Bugui and the others were all focused on Lin Wanrong, their thoughts likely mirroring Gao Qiu's.

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Brother Gao is correct. Defending our cities against the Turks is not wrong. But the mistake lies in only focusing on defense, without considering offense. They are strong, we are weak, so we shouldn't attack? What kind of logic is that? Why can the Turks freely invade our territory, do as they please, come and go as they wish? To put it bluntly, we're just too conservative,

giving up on the offense entirely. We haven't put enough pressure on them, so naturally, they're having a great time."

Lin Wanrong's words theoretically made sense. Du Xiuyuan pondered for a moment, then seriously said, "The Turks have no defined borders. Even if we wanted to attack, we wouldn't know where to find them. Besides, giving up our strength in defending cities to fight fiercely with the Turks in the desert—saying something disheartening—would be exactly what they'd hope for."

"True, the Turks have no borders to defend. Roaming the world on horseback may look impressive," Lin Wanrong said with a slight smile. "But don't they have something they need to defend? Identify their weak spots and hit them fatally; let's see how their hundreds of thousands of cavalry manage to come and go as they please!"

"Something the Turks need to defend?" Gao Qiu murmured, his face suddenly lighting up, "Right! We could burn their grain and abduct their women. They'd have to defend that, right? Damn it—"

Lin Wanrong blinked a couple of times, but Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan had already burst into laughter. Xu Zhiqing's face flushed as she glared at Lin Wanrong.

"Miss Xu, this has nothing to do with me; I didn't teach him that," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Though Brother Gao's words are crude, they do indeed display a kind of heroic audacity. I admire that."

After everyone had a good laugh, Xu Zhiqing shook her head, "Unlike us, the Turks bring their horses and grain along with their armies. Stealing grain wouldn't work and could land us in a wolf's den. As for abducting women—Turkish women have high-bridged noses and blue eyes, and are hardly more attractive than demons. More importantly, they've grown up on horseback. Their archery skills are far better than those of the average men in our nation. Anyone aiming for them may find it's not so easy to succeed."

Miss Xu's expression was mild, and her casual glance at Lin Wanrong seemed specifically directed at him.

Lin Wanrong touched his cheek, irritated. 'Do I look like a lecher? Why is everyone staring at me? I'm famously a man who can't be lewd toward beautiful women!'

"Alternatively, we could launch surprise attacks on small Turkic cavalry units or tribes," Du Xiuyuan cautiously suggested. "If we could strike just one of them and the news got out, the Turks

would have something to worry about, and they wouldn't dare trample over our borders so recklessly."

The suggestion was mature and had operational potential. The problem was that Turkic tribes were all armed communities. Unless a significantly larger force surrounded them, it wasn't clear who would end up ambushing whom once the fighting started.

Hu Bugui immediately recognized the problem at hand and shook his head, saying, "A single nomadic tribe consists of at least two to three thousand people. We would need a minimum of five thousand elite cavalry for a surprise attack to stand a chance of victory. Moreover, there's a high likelihood of getting stuck in a drawn-out battle. Poor management could put our army in a passive position; the risk is too great."

Both suggestions had been rejected. Lin Wanrong, the instigator of the discussion, had yet to speak. Observing his smile, it was clear he had already calculated something in his mind. Xu Zhiqing fixed her eyes on him, visibly irritated. "General Lin, stop speaking in riddles. If you have a suggestion, let's hear it."

Lin Wanrong spread his hands and laughed, "I really don't have any good suggestions. Miss Xu, you overestimate me."

Seeing his self-assured demeanor, Xu Zhiqing felt a surge of annoyance. She hated people who raised others' expectations only to act coy about revealing their thoughts. She hummed softly and glared at him, saying, "General Lin, you're being too modest. Your virtues and wisdom are well-known far and wide; I believe you must have some excellent suggestions."

"Miss Xu, you flatter me," Lin Wanrong sighed deeply. "All these 'faults' you mention, including my good looks, are things I've been striving to correct. It seems I've completely failed."

Gao Qiu laughed heartily, patting Lin Wanrong on the shoulder. "Ah, I didn't realize that your faults are the same as my virtues. Apart from these, I don't have much else!"

Lin Wanrong roared with laughter, his chest filled with mixed feelings. This shameless display by Gao Qiu was reminiscent of his own past. 'If anyone ever accuses me of being thick-skinned again, I'll take issue with them. How can I compare to this guy?'

"Are you going to speak or not?" Seeing Lin Wanrong exchange glances and smiles with Gao Qiu, as if he were a petty thief, Xu Zhiqing's face flushed with irritation. She felt like delivering a swift kick to his backside.

Lin Wanrong sighed resignedly, "Since Miss Xu insists, I have no choice but to speak. The nomadic people are like us; they have things they must protect. Attacking their tribes, as suggested earlier, is a decent idea but carries too much risk for too little reward. Even if we succeed, the impact will be minimal."

He paused, and his voice turned serious, "If we want significant gains, we must take significant risks—that's an unalterable truth. To make a real impact, we need to strike them where it hurts the most. Think, where is their Achilles' heel, where can we deliver a fatal blow?"

Annoyed at his penchant for suspense, Xu Zhiqing jabbed her pencil hard against his armor, "Enough! Just say it!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, took the pencil from her hand, and began sketching on the map. His drawing guided everyone's gaze. "Look at the map—follow me and look north, further, even further, to a place where the nomads are not vigilant—yes, right here!!"

With a heavy sigh, he circled a spot on the map forcefully, then added a vehement cross inside the circle, his pen practically piercing through the paper.

Everyone looked at the marked spot, their breaths catching in their throats. Their eyes widened, faces flushed and paled alternately, and beads of sweat began to roll down.

"What powerful circling and crossing!" Gao Qiu exclaimed. "Brother Lin, where is this?!"

## Chapter 513 The Nomads Are Coming

Xu Zhiqing remained silent for a long while before finally speaking. "This place is called Kizil, located more than eight hundred li northwest of Xingqing. It is bordered by the Jian River and the Sayan Mountains. Simply put, Kizil is the Turkic capital where the tribal chieftains and the royal court reside."

Gao Qiu took a sharp intake of breath, his eyes widening, "Brother Lin, you can't be joking. Travel thousands of miles to attack the Turkic royal court? That's the Turkic stronghold! Are you speaking in riddles? Even I don't dare think about it."

Lin Wanrong nodded with a smile, "In warfare, deception is key. A surprise attack can be the ultimate winning move. Brother Gao, if even a brave and wise man like you doesn't dare think about it, would the Turks ever expect it?"

"That's true," Gao Qiu murmured to himself, nodding and grinning. "Alright then, let's go to Kizil, steal their prized horses and their women!"

'This old man never forgets about seizing women,' Lin Wanrong thought, chuckling to himself.

Attacking the Turkic royal court by surprise! Lin Wanrong's idea was bold to the extreme, bordering on recklessness. It had the undertones of a heroic adventurous spirit and even a hint of romanticism. It also demonstrated his extraordinary strategic vision and courage. Neither Hu Bugui nor Du Xiuyuan dared make a sound, but their eyes glinted with unrestrained excitement. The people of Great Hua had been oppressed by these nomads for far too long. Why couldn't they give them a scare for once?

The two men exchanged glances, their faces tinged with hope and trembling excitement. Clearly, Lin Wanrong's astonishing proposal had deeply moved them.

"This plan is unfeasible," said the military adviser Xu, shaking her head and dashing everyone's hopes. "A large force making a long-distance raid would likely be annihilated by the Turks before even reaching the plains. How can we talk about taking over their court then?"

Advisor Xu's sharp insight deflated Du Xiuyuan and Gao Qiu momentarily. But seeing General Lin's composed expression, they began to regain some hope.

"We shouldn't see it that way," Lin Wanrong spoke calmly. "What is a surprise attack? It is to deliver a fatal blow to the Turks under cover of secrecy. To surprise-attack their camp, it's not the numbers that matter, but the quality of the troops. Eight or ten thousand elite cavalry are sufficient to accomplish the mission!"

"Ten thousand troops to attack the Turkic stronghold?" Gao Qiu was dumbfounded. "Brother Lin, isn't the number a bit too small? We would need at least a hundred thousand elite troops!"

His doubt echoed what Hu and Du were wondering. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "If we had a hundred thousand troops, the Turks would discover us before we even left Xingqing City. As I said before, what the nomads cannot think of, we must do. Our troops need to be elite, but their numbers must absolutely not be too many. Otherwise, it will be counterproductive."

"What's there to fear?" Energized by Lin Wanrong's stirring words, Hu Bugui roared, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "Give me ten thousand elite cavalry, and I'll venture deep into the plains, topple that Turkic camp, capture that so-called Khan, and let these nomadic brats know that we men of Great Hua are also forged from hot blood!"

Hu Bugui had fought for years, facing off against the nomadic tribes countless times. Yet, this time felt different—his emotions surged like never before, as if his very blood was aflame with unrestrained courage.

Xu Zhiqing, the chief strategist for the army, could not afford such passionate impulsiveness. She shook her head, saying, "General Hu, we must not act rashly. As General Du has already pointed out, even a sneak attack on a single Turkic tribe would be difficult, let alone attacking the central camps of the nomads—"

"It is precisely their central camps that we will attack," Lin Wanrong interrupted, smiling as he cut off Xu Zhiqing's words. "As I've said before, if the cost outweighs the gain, then it's not worth the effort. However, if the potential gain far exceeds the cost, then we should pursue it, even at the risk of our lives. Attacking the Turkic royal court is no ordinary campaign. On the contrary, it should be elevated to the context of the broader war strategy."

"Broader war strategy?" Xu Zhiqing was momentarily stunned, her pure white teeth gently biting her vibrant red lips as she sank into deep thought.

Lin Wanrong spoke with conviction: "To attack the nomadic camps is strategic, and can be either deceptive or straightforward. A stealthy approach towards the Kizil region, catching them off guard and destroying their camps, would be the straightforward approach."

"And what is the deceptive approach?" Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but ask.

"Even if we don't actually reach Kizil, each step we take closer to the Turkic royal court would be a tremendous victory," Lin Wanrong explained. "Imagine an endless grassland where suddenly a mysterious cavalry from our great Empire appears, just steps away from the royal court. Can you imagine the psychological blow this would deal to the Turks? And the boost it would give to our own soldiers?"

Lin Wanrong waved his arm with enthusiasm, his own heart boiling over with excitement. He took a deep breath, and looked at Hu Bugui, saying, "Brother Hu, you've fought against the Turks for so many years. How would you feel if what I described came true?"

Hu Bugui's eyes blazed: "Damn it, we've been oppressed by the Turks for over a hundred years! If I could have the satisfaction of actually hitting them where it hurts, even if it costs me a hundred lives, I would willingly sacrifice them. Think of the countless brothers we've lost, fighting the Turks their entire lives without ever seeing their central camps. Their deaths were unjust! Feel it, Brother Du, my blood is boiling!"

Hu Bugui's words resonated deeply, capturing the sentiments of thousands of soldiers who had long fought against the nomads. The Empire had been bullied for far too long. If their cavalry could penetrate deep into enemy territory—even if just to kick up dust and roar at the Turkic camps—it would be enough to lift the spirits of countless soldiers and reverse the Empire's long-standing weakness. This was the "deceptive" approach Lin Wanrong had spoken of.

Gao Qiu pondered for a moment, then said with a sense of shock, "Brother Lin, according to your plan, these ten thousand soldiers will plunge deep into enemy lines. Regardless of whether the approach is straightforward or deceptive, they would be walking into a deadly trap."

"You're wrong," Lin Wanrong shook his head, his teeth clenched as he emphasized each word, "It's not a deadly trap, it's a suicide mission. But there are some things that must be done, and if it's not you, then it's me—Hey, why are you all looking at me like that? What are you all thinking?"

Seeing Hu Bugui and the others staring at him with wide eyes, a mix of admiration and regret in their expressions, Lord Lin suddenly thought of something. His face went pale, and he was drenched in a cold sweat. Frantically, he waved his hands and said, "Let me make myself clear, I was only offering a suggestion. Don't expect anything more from me. I wouldn't take part in this even if it killed me. I have a whole bunch of wives waiting for me at home to bring home the bacon. What are you looking at? Stop staring or I'll gouge your eyes out! Hu Bugui, let's eat!"

He ran off as if he had stepped on a rabbit's tail, patting his buttocks as he sped away. His legs, it seemed, had fully recovered. He couldn't help but sneak peeks over his shoulder, afraid that Miss Xu might be persuaded to appoint him as the commander of an isolated deep-penetration mission. That would be shooting himself in the foot. Shaking his head in frustration, he was filled with regret.

"Coward!" Miss Xu couldn't help but scoff at his retreating figure, feeling both exasperated and amused. She took out the pencil that Lin Wanrong had left behind and made some marks on the map. "General Du, General Hu, please relay a message to General Lin. Tell him to study maps more carefully in the future. His proposal for a surprise attack on the Turkic royal court is impractical, whether we have a hundred thousand troops or ten thousand elite cavalry."

"Please elaborate, Advisor Xu," General Du Xiuyuan cautiously asked.

Miss Xu let out a soft sigh and pointed at the crude map, "Look, this is Xingqing Prefecture, currently two or three hundred miles away from us. To conquer Kizil, we must penetrate deep into the grasslands. But where would we enter the grasslands? As you can see, from Xingqing in the east to Dingguo, Yanmen Pass, it stretches for eight hundred miles. The nomads have stationed heavy troops along this route. If we venture in rashly, we'd be walking right into their trap. On the other hand, the Qilian mountain range to the west of Xingqing is where the Turkic cavalry gathers, making it impassable for us. Further west from Qilian are the Dunhuang caves and the Lop desert of death. If we really want to conquer Kizil, this is the only path. But this vast desert, devoid of human or animal tracks, is a place where no one has ever returned from. Even if we marched a million troops in, they would all die and turn into bones."

She shook her head, a bitter smile on her lips. "Even if we do cross the Lop desert, what then? We would still have to traverse the Tianshan and Altai Mountains before we could get anywhere near Uvs Lake (The largest lake in Mongolia), overlooking the Jian River and Kizil. This route has always been a one-way ticket to hell. How many checkpoints are there across the desert and over the snowy mountains? The nomads have set up their encampments at Kizil for good reason; such natural barriers are insurmountable for anyone short of a god."

Xu Zhiqing was truly well-versed, not just with the Great Hua border but even the place names within Turkic territory. She was unparalleled in her expertise. As she explained in such detail, the faces of Du Xiuyuan and the others gradually turned pale. Indeed, Miss Xu had a point. To launch a covert attack on the nomads was almost an impossible task. General Lin, despite his lofty vision and grand ideas, lacked practical experience. His plan was essentially unfeasible.

"Understood. I'll go report to General Lin right away," Hu Bugui said, unable to conceal his disappointment. The moment he had dreamt of, when he would finally have a chance to show his mettle, had evaporated into thin air.

"Hold on," Xu Zhiqing hesitated for a moment, a light blush appearing on her face. She reached into her sleeve and pulled out a small bottle to hand to Hu Bugui. "Give this to General Lin. Although his leg injury has mostly healed, he shouldn't stop using this medicine."



She paused, then spoke softly, "Tell him not to misunderstand. This medicine is from the Marshal, not me. The Marshal is concerned that General Lin may act recklessly and aggravate his old injury, which would be a significant loss for our army."

Gao Qiu responded with a few affirmative sounds and a smile. As for General Lin, he seemed to have disappeared; amidst the soldiers scattered all over the hills and fields, his figure was nowhere to be found.

The blood-red sun cast its glow over the fields, illuminating Xu Zhiqing's jade-like cheeks. She stood silently for a long time, her petite shadow stretching out into a long, straight line. A faint glimmer of tears flashed in her eyes, her thoughts unknown.

"General Lin, Brother Lin, what are you hiding here for?" A playful voice rang out behind Lin Wanrong. A young soldier patted him on the back, startling him.

Turning abruptly, Lin Wanrong shouted, "You dare to sneak up on your superior, Li Wuling? Tie a hundred-pound sandbag to yourself and run for ten miles. Then I might forgive you."

Li Wuling glanced in the direction General Lin was looking and saw Xu Zhiqing mount her horse, her figure galloping away. He couldn't help but exclaim, "Ah, so this is why you're punishing me. You were hiding here spying on my Aunt Xu, and I caught you red-handed. I'll go run those ten miles with a sandbag and then tell Aunt Xu that someone is spying on her—"

"You know nothing," Lin Wanrong snapped. "I'm not spying on her; I'm afraid she'll take someone else's advice and send me on some fool's errand."

Li Wuling scoffed, "Don't worry. My Aunt Xu is too smart to send anyone on a foolish task. But whoever gave her that advice must be pretty dumb."

'Luckily, this kid doesn't know that I'm the one who gave that advice,' Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself without saying a word. Just then, Hu Bugui rushed over, saying, "General Lin, so you're here! You had me searching everywhere."

"Finding me should be easy. Wherever it's bustling, that's where you'll find me," Lin Wanrong replied with a smile.

Hu Bugui chuckled awkwardly, "General Lin, the strategy you proposed earlier—Advisor Xu says it's entirely unfeasible."

Li Wuling's eyes widened, clearly ready to burst into laughter. Lin Wanrong's face flushed as he quickly slapped his hand, "Go on, get out of here. Finish your meal and get back to training. We high-ranking officers are talking; the likes of you should make yourselves scarce."

"Got it," Li Wuling chuckled. "Even a high-ranking officer like my grandfather would have to step aside when you and Aunt Xu are talking, haha—"

Once Li Wuling had scampered out of sight, Lin Wanrong collected himself and laughed, "That kid is quite amusing—So, Brother Hu, what were you saying?"

With a look of clear vexation on his face, Hu Bugui unfolded a map and carefully explained what Xu Zhiqing had said earlier to Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong patted Old Hu on the shoulder and smiled faintly, "Brother Hu, nothing is absolute in this world. As long as you're willing to work hard, solutions will always outnumber problems. When I have some free time in a few days, I'll tell you the story of the Silk Road."

The Silk Road? What Silk Road? Hu Bugui was confused. But Lin Wanrong promptly closed his mouth, refusing to reveal another word, lest he accidentally be drafted by Miss Xu to undertake some suicidal mission.

...

From Yanchuan to the north, facing the Northern Frontier, the army marched day and night, hurriedly heading towards Xingqing (In history, it is the capital of the Tangut Kingdom or Xi Xia; modern name Yinchuan).

The further north they went, the drier the climate became, filled with more wind and sand. Sometimes, after walking for an entire day, they would encounter four or five sandstorms. When everyone finally got up, they found their hair, eyes, noses, and ears covered in sand, looking like statues made of dust.

Border life was undoubtedly challenging. It was only spring, and they hadn't even reached the frontier yet, but they'd already experienced the ferocity of the desert's wind and sand. Lin Wanrong wondered what life must be like for the 300,000 soldiers stationed on the border.

What was most intolerable was the unpredictable temperature. They were soaked in sweat during the day, but by midnight, the cold was enough to turn a man into an icicle.

Lin Wanrong, however, seemed like a naturally resilient breed. Despite the ever-changing climate, even Gao Qiu couldn't help but sneeze a few times. Lin Wanrong, wrapped in several robes, was unfazed, even humming a few songs as they traveled.

Xingqing was a crucial town in the northwest of the Great Hua, adjacent to Helan Mountain. Despite the scars left from years of warfare between Great Hua and nomadic tribes, the ruins of the city walls still exhibited past glories. As Lin Wanrong looked at the once fertile lands now covered in endless sand, he couldn't help but feel emotional.

From somewhere came the melancholic, long-drawn singing of a woodcutter. It merged with the limitless vista of dust and sand, painting an indescribable picture of desolation and tragedy.

As they approached Xingqing, it was apparent that it was a critical fortress in the northwest; more and more people began to appear on the sides of the official road.

Lin Wanrong was looking around leisurely when he suddenly heard the distant sound of hooves, followed by piercing cries, "Run, run, the nomads are coming!"

#### Chapter 514 The Woman from the Turkic Tribe

Amidst the clamor, the rhythmic sounds of hooves echoed through the air, accompanied by the gentle jingles of bells. In the distance, a caravan came into view. Several powerful horses charged forward, their backs burdened by large bamboo baskets and wooden crates filled with cloth, tea, and salt. The weight on the horses was so significant that their backs appeared slightly bent.

Within the caravan, men with dark eyes and yellow skin, unmistakably from the Great Hua, were present. However, among them were a few individuals of a different ethnicity: taller than the average men from the Great Hua, with high-bridged noses and pale blue eyes.

"Those are definitely nomads," Gao Qiu said excitedly. "These audacious foreigners dare to pass right in front of us as our mighty army of a million men advances into Xingqing. This is utterly disrespectful! Brother Lin, let's capture them right away. It'll be our first victory!"

As the caravan passed before the army, they maintained a serene demeanor, betraying no signs of panic. It was indeed strange.

Hu Bugui chuckled and said, "Brother Gao, let's not be rash. These are but common traders traveling across the desert. They are not to be attacked. Our border people have been exchanging silk and tea for the fine horses and native products of the Turkic lands for a hundred years. Even during the fiercest times of war, private trade between our people has never ceased."

Lin Wanrong nodded in agreement, "Brother Hu is correct. Warfare is dictated by national interests, while trade fulfills the needs of the people. The two are not contradictory. Since we share a border with the Turkic tribes, it is inevitable that there will be cultural and economic exchanges between us."

Hu Bugui gave a thumbs-up and sighed, "Our people have been at war with the Turkic tribes for years, capturing countless women from the Great Hua. However, there are also women from the Turkic tribes who admire our culture and marry into our families. Inter-marriage and trade have been a part of life for years, resulting in many mixed-heritage children. This is especially common in the regions around Xingqing and Helan Mountain."

Lin Wanrong nodded slightly and said seriously, "Trade and intermarriage are natural human activities and there's nothing wrong with them. However, as we are on the brink of war between our nations, the most pressing concern is how to prevent the Turkic tribes from gathering intelligence. Just like this caravan, who knows if there might be a spy among them."

Among the group, aside from Hu Bugui, everyone else was new to the borderlands and unfamiliar with the many local customs. Hu Bugui smiled and said, "The scrutiny for potential spies is, of course, essential. Any Turkic trader coming into our lands must be vouched for by a local gentleman. All caravans passing through the border are rigorously inspected and must obtain proper documents to proceed. The Turks are even more worried than we are. The number of our people trading in Turkic lands far exceeds the number of Turkic people trading here—perhaps by ten or even a hundred times. So, if we start capturing spies, they will likely have more to worry about than we do."

The men burst into laughter at the exaggerated remark from Hu Bugui. Although it was a bit of an overstatement, the business acumen of people from Great Hua was indeed famous far and wide. The nomadic people would undoubtedly not underestimate them.

"As for trade between our two lands, there have been negotiations between us and the nomadic people. Unless absolutely necessary, neither side is allowed to attack the other's merchants. We've even documented this in black and white. Great Hua is known for its commitment to its word; in these decades, we've never plundered their merchant caravans. The Turks, on the other hand, are unreliable. They can't keep their word; they only manage to do so about half the time. The rest of the time, they continue with their pillaging, the nerve!" Hu Bugui grumbled, extremely annoyed by the lack of trustworthiness of the nomadic people.

While they were conversing, the merchant caravan drew near. Great Hua merchants in the convoy were loudly chatting with the soldiers, and every now and then, joyful laughter rang out when fellow countrymen encountered one another. The nomadic people, however, walked cautiously, as if fearful that their heavy footsteps might provoke the soldiers from Great Hua and invite disaster upon themselves.

The tinkling of bells floated by as several horse-drawn carriages from the merchant caravan passed slowly before them. The curtain of the carriages swayed, making it difficult to see what was inside.

Unable to capture the nomadic people in front of them, Gao Qiu could only glare at them maliciously, not letting a single one escape his sight. As the carriages of the caravan moved past him, he leaned forward to take a quick look and suddenly exclaimed, "A woman! A Turkic woman!"

His voice was loud enough for everyone around to hear.

"A Turkic woman!" The words exploded like thunder, vibrating the eardrums of everyone around. It was already rare to see women while on a long march with tens of thousands of soldiers, let alone a Turkic woman!

Lin Wanrong also jumped at Gao Qiu's shout, hastily scanning the surroundings. Not finding what he was looking for, he sighed and said, "Old Gao, what's the rush? Fine, once we enter the city, I'll give you half a day off. Go find somewhere to sort yourself out, lest you mistake a monkey's butt for a woman's face."

"It's true," Gao Qiu insisted, his eyes locked onto the front. "Inside the carriage curtain—look, a Turkic woman. Good heavens, since when did the Turks produce such beauties?"

Following Gao Qiu's gaze, Lin Wanrong looked and saw that in one of the middle carriages, the curtain was slightly lifted, revealing the silhouette of a woman.

She appeared young, probably around eighteen or nineteen, dressed in a thin gown with a blue base and pink edging. The long skirt seemed to float like clouds around her. On her head was a small golden cap, and her face was veiled by a transparent light-colored gauze that vaguely allowed her facial features to be seen. Her nose was slightly raised, her teeth half-exposed, and her red lips were curled into a slight smile, resembling a crescent moon on the horizon.

Her flowing hair fell like a surging black waterfall, and her skin was as radiant as exquisite jade. Her captivating eyes were constantly moving, as if surveying her surroundings. These eyes were as dark as autumn waters, and within the moist darkness, one could almost detect a faint touch of blue—deep and clear, resembling the Namtso Lake deep in the grasslands, sparkling and pure.

In Lin Wanrong's household, the women were paragons of beauty, rendering him highly immune to the allure of striking looks. Yet, when he laid eyes on this Turkic girl who seemed to waft in like a refreshing breeze from the Helan Mountains, carrying with her a heavy scent of exoticism, he felt an indescribable sense of astonishment. It was not because of her beauty, but her eyes—dark as the autumn waters but with a faint undertone of pale blue, deep and intriguing like a distant mountain veiled in mist, that stirred the imagination.

It wasn't just Lin Wanrong who was affected. Even seasoned warriors like Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan, who had fought many battles, were stunned by the sudden appearance of this Turkic woman.

The Turkic girl looked around, and suddenly, her eyes shimmered and she laughed softly. Her delicate eyebrows curved slightly, like a crescent moon on the horizon.

"Crescent Moon," Lin Wanrong murmured. For some reason, the name spontaneously came to him, as if that had to be the girl's name.

The curtain of the carriage fell, and the carriage slowly moved away. Like a fleeting breeze, she had come and gone quickly. It wasn't until the sound of the carriage bells faded away that everyone seemed to snap out of their trance. Hu Bugui shook his head in disbelief, "I have fought with the nomadic people all my life in the desert, but never have I seen such a celestial Turkic woman. What place in the Turkic lands can breed such beauty?"

Gao Qiu sighed deeply, then chuckled, "A beauty is a beauty, be it from the Turkic lands or from Great Hua. After all, once the lights are out, don't they all look the same? But those eyes... they could cost me my life and it would be worth it. Ah, I have learned something today."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and slapped Gao Qiu on the shoulder, "Beauty is to be encountered, not sought. Just a glance is a blessing; one shouldn't be too greedy."

Gao Qiu chuckled for a moment and then seemed to remember something. His eyes darted before he grabbed Hu Bugui and asked, "Brother Hu, you said that while Great Hua has honored its promises and never attacked the nomadic merchants, the Turkic have been treacherous and have plundered our merchants multiple times, is that true?"

Hu Bugui nodded, "It's true. Those nomads honor the agreements when it suits them and plunder us when it doesn't. Despicable."

"Truly despicable," Gao Qiu smirked, then turned to Lin Wanrong with a lascivious grin, "Brother Lin, how did you find that Turkic beauty?"

"Quite captivating," Lin Wanrong nodded, but then noticed Gao Qiu's lecherous expression and grew alarmed, "Gao Qiu, what are you planning?"

"If you find her that appealing, then it's simple," Gao Qiu said with a sinister smile, "Why play the gentleman when dealing with scoundrels? I'll gather some men, cover our faces, and raid that merchant convoy. We'll bring that Turkic woman back to warm your bed. If she resists, I have plenty of 'persuasive remedies,' as you well know—ha! This is what you call, 'kidnap a Turkic woman, bring glory to Great Hua!'"

'What a phrase, 'Kidnap a Turkic woman, bring glory to Great Hua.' Do you take me for a bandit king, Old Gao?' Lin Wanrong was drenched in cold sweat, unsure whether to laugh or cry. Du Xiuyuan and Hu Bugui exchanged puzzled glances.

Seeing him silent, Gao Qiu became even more excited. "Oh, come on, what's there to be shy about? She's just a Turkic woman. Use her and toss her aside! Once word of this gets out, the morale of our army will skyrocket—"

'Will the news even get out? My wives have me under a tight leash!' General Lin was horrified. He hastily wiped his sweat and grabbed Gao Qiu. "Old Gao, you know me; I've always been a man of lofty ideals. I'm not that interested in beautiful women; I have less than ten wives at home. Abducting a Turkic woman would tarnish the honor of our great nation. We should win people over with virtue, with virtue!"

Du Xiuyuan added, "Old Gao, don't be reckless. If news of us raiding merchant caravans reaches our commanders, we'll be in trouble under military law."

After some persuasion, they finally managed to calm Gao Qiu down. He sighed, "Brother Lin, I understand that abducting the woman would be disgraceful. But our nation has been weak for a long time. Conquering this Turkic beauty could do wonders for our soldiers' morale. Besides, this is one of your strong suits!"

"What strong suit? Do you think I'm a stud horse? I'm here to fight, not to seduce women!" Lin Wanrong huffed in irritation but couldn't help recalling that "Crescent Moon."

By the time the entire army entered the city, dusk had already given way to the onset of night. Xingqing was strategically located, close to Helan Mountain and overlooking the Yulin and Wuyuan counties. This would be the focal point of the anti-nomads army, and where Li Tai's main camp would be stationed.

Years of warfare had left Xingqing deserted. As nightfall approached, there were hardly any pedestrians on the streets, and the few shops that remained were already closed. The once bustling "Jiangnan beyond the Great Wall" was no longer what it used to be.

Standing atop the Great Wall, staring into the dark night of Xingqing with its decaying courtyards, Li Tai's white hair fluttered in the desert wind. He sighed deeply, "Once the 'Jiangnan beyond the Great Wall,' now a place of ruins. Generals, what are your thoughts?"

Behind the Marshal stood the commanders of various army divisions. Everyone's faces were covered in dust, yet no one bothered to wipe it off.

They had just entered the city, not even had a sip of water, and were immediately summoned by Li Tai to observe the night scene from the Great Wall. Lin Wanrong lazily leaned against the battlements as the wind howled past his ears. Outside the wall, the swirling desert winds gathered dark clouds, appearing like an open-mouthed monster, surging toward the city walls.

In the dimness of the night, the soldiers' iron spears glinted coldly. The ancient city wall below was bathed in moonlight that reflected off the endless desert.

"The desert sand is like snow, and the moon over Yan mountain is like a hook!" Lin Wanrong muttered to himself. Faced with the desolate Great Wall and the harsh moonlight over the desert,



even the greatest of men seemed insignificant, like a grain of sand. At that moment, only one word could describe his feelings—bleak, utterly bleak.

## Chapter 515 Traces of Fragrance

"The Turks are as rapacious as wolves, insulting and afflicting our Great Hua for years, causing our lands beyond the border and the people of the south to suffer and desolate. This is truly detestable and abhorrent," declared the spirited young Yu Zongcai, who was the deputy vanguard of the Left Army. Gripping the hilt of his war sword at his waist, he gritted his teeth and said, "I am but a humble general, but I am willing to be the vanguard for our army, to plunge deep into the grasslands and decide the outcome in a battle to the death against these nomads."

He was handsome, and his speech was full of righteousness and vigor. Li Tai, the Marshal, gave him a comforting smile, "Hold on, Zongcai. We have been clashing with the nomads for so many years, and there are still battles to be fought. To talk of a battle to the death at this time is a bit premature. But I highly appreciate your resolve."

Yu Zongcai acknowledged joyfully, stealing glances at Xu Zhiqing, the army strategist beside him, his eyes full of admiration clearly visible.

Lin Wanrong noticed and laughed inwardly. This General Yu was, in terms of age and appearance, indeed a match for Miss Xu. However, Xu Zhiqing was a strong-willed woman with high aspirations. The husband she would look for must be someone who could subdue her both mentally and physically. Lin Wanrong wondered if Yu Zongcai was capable of that.

"Brother Zuo, what is that?" Lin Wanrong, surveying the surroundings, saw a thick plume of smoke soaring into the sky in the far east, as if piercing the dark canopy of heaven. He hurriedly pulled Zuo Qiu, the Commander of the Left Wing vanguard, and asked quietly.

Zuo Qiu looked at the smoke, nodded solemnly, and said, "Is this your first time at the frontier? That is the beacon fire of the Great Wall, used to transmit warning signals when foreign enemies invade."

Lin Wanrong had an epiphany. This was the oldest method of signal transmission via beacon fires. How could he have forgotten? Feeling somewhat ashamed, he asked, "Brother Zuo, does the ignition of this beacon mean there is an emergency warning from the front? Is the border pass in a critical situation?"

Zuo Qiu chuckled, "Not necessarily an emergency. The desert is dry, and sometimes even lightning can cause a fire. Different ways of igniting the beacon convey different messages. Besides the beacon towers along the Great Wall, there are also fort towers. A real emergency is only indicated when both are ignited. A single plume of smoke like this signifies that enemy tracks have been found at the front and asks other passes to be vigilant. This identification method was devised by our army Advisor Xu, and it works very well."

This was a rudimentary form of coded communication, indeed very practical. Xu Zhiqing had certainly put a lot of thought into it, Lin Wanrong nodded approvingly.

Although he spoke softly, his words caught the attention of those nearby. Yu Zongcai, hearing that General Lin didn't even know these basic facts, couldn't help but shake his head slightly, a trace of disdain appearing on his face.

Li Tai, overhearing the conversation, looked up and sternly asked, "Zuo Qiu, have any of your scouts returned with news?"

Zuo Qiu hurriedly stepped forward, reporting loudly, "Marshal, scouts from my Left Army vanguard have just returned at sunset. According to their observations, two hundred thousand elite Turkic cavalry have already assembled at the foot of the Helan Mountains and are advancing toward Wuyuan. Their vanguard is expected to reach Wuyuan within four days. The elite force of two hundred thousand sent by the Turks this time includes more than half of their horsemen and cavalries. Led by the Turkic Prince Batur, and guided by the Turkic national adviser Lu Dongzan, their menacing force is heading directly toward our border."

Upon hearing the name of Lu Dongzan, Lin Wanrong felt a stir within him. At last, he was to meet this clever Turkic adviser on the battlefield. He wondered if the Emperor would regret the decision to let the tiger return to the mountain when he learned of the situation here.

Li Tai nodded and sighed, "The Left Prince Batur and Right Prince Tursun, known collectively as the Desert Twin Eagles, are the most renowned warriors of the Turks. They are the left and right arms of Turkic Khan Bilge, and with the ingenious and versatile adviser Lu Dongzan, the Turks are fully committed to victory this time."

What was all this about Batur, Tursun, the Desert Twin Eagles, and Bilge Khan? These nomadic names were awkward and hard to remember. Lin Wanrong scratched his head; his own nickname, Lin San, was much more catchy.

"Marshal, the Turkic elite are all out, and they are coming ferociously. We must take precautions early," said Xu Zhiqing. She appeared more haggard than a few days ago, dressed in light-colored

armor that concealed her stunning figure. The desert winds and sands had not eroded her porcelain skin; her cheeks were as smooth as ever, and her eyebrows exuded an added touch of valor.

The Marshal nodded slightly, "Zuo Qiu, you have been fighting the Turks for over a decade. In your opinion, how should we deal with them, given that they have brought out their entire force this time?"

"Marshal," Zuo Qiu saluted, "the nomads have mobilized more than half of their forces this time, and their aggression is unparalleled in years. However, no matter their numbers, their nature hasn't changed. Our army has been fighting the nomads for many years and possesses abundant experience. As the saying goes, we'll meet force with force and water with earth. Essentially, this battle against the nomads is no different from the previous ones. We do not need to change our strategies significantly. By relying on previous experiences, we may not win big, but we certainly won't lose big either."

These were words of seasoned wisdom, and even Lin Wanrong found himself nodding in agreement. Zuo Qiu was a prudent man, and Li Tai had made the right choice appointing him as the vanguard.

After a moment of contemplation, Li Tai nodded, "To meet changes with constancy ensures an invincible position. Zuo Qiu, your words are very sensible. Lin San, what do you think?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Marshal, it's my first time fighting the nomads and I've never set foot in the desert. How could I offer any constructive suggestions? Let's play it safe, fight a bit, and see how it goes."

Fight a bit and see? The room erupted in laughter. This Lin San was indeed as cunning as the rumors suggested; his suggestion was perhaps the safest and most conservative.

Li Tai nodded solemnly, "You're not wrong either. This time, our great nation is committed to a life-or-death battle with the nomads. There is no other way. The burden we bear is immense; first, we seek stability, then victory. That is the most prudent course of action. Zhiqing, what do you think?"

Xu Zhiqing gently nodded, "Marshal, you are absolutely correct. Seeking stability in the initial battle allows us to take the initiative."

"In that case, I'll make the decision," Li Tai's expression tightened, and he declared loudly, "All generals, hear my command!"

Everyone puffed out their chests, listening intently as the Marshal continued, "For today and tomorrow, the army will rest in Xingqing Prefecture. The day after at dawn, the left, center, and right divisions will advance simultaneously. We must reach the outskirts of Wuyuan by the following dawn to set up camp. All divisions will be coordinated by Military Advisor Xu. Dispatch all scouts, and report every half-hour. If you hear of enemy cavalry appearing, launch a devastating counterattack. Among the troops, those who charge bravely will be heavily rewarded! Those who cower and retreat will be executed on the spot! This is our first battle, and victory is the only option. Do you all understand?"

"Understood!" The officers shouted in unison, their battle cries echoing far and wide.

By the time all military matters were settled, the moon was already high in the sky. General Li Tai dismissed everyone, but specifically retained Lin Wanrong and Xu Zhiqing.

The howling wind carried sand as it blew past their ears, and the desert night was as tranquil as water. Li Tai, his graying hair fluttering in the wind, stared intently at Lin Wanrong's face without uttering a word.

Feeling unnerved by his gaze, Lin Wanrong hastily spoke up, "General, Marshal, did you want to see me for something?"

Li Tai chuckled, "If there was nothing, why would I ask for you? I heard from Zhiqing that you recently proposed a rather unique idea—"

"No, no," noticing Li Tai's somewhat sinister smile, Lin Wanrong wiped his sweat and hastily shook his head, "Marshal, that was just nonsense. You really can't take it seriously."

"I haven't," Li Tai patted his shoulder solemnly, "Zhiqing and I have carefully considered it. While your idea is indeed bold and enticing, the path is unfeasible."

Relieved, Lin Wanrong nodded quickly, "If it's unfeasible, that's good, that's good—"

Suddenly, Li Tai let out a long sigh, pointing with his rough hand to the towering Helan Mountains in the distance. His facial expression became so stern it was frightening, "Lin San, do you know how many elite enemy cavalry are gathered there?"

Has the General lost his mind? The scouts just reported—there are 200,000 Turkic cavalry! Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Marshal, are you testing my memory? Who among our troops doesn't know? There are 200,000 Turkic soldiers over there!"

"200,000?!" Li Tai slowly shook his head, exhaling deeply with a bitter smile, "If it were really just 200,000, that would be fine!"

"What do you mean?" Lin Wanrong's face paled, his heart leapt into his throat, "Marshal, what are you saying? Is it not 200,000?!"

Xu Zhiqing bit her lower lip, her expression somber, "The 200,000 is a number we've given to boost the morale of our troops. In reality, the enemy has well over 300,000 elite cavalry."

"Three—300,000?" Lin Wanrong was stunned. The forces led by Xu Zhiqing were to march towards Wuyuan the day after tomorrow, their total numbers were just short of 300,000. On the boundless desert plains, the enemy cavalry already held a tremendous advantage. Now, they had even lost their numerical advantage—how could they possibly fight this battle?

"Miss Xu, you're not pulling my leg, are you? How did the enemy suddenly gain an extra 100,000 men?" Lin Wanrong wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, speaking cautiously.

Xu Zhiqing shot him a glance. "At a time like this, do you think I'm in the mood for jokes? The Turks have been uniting the tribes in the vast desert for years. Their territory has more than doubled, and their strength has surged. Gathering 300,000 elite soldiers is not difficult for them. We knew the news a few days ago but concealed it to not dishearten the soldiers. Only the Marshal, you, me, and Zuo Qiu are aware of this."

Lin Wanrong gasped, visibly irritated. "Marshal, Advisor Xu, why tell me this? If I die in the front line in two days, so be it! It would save you the trouble of explaining this today."

"What nonsense are you talking about!" Xu Zhiqing spat out, understanding he was venting his frustration. "Who would want to gamble with the lives of our soldiers? But we have to engage in battle. If we retreat without fighting, how will we explain to our soldiers? This battle is not something you and I can decide. If you want to blame someone, blame me; it was my suggestion to conceal this."

As Xu Zhiqing spoke, her eyes reddened and her voice rose. She turned her head away, biting her red lips as tears gathered in her eyes.

Lin Wanrong watched her, finding it impossible to scold her anymore.

Li Tai patted his shoulder solemnly. "Lin San, you should understand Zhiqing's intentions! Everything she's done is for the soldiers and for our Empire. Don't misjudge her."

At this point, what was the use of saying all this? They had to fight. Lin Wanrong could only sigh, "Since it's decided, why even ask? I may fear death, but I won't be a deserter. But I hope Advisor Xu won't do such foolish things in the future. The burden shouldn't be yours alone; it's everyone's responsibility."

Xu Zhiqing clenched her teeth, her tears finally falling. Each drop shimmered in the moonlight, eliciting empathy.

Lin Wanrong looked at her face and was suddenly reminded of their past encounters—their first meeting in the ruined temple, their second meeting by the lake, the tender moments in Shandong, that resolute kiss, the anger when he visited her. Everything seemed as clear as the cold moon on the desert frontier.

'Oh God, why did I get such a terminal case of sentimentality?' Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, handing her a handkerchief embroidered with mandarin ducks, a treasure given to him by Ning'er that he'd kept. "Don't cry. In the desert, water is precious; it's shameful to waste it."

"You're the shameful one!" Seeing his jesting expression, Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but want to curse him. She slapped his hand away. "Why are you giving me someone else's handkerchief? I don't want other people's belongings!"

Xu Zhiqing shot him an annoyed glance but stopped crying altogether.

The Marshal looked at the two young people before him and chuckled, "You two have traveled together for more than a thousand miles. How many in this world can boast of such a deep connection? What grievances could possibly be left unresolved between you?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly, "Marshal, you're being too blunt. I'm embarrassed!"

Xu Zhiqing's face flushed as if dusted with rouge. Just as she was about to speak, General Li Tai waved his hand, saying, "I won't meddle in young people's affairs. You can sort it out yourselves. But don't let it affect our mission against the enemy. Lin San, Zhiqing, I've fought the nomads for many years. Never have I felt so much pressure as I do now. If they lose, they can retreat back to their grasslands and regroup. But for us, this is all we've got. If we lose, it would be a catastrophic disaster—we can't afford to lose!"

Indeed, they couldn't afford to lose. If they did, wars would ravage the entire land. Not only would the common people suffer, but even friends and family would be forced into exile. Defeat was beneficial to no one.

A sense of urgency surged in Lin Wanrong's heart. "General, if I may speak freely, we've been fighting these nomads for years. While many of our tactics are practical, they are not strategic. We've mostly been on the losing end using our old methods. This time they've marshaled all their forces, clearly aiming for our heartland. We have no room for retreat. Why not try something new at the strategic level? Instead of just defending, why not counter-attack in some capacity to tie their hands?"

"Is this the strategy you spoke of before, to directly attack the Turk's royal court?" General Li Tai's eyes sparkled.

Lin Wanrong nodded slightly. "The greatest advantage of this plan is its element of surprise. If even we hadn't thought of it, the nomads certainly wouldn't see it coming."

Both Li Tai and Xu Zhiqing were military experts and understood immediately. Xu Zhiqing nodded cautiously, "But you just said this plan is fundamentally flawed—"

Lin Wanrong coughed awkwardly, "Well, Miss Xu, theoretically speaking, I'm generally honest. Legend has it that there is a magical Silk Road that stretches from east to west, passing through deserts and snowy mountains—"

"The Silk Road, stretching from east to west?!" Xu Zhiqing exclaimed, gripping his hand, "Is it true? Can we reach Kizil? Why didn't you say this sooner?!"

'Her hand is really warm,' Lin Wanrong thought. 'I haven't touched them for a long time. The night is cold and I need to draw some strength.' He stroked her hand discreetly, "Whether or not we can reach Kizil, I'm not sure. All I know is it stretches from east to west. Miss Xu, I'm an honest man; how could I speak recklessly about something unverified?"

Xu Zhiqing's cheeks flushed crimson, and her small hand tried to wriggle free, but it was gripped tight in his iron-claw-like grasp.

"What are you doing?" she gasped softly, lowering her head in embarrassment. "Don't think you can bully me—I remind you, the general is still here!"

"Is that so? Oh my, Miss Xu, you're so excited that your little hand actually has gripped both of mine," Lin San shook his head with a sigh, his face filled with admiration.

'I guess I'm just unlucky!' Xu Zhiqing sighed lightly, withdrawing her hand immediately. Her eyes reddened in an instant.

"Lin San, answer me honestly, how confident are you about this route?" Li Tai wore a heavy expression, pretending not to notice the two's intimate movements, and asked solemnly.

"Marshal, let me clarify first. I merely suggested this path; I can't be the one to walk it!" Lin Wanrong was taken aback and quickly waved his hands, getting the unpleasant truth out upfront.

Li Tai gave an ambiguous smile, "First, tell me how confident you are. Every soldier under me is invaluable!"

'I have no bloody confidence,' Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I've said it before, this route exists only in legends. As for confidence, there's absolutely none. However, compared to the massive rewards, taking this risk is worth it! The final decision is for the Marshal and the military advisor to consider carefully."

Li Tai pondered for a moment, then shook his head, "We'll discuss this matter further. Right now, the priority is the Wuyuan campaign. It's getting late; Lin San, escort Zhiqing back to camp first."

'Why should I escort her when she has her own soldiers and guards?' Lin Wanrong thought with frustration. But he saw that the general had already left, striding away from the tower.

Xu Zhiqing's cheeks reddened slightly as she took a few steps forward to catch up with Lin Wanrong, huffing, "Don't listen to the Marshal's nonsense. I can ride back myself; I don't need your escort."



"That's true, it wouldn't be appropriate for a man and a woman to be alone together. Wouldn't be good for our reputations," Lin Wanrong chuckled and stopped in his tracks.

"What reputation do you have," Xu Zhiqing's eyebrows shot up, instantly furious. "I, Xu Zhiqing, have always been honorable, and have nothing to do with you. General Lin, please stop here."

Her silver teeth almost pierced her cherry lips; her steps hastened as she prepared to mount her horse. Just as she was about to spur her horse, she felt her sleeve being tugged. She turned her head and saw it was General Lin.

Lin Wanrong took out a small medicine bottle from his pocket and shook it in front of her, "I asked the Marshal today; he said he never gave me this medicine. This is quite strange, Advisor Xu, do you know who gave it to me?"

The bottle he held was the same one that Xu Zhiqing had given him through Hu Bugui, claiming it was from Li Tai.

Tears began to well up in Xu Zhiqing's eyes. She snatched the bottle from his hand and broke down, "Give it back, you ungrateful wretch. The only person I, Xu Zhiqing, misjudged in my life is you! Go—"

She flicked her whip several times against the horse's hindquarters, but the steed merely lifted its hooves without galloping away. She looked down and saw that Lin Wanrong had a grip on the horse's reins.

"What are you doing?!" The usually composed Advisor Xu was on the verge of madness. Sitting atop her horse, her eyes shimmered with tears as she screamed hysterically, "Lin San, until when do you plan to torment me, huh?"

Lin Wanrong sighed softly and said, "Miss Xu, thank you for the medicine. It's truly effective."

Although his voice was gentle, Xu Zhiqing heard him clearly despite her tears. Her sobs gradually quieted as she retorted in an almost inaudible voice, "The medicine wasn't meant for you. Before I left, I broke the leg of our family's Lin San and applied the medicine to test its effects."

"Our family's Lin San?" Lin Wanrong was baffled. Realizing her words were ambiguous, Xu Zhiqing hurriedly clarified, "Not you, the Lin San that's kept in my room."

'The nerve of her!' Lin Wanrong was incensed. 'So, Miss Xu gave me the medicine she used on a mongrel. Do I look like I'm in the same league as that creature? Such an insult to my dignity.'

Both fell silent. Observing his darkening face, Xu Zhiqing wanted to laugh but dared not. She blushed, sobbed quietly, and lowered her head, her voice tender, "Are your legs fully healed?"

Lin Wanrong grunted, "Hmm, thanks to your medicine, I can now run faster than your family's Lin San."

"What nonsense, he's not from our family," Miss Xu retorted, her pretty face flushing red. She hesitated, then whispered, "You'll be heading to the front lines the day after tomorrow. The desert is treacherous; the nomads are not like the White Lotus Cultists. Be cautious. Wear your armor properly, your helmet, your chest plate—don't leave anything behind. Choose a horse with light hooves; it's faster to charge and retreat—"

'This girl does know me well,' Lin Wanrong nodded emotionally. Miss Xu seemed to feel she had said too much, which was unlike her usual style. She abruptly stopped speaking and took the reins from him.

"You're leaving?" Lin Wanrong hastily inquired.

"Hmm," Xu Zhiqing nodded softly.

"Let me see you off!"

"No need," Miss Xu blushed, "It would be inappropriate for a man and a woman to be alone. It won't be good for either of our reputations. Go!"

As her words fell, her steed leaped into the air, charging straight toward the central military camp, leaving Lin Wanrong staring for a good while.

Returning to his own camp, Lin Wanrong hurriedly ate some cold rice and called for a meeting with Hu Bugui, Du Xiuyuan, and others to plan for the journey to Wuyuan.

Setting out from Xingqing Prefecture meant entering the vast desert beyond the Great Wall, where an encounter with nomads was always possible. This was no joke. Among them, only Hu Bugui had such experiences, so he was asked to elaborate, which everyone took to heart. As for the increasing numbers of Turkic cavalry—from two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand—that was a secret no one could disclose.

Exhausted from days of sleeping rough, Lin Wanrong dimmed the lamp in his tent, preparing to sleep. Just as he was drifting off, a faint breeze blew in, causing the candle to flicker.

Yawning, he turned over to continue sleeping. However, he felt something soft near his feet. Kicking it a few times, he found it was a crumpled paper ball. Who could have thrown it onto the bed?

Hurriedly, he unraveled the crumpled paper to find four characters written on it—"Li Tai is in danger!"

The characters, hastily scribbled with an eyebrow pencil, bore the unmistakable handwriting of a woman. The style seemed vaguely familiar, yet he couldn't quite place it. In the city of Xingqing, apart from Xu Zhiqing, he didn't know any other women. Who could have sent this note?

"Li Tai is in danger?!" As if spring-loaded, he sprang from his bed, urgently shouting, "Hu Bugui, quickly, prepare the horses, we're heading to the Marshal's camp!"

Hu Bugui, still groggy from sleep, dashed in from outside the tent, asking, "General, what's happened?"

With mounting anxiety, Lin Wanrong didn't pause to explain. Mounting his horse, before he even left the camp, he noticed flames soaring into the sky in the distance. The direction indicated it was coming from Li Tai's camp.

"It's bad, the Marshal's in trouble!" Hu Bugui, so terrified it seemed he'd lost his soul, hadn't even properly put on his boots. He hastily galloped behind Lin Wanrong.

The flames in Li Tai's camp grew larger and the cries of the soldiers echoed incessantly. Lin Wanrong's face turned pale. The left wing, center, and Li Tai's main camp were closely connected

and had strict defenses. How could this have happened? If something befell Li Tai before even encountering the Turk, the upcoming battle would be meaningless.

The rhythmic sound of hoofbeats tore through the silence of the long street. Leading the charge, Lin Wanrong, accompanied by Hu Bugui and the rest, galloped with a fervency akin to blazing flames.

Suddenly, amidst the hoofbeats, several sharp whistling sounds emerged. From the side alleys, dozens of powerful arrows were shot with a buzzing that filled the air, reminiscent of locusts swarming, aiming directly at Lin Wanrong and his party.

"Ambush!" Hu Bugui yelled, standing up on his horse and drawing his saber, deftly deflecting an incoming arrow. A crisp sound resonated as the arrow's tip clashed with the blade, sending out sparks, indicating the force behind it.

Being at the forefront, Lin Wanrong heard Hu Bugui's shout. Almost immediately, two arrows, one from the left and one from the right, were aimed at his temples.

Dangerous! With a roar, Lin Wanrong bent low on his horse, narrowly dodging the wind of the arrows. Just as they seemed poised to hit, a sharp clinking sound was heard, and two flashes of silver emerged from an angle, striking the arrows and causing them to fall straight down.

"Attack!" Without the luxury of identifying his savior, the barrage had already ignited Lin Wanrong's fury. Drawing his firearm, he fired a shot into a nearby house.

With a chilling scream, the head of a nomad split in two. The elite soldiers following Hu Bugui forcefully barged into the building, firing crossbows in rapid succession. Hundreds of soldiers charged in as dozens of Turkic warriors, their sabers gleaming, descended from the rafters, engaging the Great Hua soldiers in fierce combat.

Holding the reins with one hand and his firearm in the other, Lin Wanrong, engulfed in a murderous aura, roared, "Brothers, skewer these curs for me. Leave no survivors. Hu Bugui, immediately shut all city gates. Tonight, I'm out for blood!"

Hu Bugui hastily took off to execute the orders, but Lin Wanrong's rage was far from quelled. With a massive force of three hundred thousand in the city, they first faced the Marshal's camp in flames and then an assassination attempt on the vanguard. Did they truly take the Great Hua Empire for soft clay to be molded at will?

He sneered coldly as he picked up the two arrows that had been aimed at him from the ground. The arrows were thicker than a thumb, made of raw iron, and felt exceedingly heavy in his hands. Embedded between these arrows was a silver needle, its metallic sheen glistening brightly.

It was precisely this silver needle that had struck down the arrows. Lin Wanrong stared in amazement for a moment before leaping up in ecstatic joy. "Fairy Sister! It must be Fairy Sister who has come!"