

Finest 521

Chapter 521 The Blood-Red Sunset

At the distant horizon, a whirlwind of sand filled the sky. Countless Turkic steeds galloped like flying arrows, darting across the desert like shooting stars. The hooves pounded the earth, shaking it to its very core.

The cavalry on horseback wore fur armor and fur hats. Their eyes, deeply set, gleamed with a wild blue hue. Their pointed noses conveyed the indomitable spirit characteristic of the Turkic people. The cavalries' faces were flush with excitement and greed. Gleaming scimitars were held aloft in their robust arms, glinting with a cold light in the sunlight.

The Turks had arrived! The sky was filled with sand as if a sudden cloud had descended from the heavens. They were several times faster than anyone had imagined. The thunderous scene of ten thousand warhorses neighing and galloping across the desert was heart-stoppingly magnificent.

The earth-shattering noise seemed to shake Lin Wanrong's heart out of his chest. He gazed into the distance where clouds, sand, warhorses, and men blurred into one, filling the desolate scene with an unparalleled sense of awe. No matter how great you were, you'd feel utterly insignificant in the face of such overwhelming power.

Lin Wanrong's eyes were wide open, his face flushed red. Blood surged through his veins, gradually heating up.

"Brothers, get ready—" Du Xiuyuan swung his long blade, and tens of thousands of Great Hua soldiers swiftly took their positions. Their faces were solemn, tinged with a hint of nervousness. Those who were entering the battlefield for the first time held their spears with a faint tremble.

Scouts hurriedly reported from all directions, filling the air with a palpable tension. Great Hua's first battle was finally about to begin!

At the forefront, Lin Wanrong found himself lost in the moment. All he could hear were the thunderous hoofbeats; all he could see were the gleaming scimitars of the Turkic warriors. Even the most cowardly person would feel a burning surge of courage in this uncertain moment between life and death.

The battlefield could turn cowards into heroes.

Forty miles, thirty miles, twenty miles... The Turks' myriad iron horsemen closed the distance at an almost unimaginable speed. Gradually, the sounds grew louder, and the sand turned the air within ten miles into an impenetrable fog. Vaguely, the manes of warhorses and the fur hats atop the Turks became clearly visible.

"The Turks are ten miles away—" A shout from the scout up front tightened everyone's hearts instantly. Soldiers stared into the distance, their grips so tight they seemed ready to crush the hilts of their blades.

"Five miles—" Lin Wanrong held his breath. Time seemed to freeze. He could no longer hear any sounds, only the sight of the Turkic warriors' fangs, so close they seemed within reach.

Dust swept across his face; sand crept into the corners of his mouth, leaving a bitter taste. Lin Wanrong spat out a mouthful of saliva, only to find to his astonishment that the distant cloud of Turks seemed to slow down. The hoofbeats grew more sparse.

After a short moment, the boundless cloud seemed to come to a sudden stop. The neighing of the steeds ceased; only a few sparse hoofbeats reached their ears. Astonishingly, the Turkic horsemen had gradually halted their gallop. Only the sneezes of the horses contributed to a subdued rumble, echoing in the ears of the Great Hua soldiers.

Tens of thousands of cavalries who could stop on command, as could their horses—perfectly coordinated, incredibly efficient, impeccably uniform. They halted a mere two or three miles from Wuyuan City, proving just how formidable the Turkic horsemen truly were.

Lin Wanrong's heart sank as he gained a clearer understanding of the fighting capabilities of the nomads.

"Why have the nomads suddenly stopped?" Du Xiuyuan, standing beside him, furrowed his brows and asked, "Could it be that they've noticed something unusual?"

Lin Wanrong's expression was as still as water, and he slightly shook his head, allowing the wind and sand to pelt his face. The desert, which moments before had been filled with the thunderous sounds of hooves, suddenly grew eerily quiet. The neighs of fine horses and the rustling sounds of fluttering flags seemed inconsequential in the ears of all the soldiers. The battlefield had fallen into a deathly silence, where even the sound of a dropped steel needle could alert both sides.

Lin Wanrong leaped onto the highest mound of earth and took a long bamboo-made megaphone. Facing the distance, he shouted, "Turkic whelps, listen well! I am Lin San, the vanguard marshal of a million lions from the right flank of the Great Huá Empire! Where is Nurzhan?"

He shouted with all the strength he could muster, and his voice traveled far through the megaphone. Amidst the swirling winds and sands, there was an indomitable air of valor.

Opposite him, the Turks remained silent. No one responded to his shouting, but the glint of malicious intent in their eyes shot through the desert winds and sands, aiming straight at Wuyuan City.

"If Nurzhan has already arrived, given the Turk's aggressive nature, he would not cower. It appears he must still be among the rear troops and has not yet reached the front lines," Du Xiuyuan analyzed calmly, standing beside him.

Lin Wanrong nodded and yelled again, "You Turkic scoundrels who dare to commit crimes and invade our Great Huá territory, slaughtering our people! Heaven shall not tolerate this. In the name of the right flank marshal of the Great Huá lions, I command you to retreat immediately! Furthermore, let the Turkic Khan write a letter of surrender and deliver it to our Great Hua Empire, paying tribute year after year, and kowtowing to our Emperor. If you fail to heed this warning, you shall be doomed to never return, your bodies crushed to pieces!"

There was a sudden commotion in the ranks of the Turks across the field. The warhorses started to neigh incessantly. Evidently, someone had translated his words, and the Turks were furious. The sound of hooves from the opposing side started to grow louder, unsettling the stillness.

Suddenly, a heavy thud of hooves broke the silence on both sides. The neat formation of Turks slowly parted, and a row of horsemen came charging from behind their ranks. Leading them was a large flag bearing a clearly visible wolf's head with its mouth wide open. Beneath the flag was an imposing horse, and astride it sat a Turk with deeply set eyes and a high nose bridge. He was much larger than the average Turk, wielding a heavy spiked club in his hand. His curled hair and fierce eyes glinted with a chilling light. Judging by his appearance and aura, this had to be Nurzhan, the vanguard of the Turks.

The Turk was shouting incoherently, not even requiring a megaphone to make himself heard, his voice was terrifyingly loud.

Lin Wanrong could not understand what the man was saying. Du Xiuyuan quietly translated, "General, that is Nurzhan. He says he wants to duel you, capture you alive, and use your heart and lungs as accompaniment to his wine."

Fury surged within Lin Wanrong. He shouted into the megaphone, "Nurzhan, you ignorant brat! You dare speak nonsense in my Great Huá territory? If you've got the guts, duel with the ten thousand men of my Great Huá! Grandpa Lin will definitely show you what I'm made of today!"

On the other side, it was evident that they too had an interpreter. Nurzhan bellowed loudly, his eyes bulging like bronze bells. With a sweeping gesture of his shaggy hand, he shouted something unintelligible in the Turkic language. Instantly, the Turkic brigade exploded into action, like a burst heap of sand. Countless horses neighed in unison and charged forward.

The speed of the Turkic warhorses was astonishing, and the riders had grown up on horseback, mastering every move. In the blink of an eye, a storming dark cloud rolled in again, with countless arrows flying thick as locusts. The thundering hooves made the soil of Wuyuan City tremble, nearly bursting eardrums. Their momentum and aura surpassed what had been witnessed before.

Lin Wanrong's heart pounded wildly. He roared, "Brothers, prepare—"

A scout from the front shouted, "The nomads are three miles away—"

"The nomads are two miles away—"

"Fire the cannons!" Lin Wanrong drew his sword swiftly, its bright gleam piercing the sky. He roared mightily, his voice resonating heroically amidst the sound of galloping hooves.

Boom! Boom! The two cannons that Du Xiuyuan had positioned within the city unleashed their fury, their tongues of flame reaching far into the distance. The cannonballs whistled through the air in a beautiful arc, landing amidst the Turkic cavalry. Several Turkic horses were blown to bits, flames erupted sky-high, and dozens of nomads vanished in a sea of fire.

It was as if the blood and fire had provoked the savagery of the Turkic forces. Their advance didn't falter for a second. They marched over the scattered remains of horses and comrades, shouting incomprehensible slogans. Tens of thousands of horses surged like rolling dark clouds, racing toward Wuyuan City with electrifying speed. The sight was so overwhelming that it seemed to change the color of the world.

The cannons roared continuously, their barrels growing hot. But compared to the barbarians, this firepower was but a drop in the bucket. The Turkic advance was unable to be halted, the nomads left dozens of corpses behind but broke through the artillery's blockade, closing in on Wuyuan City.

Three hundred feet, two hundred feet, one hundred feet—the arrows of the barbarians whistled as they fell near the city walls.

"Fire arrows!" Du Xiuyuan swung his long knife, and eight hundred fire archers drew their longbows, aiming at the approaching riders. A thousand fire arrows were unleashed at once. Those at the forefront of the Turkic forces were knocked off their horses, their clothes instantly ignited. Screams filled the air. Yet those who followed were undeterred, quickly advancing past their injured comrades and arriving at the city gates. Drawing their bows, they aimed for the top of the walls.

"Repeating crossbows!" Lin Wanrong knocked an arrow out of the air and yelled decisively.

Immediately, crossbowmen stepped forward, taking the place of the fire archers. These repeating crossbows had been carefully modified by Xu Zhiqing, their shooting precise and rapid, making them especially suited for city defense. Countless repeating crossbows fired like a swarm of locusts at the approaching nomads.

The Turkic forces were just a few dozen feet from the city walls when they were met by a devastating volley of crossbow bolts that knocked men and horses off their feet. The screams were endless, and the damage from this volley surpassed even that of the cannons and rockets.

Suddenly, a few loud cries emanated from within the Turkic formation, and four to five thousand heavily armored riders broke out like the wind, swooping directly toward the top of the city walls. These Turkic heavy cavalries were clad in thick armor, their bodies hugging the manes of their horses, their faces even more ferocious. They moved at an even faster pace and reached the base of the city walls in the blink of an eye, leaving the crossbowmen no time to aim and fire.

This was the moment for a battle of blades! A Turkic heavy cavalryman vaulted over the earth wall on horseback, swooping right over Lin Wanrong's head, becoming the first Turkic invader to breach Wuyuan City.

With a loud cry, Lin Wanrong swung his blade; amid a spray of blood, the Turkic warhorse was cleaved in two by his single stroke. The Turkic heavy cavalryman crashed heavily onto the ground. Lin Wanrong swiftly approached, mustering all his strength to thrust his blade into the chest of the

nomad. A gush of blood soared skyward, spattering on his helmet and face. The hot, fresh blood stimulated him, filling him with a sensation of intense, fiery vitality.

Lin Wanrong let out a prolonged roar, pulling his long blade from the chest of the nomad. The air filled with the scent of blood. "Charge!" he shouted with all his might, inspiring a heroic cry that resonated like a mighty river.

"Charge!" His soldiers, their passions inflamed, burst out from their cover, engaging in brutal combat with the Turkic heavy cavalry.

The Turkic men were indeed as fierce as their reputation suggested—excellent horsemen with superb swordsmanship, tall and strong, straightforward in their approach. Each stroke of their blades carried the weight of a thousand pounds.

These ten thousand elite troops were all handpicked by Lin Wanrong from Shandong, and were unrivaled in their prowess within Great Hua. However, when pitted against the Turkic heavy cavalry, the difference was clear. Throughout the fierce battle, disparities in physical strength and experience gradually became evident.

The Turkic swordsmanship was straightforward and lethal, while the soldiers of Great Hua fought with fervor, fearlessly confronting death. Their unparalleled confidence compensated for their physical disadvantages.

Both sides clashed fiercely, resulting in heavy casualties among the Turkic forces and the fall of countless Great Hua warriors, their blood soaking the desert sand.

Everywhere, blades glittered; everywhere, trails of blood marked the ground. In that moment, the small city of Wuyuan became a point forever remembered in the history of conflicts between Great Hua and the Turkic forces.

A piercing cry rang out as a Great Hua soldier, blind with rage, threw aside a leg that had been severed by the enemy. Like a blood-soaked god of war, he hopped on one leg and pinned a Turkic man beneath him, biting fiercely at the Turkic soldier's face. The nomad let out a savage roar, his curved blade piercing the Great Hua soldier's chest and gutting him.

"You bastards—I'll curse your ancestors!" Lin Wanrong roared, his eyes narrowed like a ferocious lion. Leaping forward, he aimed his blade at the head of the nomad, hacking away furiously. His

crazed roar echoed throughout Wuyuan City. "Scum, I'll hack you to death! All you nomad dogs, come at me!"

Seeing his manic behavior, his high-ranking officers were startled and quickly surrounded him for protection. Du Xiuyuan cut off the head of a nearby nomad and rushed to his side, shouting, "General, General!"

Lin Wanrong's fingers trembled as he gently closed the eyes of the fallen soldier. "Brother Du, how many nomads have infiltrated Wuyuan?" he asked in a voice tinged with bloodshot eyes.

Dodging a flying arrow, Du Xiuyuan responded, "At least half of them, General."

Lin Wanrong surveyed the scene, his eyes taking in the sandy expanse of Wuyuan City, now stained red with blood. Countless men lay strewn across the desert—standing, lying, entangled with their enemies. Not a single body was whole; not one man could rest his eyes in peace. The young bodies seemed to merge into the desolate landscape, becoming one with the vast desert.

Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth until they nearly cracked, his eyes red and swollen. Casting a glance at the Turks who were flooding into the city from a distance, he suddenly let out a sky-piercing howl, "You mongrels, your blood will pay for this! Du Xiuyuan, signal the retreat of our entire army—"

"All troops retreat!" Du Xiuyuan's trumpet call resounded, and the remaining soldiers of the Great Hua Empire roared in unison. Gathering all their strength, they repelled the Turks before them with a swing of their blades, leaped onto their horses, and turned to flee the city.

Seeing the retreat of the Great Hua troops, the Turkic cavalry blew their long horns, rallying their entire camp. The sound of hooves intensified from beyond the city walls as a multitude of Turkic horsemen swarmed in, chasing the retreating Great Hua soldiers through Wuyuan City.

Lin Wanrong and his generals Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui stayed behind till the end. Only after Gao Qiu had cut down five Turks did Lin Wanrong grit his teeth and growl, "Brothers, let's go!"

The three of them mounted their horses, arrows whizzing past them, aimed directly at their backs. Clearly, the Turks had recognized the man who had been shouting commands earlier as "Lin San, the Right Marshal of the Great Hua's Lion Army," and their cries of excitement were incessant.

The remnants of the Great Hua forces raced ahead, with countless Turks pursuing them from behind. Across the vast desert, the two armies stretched out in a long, spectacular line.

Turning his head, Lin Wanrong saw an overwhelming mass of Turkic cavalymen surging after them like a swarm of angry bees. He suddenly wheeled his horse around, "Du Xiuyuan, fire the arrows!"

This was the moment Du Xiuyuan had been waiting for. With a look of steely resolve, he took out his signal arrows.

"Whizz—whizz—" Two sharp whistles tore through the sky. Amidst the swirling desert sands, several flares burst forth like beautiful fireworks.

Lin Wanrong clenched his fists, quietly waiting for that crucial moment. Each second felt painfully slow.

"Boom—boom—" The sounds were music to Lin Wanrong's ears. As the signal arrows landed, Li Sheng's cannons unleashed their fiery roars. Blasts of fire shot towards Wuyuan City.

The retreating Great Hua troops involuntarily halted, excitement lighting up their eyes as they gathered behind Lin Wanrong. All eyes were on Wuyuan, where plumes of thick smoke were rising into the sky. However, there was no expected burst of flame. Just as they were growing anxious, several mournful howls resonated; the cannons from the Divine Machine Unit seemed almost guided, hitting the very center of Wuyuan City.

A ground-shaking "boom" echoed as blinding flames scorched the eyes; Wuyuan City erupted like a string of fireworks. Explosions were continuous, the earth trembling. From a distance, Wuyuan looked like a gigantic mushroom, lifted into the sky by one blast after another. Countless horses, countless Turks, were sent soaring into the heavens, transforming into ethereal specters. Their screams, their shouts—all were drowned out by the overwhelming sound of explosions.

The Turkic warriors who had pursued them out of the city were stunned. They looked back at the rising swirls of dust and blood-mixed clouds in horror, even their warhorses trembling beneath them. For the first time, they felt a sense of dread.

Explosions and flashes of fire, one wave after another, seemed to split the vast desert in two. The earth-shaking sensations caused everyone to glance sideways.

Lin Wanrong's face was calm, his eyes as cold as the ice and snow of the Tianshan Mountains. He took a deep breath and forcefully drew his long blade, his voice hoarse as he roared, "The time for revenge has come! Don't give the Turkic people any chances. For our fallen brothers—kill them all! Charge!"

"Kill them all! Charge!" The soldiers who had just experienced bloody battle erupted in pent-up anger and resentment. The pitiful state of their brothers-in-arms, who were like family, further fueled their killing intent. At this moment of turning defeat into victory, only fresh blood could properly honor their fallen comrades. The remnants of the Great Hua forces turned their horses around, their eyes bloodshot, charging like ferocious wolves straight toward the Turkic cavalry.

Lin Wanrong led the charge, the wind howling past him on either side. The faces of his fallen brothers flashed before his eyes, and he remembered nothing else. All that occupied his mind was a single word—kill! Kill! Kill!

He didn't know where he got the strength, but he plunged into the midst of the Turkic soldiers, slashing wildly. No technique, just a single cleave! A strange yet powerful force seemed to make him an invincible warrior for that moment. The blood before him looked like a red rain in the desert, washing away a century of humiliation for Great Hua.

"Brother Lin has gone mad—" Gao Qiu muttered, his eyes moist. Suddenly, he yelled, "I'm going mad too!" He charged into the enemy ranks with his blade, standing back to back with Lin Wanrong. Blades rose and fell; one after another, Turkic men were cut down beneath their horses.

This group of retreating soldiers suddenly transformed, as if reborn. One by one, they charged fearlessly toward the Turkic cavalry, their spirit and strength even astonishing the highly combat-effective Turkic warriors.

"Charge!" Dust rose from the south. Tens of thousands of dragon flags fluttered high in the wind. A thunderous sound echoed as hundreds of thousands of elite Great Hua troops surged like a rolling wave of desert sand. Leading the charge was Hu Bugui, his horse swift as the wind. The bloodlust in his eyes chilled even his own men.

The moment to wash away a century of humiliation for Great Hua had come.

Though the Turkic warriors were formidable, the troops who had left the city were now stranded. Faced with countless fierce and hungry Great Hua elites yearning to cleanse their shame, even their considerable fighting skills could only lead to their obliteration in the endless sands.

In a daze, his arms already swollen and sore, Lin Wanrong could think of nothing else but swinging his blade. Together with Gao Qiu and Du Xiuyuan, they spearheaded the charge, cutting through all resistance. Their battle robes were already soaked through with blood, rendering their appearance unrecognizable.

Through countless life-or-death struggles and near-death experiences under enemy blades, he didn't know why, but that final, critical strike always seemed to come from him.

The timely arrival of Zuo Qiu's left flank and Xu Zhiqing's central army had cut the chasing nomads who had left the city into several segments, completely encircling them. The grand strategy for this battle was already set. The Turkic vanguard of 60,000 had already lost 15,000 within the walls of Wuyuan City. The majority of the remaining 20,000 outside the city had been annihilated, while a small portion continued to resist in the corners. However, they were no longer a concern. The only slight regret was that more than 20,000 Turkic cavalry, including their vanguard leader Nurzhan, hadn't managed to enter the city in time. Amidst the flames of Wuyuan City, Nurzhan looked at the brutal fighting across from him, not daring to advance any further.

"Exhilarating, exhilarating!" Hu Bugui's face flushed with excitement; his armor was already soaked in blood, and his steel blade was chipped. He gestured exuberantly, "I've fought for so many years, and this is by far the most exhilarating. General Lin, you have no idea! I've never seen the Turks look so desperate. Forty thousand! Forty thousand nomads! Is there anything more exhilarating than this?"

Annihilating over 40,000 of the Turkic elite in the first battle was undoubtedly a significant victory that would resound through the ages. There was no doubt about that.

Lin Wanrong was mentally and physically exhausted. He sighed lightly, "Brother Hu, how many casualties did our army suffer?"

Hu Bugui's expression dimmed, "Although we had a significant advantage in this battle, the nomads were genuinely fierce fighters. We lost over 10,000 men, of which more than 6,000 were our brothers stationed at Wuyuan."

Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth, his eyes reddening in an instant. Both Gao Qiu and Du Xiuyuan were silent, filled with sorrow.

"Brother Hu, how much time before the Turkic reinforcements arrive?" He sighed deeply, his voice hoarse.

Hu Bugui replied, "Roughly four hours. That Nurzhan across from us is waiting for their reinforcements. Advisor Xu instructed us to swiftly clean up the battlefield and withdraw immediately to avoid direct confrontation with the Turkic main force."

Lin Wanrong nodded and looked around. In the aftermath of the battle, the area was in complete disarray, shrouded in the smoke of gunpowder, scattered with flying sparks, and soaked in vivid blood that had dyed the desert red. Far away, long planks were lined up, underneath which dry twigs were arranged. The bodies of the fallen soldiers were neatly laid out, and tens of thousands of troops stood quietly beside them. Staring at the comrades with whom they had shared life and death, their eyes were shimmering with tears.

Lin Wanrong clenched his fists, "Have the remains of our brothers been gathered?"

"All those who died outside the city have been brought together; their remains have also been arranged." Hu Bugui's nose felt sour, "As for those inside Wuyuan City, they are likely lost forever."

The flames of Wuyuan City served as the best tribute to them. Lin Wanrong sighed and slowly walked toward the bodies of the fallen soldiers.

Faces of the young flashed before him, some familiar and some not. Although their appearances had been tidied up, the ghastly sight of their deaths was still shocking. They were husbands to wives and children to parents; how many people were praying day and night, hoping for their safe return? Little did they know that the men they had been yearning for had turned into a pile of bones deep in the desert under the setting sun.

Lin Wanrong felt as if his heart was being twisted, tears silently falling from his eyes. He knelt down quietly, followed closely by Du Xiuyuan, Gao Qiu, and Hu Bugui. Tens of thousands of soldiers followed their commander, tears streaming down their faces as they knelt and did not rise.

After a prolonged silence, Du Xiuyuan spoke softly, "General, it's time. We cannot let the remains of our brothers fall into enemy hands. Please grant them their last journey."

Lin Wanrong took a deep breath and accepted the torch from Du Xiuyuan's hands. With gritted teeth, he hurled it onto the pile of dry branches. A roaring fire spread slowly from near to far, consuming the young faces lying there. From then on, deep in the vast desert, tens of thousands more heroic spirits came to rest.

Hu Bugui asked, "General, we are about to retreat, but we've seized tens of thousands of the enemy's warhorses. Due to the urgency of time, there are still over 5,000 that are hard to tame and cannot be taken with us right away. What should we do with them?"

"What should we do?" Lin Wanrong hummed, a cold light flashing in his eyes. "Not a single needle, not a single blade of grass should be left for the Turks!"

Hu Bugui looked at him, puzzled. Lin Wanrong's fists clenched with a grinding sound, "Those untamable Turkic horses—kill them all on the spot. Let all our soldiers do it. If the Turks are ruthless, we must be even more so!"

"Good, let it be so! Our great nation suffered before because we were too weak!" Hu Bugui shouted, his eyes gleaming.

Indeed, the reputation of the Turkic warhorses was not unearned. Despite the horrors of war they'd been through, their strides remained steady, their hoofbeats high-spirited. Yet, their wild nature made them difficult to tame quickly.

Gazing at the thousands of neighing Turkic warhorses before him, Hu Bugui's face flushed with excitement. To slaughter the enemy's warhorses as if chopping cabbages was something he had long dreamed of, and it would show the Turks the ruthlessness of their great nation.

"Prepare—" Hu Bugui's eyes glinted with ferocity, and with a strong swing of his arm, he shouted, "Cut—"

"Cut—" Tens of thousands of soldiers roared in unison. The 5,000 Turkic horses neighed loudly for the last time, their heads severed from their bodies in an instant. The sky was stained red by the gushing blood, reflecting the setting sun.

Lin Wanrong mounted his horse, looked at the passionate soldiers before him, and felt a heavy sense of responsibility well up within him.

"Go—" He yelled, turning his horse and leading the way. Tens of thousands of soldiers mounted their horses and followed their commander, vanishing gradually into the deep recesses of the desert.

The severed heads of 5,000 Turkic warhorses lay there, their blood drying up. Under a sunset shrouded by sand haze, 5,000 horse heads were neatly aligned, forming two bloody characters that would send shivers down the spine of any enemy— "Great Hua!"

Chapter 522 The Grave Situation

News of the great victory at Wuyuan spread like wildfire to Xingqing, Shuofang, and Yanmen Pass, eliciting jubilant cheers within and beyond the Great Wall. Countless soldiers guarding the passes were elated, their spirits soaring, and tears of emotion wetting the turrets and battlements.

The threat of the nomads had lingered for a hundred years, an ongoing malaise finally alleviated today. This moment of upliftment was something that Great Hua had waited for far too long. Although the first battle resulted in annihilating only about 40,000 of the enemy, it was a feat achieved under unfavorable conditions, in terms of both manpower and capabilities. The brilliance of the campaign was enough to be included in textbooks. It was a milestone victory, enormously significant for boosting the morale of the Great Hua populace and its soldiers.

Stepping on gunpowder and holding fort at Wuyuan, Lin Wanrong led thousands of brave warriors in a bloody battle against the Turks. His valor and tact brought him instant fame. In a matter of days, his name spread throughout the regions along the Yangtze River and the areas surrounding the Great Wall, etched into the hearts of six hundred thousand soldiers guarding the borders. In comparison, his past achievements in eradicating the White Lotus seemed trivial.

However, Lin Wanrong had no time to dwell on these matters. The elite troops he had led from Shandong had suffered heavy casualties. Numerous young soldiers had fallen before his eyes, keeping him restless and awake at night. He seemed crazed in his relentless drilling of troops, waking up early and staying up late, surprising even those like Hu Bugui with his fervor.

"Miss Xu, could you please persuade the General?" Under the setting sun, Hu Bugui, Gao Qiu, and Du Xiuyuan stood next to Xu Zhiqing, watching Lin Wanrong's imposing figure in the distance and sighing silently.

Astride his horse, Lin Wanrong was shirtless, gripping a sword in one hand while sweat beads trickled down his forehead and cheeks, blurring his face. He seemed entirely unaware as he spurred his warhorse and charged forward like a whirlwind.

"Charge—"

With a furious roar, the blade in his hand stabbed into a standing log, its tip shaking tremulously as it pierced through the wood. Behind him, a wave of shadowy figures on thousands of galloping horses kicked up a storm of sand, their riders shouting as they practiced desert warfare maneuvers.

Xu Zhiqing sighed softly, "Don't you know his temperament? He's happier than anyone when he smiles, but more stubborn than a rock when he's obstinate. Who could possibly persuade him?"

Gao Qiu nodded, "Indeed. In the past, the mere mention of a pretty young woman would light up his eyes. But these days, no matter what I say or even present him with special illustration books, he simply doesn't smile."

"What kind of illustration books did you give the General?" Du Xiuyuan asked curiously.

Gao Qiu chuckled, "Books passed down in my family for educational purposes. The kind General Lin likes!"

If Lin San liked it, then it surely couldn't be anything decent! Xu Zhiqing lightly spat, her cheeks flushing. "The time for today's council has arrived. Commander Gao, please summon General Lin to my tent for discussion."

As Xu Zhiqing's figure gracefully receded into the distance, Du Xiuyuan and the others finally burst into laughter. Gao Qiu looked around and whispered mysteriously, "Brothers, have you noticed? The relationship between our advisor and General Lin seems to have improved these past few days. She often visits our camp and the way she looks at General Lin... Ah, how sentimental—like wind, like sand! Seems like the illustration books I gifted General Lin will find their use very soon, hehe —"

"Useless nonsense!" Gao Qiu received a kick to his rear, and a voice chuckled from behind him, "Those tricks in the painting album you gave me are outdated by a decade. Time for an upgrade."

Lin Wanrong stood before them, shirtless and brushing the sand off his body. His skin was as healthily tanned as his face, and beads of sweat glimmered in the falling desert sun, epitomizing vigor. Gao Qiu looked at him in awe and exclaimed, "Great muscles, great build! Brother Lin, how did you train yourself like this? Teach me!"

Lin Wanrong grinned, "Wash your face with sand, scrub your body with bricks, and persist for ten years—great things can be achieved!"

Gao Qiu rolled his eyes. Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan erupted in laughter, their voices mingling with the distant cries of warhorses and clashing of soldiers, echoing up to the heavens.

As Lin Wanrong strode into the central army camp, the sun had already sunk deep into the desert. Soldiers on guard at the camp's entrance greeted him with eyes full of admiration, saluting him in unison. This was the ultimate accolade for a valiant warrior who had fought against the Turks, a mark of trust and respect.

Gazing at these young faces full of anticipation and excitement, he thought of his brothers who had died at Wuyuan. Lin Wanrong managed a smile and waved his hand in a muted gesture.

Just as he stepped into the central tent, a hearty laugh resounded, "Well, well, Brother Lin! You've won a great victory but haven't shown your face for two days. What's the matter? Afraid we'll steal your credit?" Zuo Qiu grabbed his arm, jesting relentlessly.

Lin Wanrong offered a slight smile, "Brother Zuo jokes. This credit belongs to everyone. Why would it need to be stolen?"

The tent was filled with quite a few people that day, including commanders and deputy commanders from all three fronts, numbering over thirty. Seeing Lin Wanrong enter, their faces lit up with joy. Achieving such an impressive victory in their first battle had exceeded everyone's expectations. It had not only reversed the decline that Great Hua had suffered for years but also made the nomadic tribes halt at Wuyuan, hesitant to advance. The atmosphere was filled with jubilant smiles. ♦

Xu Zhiqing cast a stealthy glance at him, noticing his loose armor and faint traces of fine sand on his forehead. He appeared more tanned and jovial than before, different from how he looked before joining the army—there was a new rugged charm. She pursed her lips and smiled, "Brother Zuo, don't pressure him too much. I heard that before leaving Wuyuan, General Lin beheaded all 5,000 captured Turkic warhorses and arranged them to form the characters for 'Great Hua,' showing his defiance to the enemy. Turkic Prince Batur was so furious that he offered a reward of ten thousand gold coins to capture Lin San. General Lin has been training troops these past days, probably to avoid the fearless Turkic soldiers snatching the gold off him!"

Laughter broke out among the crowd, accompanied by thunderous applause. Lin Wanrong glanced at her and chuckled, "And what about you, advisor? Are you worried?"

Miss Xu gave him a sidelong glance, her cheeks flushed. She turned her head slightly and murmured a soft "Hmm," sweet as nectar.

Deputy commander Yu Zongcai observed the subtle interaction between the two and his face instantly paled.

Zuo Qiu slapped his hands together fiercely, exclaiming, "Brother Lin, your beheading of the enemy horses was truly exceptional—far more satisfying than even setting explosives in Wuyuan City. The nomads grew up on horseback; their war horses are their lives. Your single stroke has chilled the very souls of the Turkic people! For hundreds of years, what our Great Hua nation has lacked is precisely this ruthlessness! These few slashes—so invigorating, truly exhilarating!"

The atmosphere buzzed as the men talked for a moment. Their confidence soared to unprecedented heights, even the usually composed Zuo Qiu flushed with excitement. The efficacy of their first major victory was evident.

However, Lin Wanrong maintained his sobriety. Although the Turkic forces had lost forty thousand of their elite troops in the initial battle, they still had 260,000 soldiers amassed before Wuyuan City. Their defeat came from their own arrogance and underestimation of the enemy, coupled with their isolated advance into enemy territory. Great Hua's surprise tactics and decisive victory had an element of serendipity and were not easily replicable. As the war progressed, the Turkic forces would learn from their losses, heightening their vigilance. Achieving another such victory would be as difficult as scaling the heavens.

Xu Zhiqing seemed to share his awareness. When the tent finally quieted down, she pointed to the map hanging on the wall and spoke solemnly, "Our current position lies along the northern foothills of the Helan Mountains, about four hundred miles from Wuyuan. Following the Helan Mountain canyon leads to Xingqing Prefecture, our rear support. We are the only line of defense before Xingqing Prefecture. Though we triumphed in the Battle of Wuyuan, the enemy's main force under Batur has converged before the city walls of Wuyuan. They still have around two hundred thousand troops, all of which are Turkic elites. Due to our unexpected initial victory, the Turkic National Tutor Lu Dongzan has changed his strategy. No longer will they blindly advance; they have adopted a more stable approach, advancing cautiously layer by layer. Finding another opportunity for a surprising victory like at Wuyuan will not be easy."

Her words silenced the tent. If the Turks abandoned their impulsive, aggressive tactics, their combat power would be truly fearsome. As for the Turkic National Tutor Lu Dongzan, his cleverness and wit were well known.

"What do you all think of the current situation?" Miss Xu sighed softly, her gaze sweeping over the generals as she quietly asked.

The severity of the situation lay plainly before them. The joy from their initial victory had been greatly diluted. The tent was eerily quiet as everyone furrowed their brows in deep thought.

How to fight the next battle was also a problem Lin Wanrong had been pondering. With Lu Dongzan's intelligence, he would not make the same mistake twice. The Turks' more calculated advance might have slowed their pace, but it significantly increased their threat, adding even more pressure on Great Hua.

"Advisor, if we array our troops to decisively engage the enemy, what are the odds of victory?" Zuo Qiu pondered for a long moment before asking through gritted teeth.

Miss Xu shook her head gently, "Purely in terms of numbers, we are about even with the Turks. We have the advantage in cannons and crossbows, but the Turkic cavalry are individually stronger. In this vast desert, there are no natural barriers to defend. If we are to engage in a decisive battle, I fear our chances of victory are less than fifty percent. The Turks are probably counting on this very moment."

A sigh escaped Zuo Qiu's lips. A decisive battle was a last resort, one they could not afford to employ lightly.

Lin Wanrong blinked his eyes and suddenly spoke up, "Advisor, this Helan Mountain canyon is naturally difficult to traverse and is a must-pass route for the nomads invading the Central Plains. What if we heavily garrison this canyon to block the Turks' route south?"

As soon as his words landed, a voice of dissent rose, "General Lin, just because you've won a battle doesn't mean you can get carried away. Do you know that there are two major canyons in Helan Mountain running from north to south? How are we supposed to guard them?"

"Can't we guard both?" Lin Wanrong replied with a faint smile. "Are you saying that because there are multiple entrances to the Helan Mountain valley, we should just let the Turks march straight through and seize Xingqing?"

Caught off guard by Lin Wanrong's eloquence, Deputy Commander Yu was left speechless.

Xu Zhiqing nodded, "Certainly, the two canyons can be defended, but our troops would be spread thin. The Turks could choose either route to launch a concentrated assault, and the initiative would then fall into their hands."

"Advisor Xu, whether we like it or not, to defend Xingqing, we must guard both of these canyons. Am I right?" Lin Wanrong looked at her intently, his eyes burning.

Xu Zhiqing glanced at him, her cheeks flushing slightly, "Yes, these two canyons must be defended. So, are you planning to plant explosives again? The nomads learned their lesson last time; they won't fall for that again."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Advisor Xu, you're truly intelligent, seeing through my ruse so quickly. If all the nomads were as smart as you, we'd be doomed."

Xu Zhiqing shot him an annoyed look, "What exactly is your plan? Speak!"

Lin Wanrong turned serious, "Advisor Xu, if the entire Turkic force of two hundred thousand attacks, and we're defending these two canyons, how long do you think we can hold out?"

After pondering for a moment, Xu Zhiqing finally replied, "Defending a canyon is not the same as defending a city. Unless we blow up the canyon, we could only hold out for three days at most."

Blowing up the canyon would certainly slow down the Turks but would also sever the crucial passageway between Xingqing and the great desert. Not to mention the loss of Wuyuan, Helan Mountain would be handed over to the Turks. Their only option would then be to retreat to Xingqing. Once the barbarians cleared the canyon, Xingqing would be left without natural defenses and exposed to the enemy's cavalry—a desperate move, indeed.

Furthermore, Helan Mountain wasn't just an imposing mountain range for the Great Hua; it marked the boundary between farming and nomadic people and served as a psychological bastion for the soldiers.

Everyone understood this, and their faces changed when they heard the idea of blowing up the canyon.

"Three days?" A glint of ferocity flashed in Lin Wanrong's eyes as he clapped his hands abruptly, "Whether we like it or not, three days it is then. Advisor Xu, I have a plan."

"Gasp...!"

Startled by the sensation of his entire body falling into an abyss, Kapros sat up. All he could see before him was darkness.

'Where am I?'

"Fireball!"

He instinctively uttered the spell, bothered by the darkness, but strangely, the expected whoosh of flames igniting didn't come.

"...Fireball. Fireball!"

Even after chanting it three times, there wasn't even the slightest feeling of mana being drained. As he tensed his entire body, sensing something was amiss, suddenly a white light flashed before his eyes and someone appeared.

'Ah...'

Kapros, who had reflexively taken a defensive stance, hesitated as soon as he recognized the person who appeared.

It was Superior. More precisely, it was the Superior from ten years later that he had seen in the memory of meeting Ilumine. The androgynous beauty was gone, replaced by a short-haired Lord Superior who looked like a suddenly matured young man with a scar on his face.

He had always seen him from afar, but now the fact that he was face to face with him felt very strange.

After staring into Kapros's eyes for a long time, Superior grinned and raised his hand.

"You're not very sociable, are you? Well, what use would a mage pursuing solitary training have for sociability?"

"...Are you talking to me?"

Kapros asked in disbelief, and Superior nodded.

"Who else would I be talking to? I don't have a habit of talking to myself."

"Well, this is..."

As Kapros muttered in disbelief, Superior nodded as if he understood.

"You must be surprised. I understand. Meeting such an unprecedented genius, how could one not be surprised and still be human? Yes, indeed."

Despite clearly seeing Kapros frown deeply at those words, Superior continued speaking without concern.

"Do you know why you're here?"

If he knew that, he wouldn't be in this situation.

"I don't know."

"This is a place I prepared for when you would appear someday. The same goes for me. To be precise, I could be called an avatar left behind by the man known as Lord Superior for his future successor." R

"So this is also a continuation of the quest?"

"...In other words, I'm both an examiner and a helper. But don't worry. This is the only time I'll act as an examiner."

Kapros was surprised to hear himself say "quest" without thinking and immediately regretted it, but Superior continued speaking as if he hadn't heard. It seemed that content related to the game system outside didn't reach him.

"From now on, I'll test you according to my mission. There are two parts to the test, and if we were to divide them, they'd be like written and practical exams? Hahaha. Which do you want to do first?"

"...Pardon?"

As Kapros unconsciously asked again, he saw Superior's brow furrow slightly as he stared at him intently.

"Sigh... For a successor I've waited for over many years, to be honest, you seem to fall short in appearance to be my successor. With that dark thing you're wearing... Your eyes and hair are dark, so why dress in such dark clothes too? You're not some monster hunter."

'...What did he say?'

Feeling like he was losing what little patience he had left at this image-breaking statement, Kapros closed his mouth. After grumbling a few more times, Superior explained once again.

"So, as I said, I'm going to test you now. There are two tests. One that uses your head and one that uses your body. Which do you prefer?"

Despite the grumbling, the tone imbued with honesty evoked more likability than displeasure. Roughly concluding that this was not much different from all the hardships he had to endure during the quests so far, just in a different form, Kapros brushed back his hair and hood and opened his mouth.

"Using my body seems more comfortable."

After all, in his real life up until now, he had been more of an athlete who used his body more than his head. Superior's lips curved upward upon hearing the answer.

"It seems my successor is more vigorous than I am. Well, that's fine. Then draw your sword."

"...Sword?"

Thinking it was nonsense to talk about a sword that wasn't there, Kapros reflexively moved his right hand to his left waist where he usually carried a sword, and was startled to feel something that shouldn't be there, lowering his gaze.

What he grasped was a long mass of light resembling a sword. The weight felt was neither as light as it looked, nor was it heavy. This appropriate weight and the feel in his hand was like...

"It's fine, right? It's a sword matched to the balance your body remembers, so of course it'll be fine. Then I'll take up my sword too."

It fit his hand perfectly and had a familiar weight, even more so than the sword he had bought before, as much as the sword he used to use.

The moment Superior reached out into the air, a small light that burst from his hand, which was clenched as if grasping something, suddenly elongated and clung to his hand.

Grasping it and spinning it around once impressively before lightly holding it with both hands, Superior nodded his chin and provoked Kapros.

"We'll use only our bodies and swords, no other abilities. Since it's your first time, I'll give you three chances. Come on!"

Kapros thought Superior must be crazy, but regardless of his thoughts, his body was nimbly grasping the sword and rushing in to find an opening. As he thrust the sword quickly and powerfully towards the exposed flank, Superior's sword slid in to block it, causing a strong repulsion as they clashed.

Bang!

"...Ugh."

"Ho, your body is really good. It might have been better if you had become a swordsman with that physique, why did you choose to be a mage?"

The teasing words made his fighting spirit flare up like fire. He felt his concentration heightening to an unusual degree.

It made sense given that he could see nothing but Superior and himself, but he was excited to a degree he couldn't control, unlike usual. As he circled around, facing off against Superior who had stepped back to create distance, Kapros began to attack again without hesitation as soon as he saw an opening.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Ba-bang, bang!

Perhaps this was the first time?

Chapter 524 Pointing the Sword at the Fortress

Miss Xu wore a subtle smile, her gaze filled with unspoken emotion as she looked at him. Her gentle words echoed endlessly in Lin Wanrong's ears, leaving him momentarily stunned. 'Have I been foolish?' he pondered. 'Why have I taken on such a dangerous task? This isn't my style!' Deep in thought, a sudden intuition washed over him. On the battlefield where home and country were defended and blood was shed, any hot-blooded man would be compelled to partake, driven by an innate yearning. Even for someone as crafty and opportunistic as himself, there was no exception.

Seeing that he had remained silent for a while, Miss Xu smiled gracefully. "This seems out of character for you. Are you truly prepared to leave behind all that is dear to you, to undertake such an uncertain task?"

Lin Wanrong sighed heavily and reluctantly replied, "Do you think I want to go? But some tasks have to be undertaken, and what's most hateful is that I happen to be the most suitable person for this job. What else can I do but resign myself to fate?" He shook his head, appearing wretched, but the meaning behind his words was crystal clear—he had made up his mind to go.

Xu Zhiqing stared blankly at him, memories flooding her mind. Their first meeting at the Jade Buddha Temple to escape the rain, their second encounter at the Jinghua Academy, discussing orchids and praising the natural world in the Grand Prime Minister Temple, casting nets in Weishan Lake to catch silver. Throughout their time together, he had been playful and cheeky, never missing an opportunity to take advantage. Now, on the battlefield, he revealed himself as a man of valor and

steel, earning even the respect of the ferocious Turkic warriors. Bravado and flippancy—two extremes in one man, causing her both delight and concern. She wondered which version of him she preferred more.

Noticing Xu Zhiqing's fluctuating expressions—her face flushing, then paling, shifting between joy and worry—Lin Wanrong grew anxious. He hastily waved his hand before her eyes. "Miss Xu, what's wrong with you? Oh, you look like you've caught a cold and are shivering. Quickly, let me take your pulse."

"You're the one who's shivering," Xu Zhiqing gave him a disdainful glance, her cheeks flushing hotly. "I'm considering your proposal and trying to figure out whether you're telling the truth."

"Really?" Lin Wanrong grinned, focusing on her flushed cheeks. "Let me give you a tip, Miss Xu. When people lie, their ears turn red. If you don't believe me, feel for yourself."

Almost reflexively, Xu Zhiqing reached out to touch her earlobe but suddenly caught herself. "What are you doing? Trying to trick me again? You're the one with red ears—you have them all the time!"

Lin Wanrong looked at her with a smug smile. Xu Zhiqing hurriedly lowered her head, her ears burning like fire. For a moment, both were at a loss for words, yet the atmosphere was strangely tender.

"You should write to them sooner rather than later," Xu Zhiqing said softly, watching him clutch the portraits of his wives tightly in his hands, reluctant to let go. "The pain of separation is unbearable. Don't treat these good women lightly."

Lin Wanrong looked at her with a smile and said, "Of course I'll write back. Later, I'll go back, boil some water, get cleaned up, and then paint a portrait to send back home. It'll be the kind that Ning'er loves the most."

"Frivolous," Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but blush. Although he spoke ambiguously, she knew him well enough to guess what kind of portrait he would create. "Where did you hear about this route traversing the Helan Mountains?"

Switching to serious matters, Lin Wanrong stopped smiling. His expression became unusually solemn. "It doesn't matter where I heard it from, Miss Xu. I only ask you one thing: do you trust me or not?"

Xu Zhiqing neither nodded nor shook her head. She softly said, "I trust Ning'er."

The young lady spoke quite ambiguously. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "That's good enough. The greater the risk, the greater the reward. Given the current situation, whether this route exists or not, we have to take a gamble. It's much better than just waiting here for the Turks to attack. Besides, if I do manage to find it—"

Her face pale, Xu Zhiqing interrupted him softly, "What if it turns out to be a dead-end?"

A dead-end? Lin Wanrong paused, noticing her tear-filled eyes. Suddenly he laughed, "Don't worry, I won't die. My younger sister often says, 'Good people don't live long, bad people live for a thousand years.' I wholeheartedly believe it; I have a lot of good days ahead." R

Seeing that he was resolute, with not a hint of reluctance in his smile, Xu Zhiqing finally bit her silver teeth, "Fine, I'll report to the Marshal right away. You will lead the troops from east to west through the Helan Mountains to launch a surprise attack on the Turks' stronghold in Bayanhot."

Lin Wanrong nodded, feeling a sudden weight on his shoulders. This eastern-western corridor through the Helan Mountains existed only in his memory; he had no confidence in actually being able to use it. But the situation was pressing. The Turkic cavalry was advancing, and in a few days, they would reach the foot of the Helan Mountains. The surprise attack on Bayanhot was both unexpected and the most effective strategy. Yet it was also fraught with danger and difficulty.

"Based on the nomads' current marching speed, they will reach the Helan Mountains in three days and engage with our forces. These two large canyons running from north to south are the last line of defense before Xingqing, and also a barrier for our troops. I assure you that within ten days of the nomads arriving at the foot of the mountains, the Helan Mountains will not fall," Xu Zhiqing firmly said, her eyebrows lightly raised.

Xu Zhiqing had to divide her forces to defend both the north and south canyons, leaving no room for laxity. On the other hand, the Turkic cavalry could concentrate their forces and choose one canyon to attack. To buy time for Lin Wanrong's surprise attack, Xu Zhiqing would have to defend the Helan Mountains for nearly twice as long as originally anticipated. The pressure she would be under was unimaginable.

What else could he say at this point? Lin Wanrong let out a deep sigh, "Thank you, Miss Xu."

Her eyes slightly red, Xu Zhiqing softly said, "You, always saying thank you for no reason. Is this fight against the Turks solely your family's concern?"

He chuckled, "That's true." Nodding, he added, "In that case, I'll go back to the camp to make arrangements. To save time, we'll set off early tomorrow morning."

Xu Zhiqing hummed in acknowledgment, not speaking further. As Lin Wanrong turned to leave, he was about to step out of the tent when he heard Miss Xu softly call, "Lin San—"

Lin Wanrong turned back to see Xu Zhiqing's eyes misty, blushes on her face. With delicate hands, she slowly removed her helmet, revealing her lush, raven-black hair that draped like the finest silk in the Jiangnan region, gently cascading over her shoulders.

Snowy skin, phoenix eyes, willow brows, cherry lips—her figure was like a willow tree gracefully bending beside a lake. Stripped of her military attire, Xu Zhiqing was alluring and graceful, her youthfulness eclipsing the harshness of the desert winds.

"Miss Xu, you—" Lin Wanrong licked his dry lips, staring in disbelief.

Xu Zhiqing shyly chuckled, "Do I look good?"

"You look wonderful," Lin Wanrong nodded, still dazed.

Xu Zhiqing looked at him gently, "Do you remember the story of the buried sand I told you?"

"Yes, I remember," he said.

Tears began to well up in Xu Zhiqing's eyes as she softly murmured, "Every grain of sand that falls from the sky represents a lifetime of longing from me. Hence, the vast Taklamakan desert was born."

Hearing the story of buried sand once more, Lin Wanrong was emotionally stirred. Looking at Xu Zhiqing's tear-streaked face, he found himself at a loss for words.

Xu Zhiqing suddenly laughed gently, yet heartbreakingly, "Lin San, can you promise me one thing?"

"Of course," Lin Wanrong eagerly nodded, "not just one thing, even a hundred things, I would promise."

"I only need one." Xu Zhiqing gazed at him, her long eyelashes trembling, a tear drop silently falling. "Please remember, you must come back! Otherwise, who will see me in my prettiest dresses? And where shall my body be buried?"

Lin Wanrong was lost, staring at Xu Zhiqing's crystal-clear tears and pure, beautiful smile. It was as if air filled his heart, making him feel weightless. For a moment, he forgot himself entirely.

...

As the sun set, a white horse raced through the sandy winds and evening glow, heading straight for the right-wing camp. Its shadow stretched long in the waning light.

"General Lin has returned!" Du Xiuyuan stood up abruptly, his eyes filled with urgency.

Hu Bugui moved even faster, dashing forward a couple of steps to grab the reins of the horse that had just entered the camp and slowed down. "General, did the advisor agree?"

Lin Wanrong dismounted and nodded lightly, "She agreed."

"She agreed?" Hu Bugui was overjoyed, "Excellent, this time the Turks won't know what hit them."

Gao Qiu squinted at him and said, "Brother Lin, what's the matter? Why are your eyes red?"

"Oh, I rode fast, and the sandstorm was quite strong." Lin Wanrong's mind flashed back to the captivating gaze of the beautiful female strategist, a mix of sweetness and heartache filling him. He sighed softly, shaking his head to dispel these thoughts. "Brother Hu, did you find any information on what I asked you to investigate?"

Hu Bugui nodded, taking out an aged piece of sheepskin map from his chest and handing it to him, "I visited a few remaining hunters in the Helan Mountains in the past two days. According to them, there are legends of people crossing the mountain range and even seeing golden fur in Bayanhot. But these are old tales from the hunters, unverifiable. I found this sheepskin map in one of their homes; the arrow on it seems to point in the northwest direction, so I brought it back."

The sheepskin map was ancient, its markings drawn with charcoal. Apart from a few mountains indicated by triangles, most of it was illegible. However, as Hu Bugui had said, the direction of the arrow pointed northwest. Lin Wanrong looked at it a few times, comparing it to the map in his memory. It seemed vaguely familiar, but its blurriness far exceeded its clarity.

At the very least, the map proved that some brave hunter had once ventured in that direction. Crossing the Helan Mountains from east to west wasn't impossible. This thought settled Lin Wanrong's mind somewhat.

"Brother Hu, have all the brothers been assembled?" He stashed the sheepskin map inside his robe and asked in a low voice.

Hu Bugui gave a thumbs-up, excitement filling his words. "Eight thousand brothers, handpicked by me. Every one of them a warrior. They've all heard that this mission is fraught with danger, yet not a single one has flinched."

"Our Great Hua has never lacked for heroes!" Lin Wanrong patted him on the shoulder, a gratified smile on his face.

Du Xiuyuan watched his smile and snorted in dissatisfaction. "General Lin, why can Old Hu go while I can't?"

"Brother Du, should we even be discussing this?" Lin Wanrong's expression was indifferent. "The goal of this raid on Bayanhot is military strength, and my right-wing army needs a man of wisdom and strategy. Who else could fulfill this role but you? Moreover, your valor and intelligence during the Battle of Wuyuan have already proven your worth; you have nothing more to prove."

Lin Wanrong had earned his authority through hard-fought battles. Who among his subordinates would dare to defy him? Du Xiuyuan might have looked disappointed, but he accepted the order nonetheless.

The night before departure was always the hardest. Facing a journey with an uncertain outcome, who could rest easy? Gently caressing the portraits of his wives, remembering the tender moments he had shared with each, Lin Wanrong's emotions swirled, a mixture of joy and sorrow, and an inexplicable sense of oppression gripped him.

He wanted to write a family letter, featuring a sketch of himself bathing freely in the wilderness, but his hand seemed to have a mind of its own. The scene that emerged was a young general atop the towering Helan Mountain, gripping a long sword, howling in defiance—a vivid portrayal of his current state of mind.

He sealed the sketch in an envelope. Looking up, he saw that dawn was breaking. Gao Qiu, Hu Bugui, and eight thousand brothers were already armed and waiting for him.

Faces young and old alike were filled with admiration and confidence for General Lin. It was an incomparable spiritual force, stirring Lin Wanrong's soul. Spurring his horse, he shouted, "Target—northwest foothills of the Helan Mountains, Bayanhot! Move out!"

The crisp sound of horse hooves shattered the pre-dawn stillness of the Helan Mountains. A column of robust Great Hua soldiers meandered along the eastern foothills, their forms gradually disappearing into the distant valleys.

The melancholy strains of a Morin khuur drifted through the air like a desert mist, accompanied by a mysterious, heart-wrenching female voice:

"The winds of my homeland caress my face;

The scent of the grasslands fills my heart;

Herds of cattle and sheep roam,

While shepherds sit astride their horses,

Their long songs escorting you into the distance..."

The lamenting melody resonated through the hearts of those who heard it.

Chapter 525 The Difficult Journey

A melancholy tune floated through the air, tinged with faint sorrow and sadness, deeply touching the hearts of these young men who were about to embark on a distant expedition.

"Brother Lin, look, it's Miss Xu. She has come to see us off!" Gao Qiu whispered.

Lin Wanrong looked back towards the eastern hills. In the hazy red glow of the sunrise, Xu Zhiqing's slender and beautiful figure stood like a lone flower on the mountaintop. The morning sun illuminated her pure face, shimmering with a faint golden light. Two streams of crystal-clear tears silently rolled down her cheeks, as pure as the morning dew in the Helan Mountains—heartbreakingly poignant and beautiful.

Thinking of the sand-burial story Xu Zhiqing had told him, Lin Wanrong sighed lightly, his heart flooded with both joy and sorrow. Gritting his teeth, he flicked his horsewhip, and his galloping steed dashed away, leaving all behind, never looking back.

A brilliant array of rosy clouds burst forth, and Xu Zhiqing's figure remained motionless atop the peak, like a petrified 'wife-waiting' rock, unable to move for a long time.

...

As they moved from east to west into the Helan Mountains, the weather gradually turned colder. At first, the road was wide, and towering pine and spruce trees lined both sides. A sea of clouds stretched for miles, and the eye could not see their end. Cherry trees blushing red, lilacs a deep purple, almond blossoms a delicate pink—various uniquely beautiful shrubs filled the valleys and ravines. Layer upon layer of colorful forests complemented the songs of birds, the fragrance of flowers, and the babbling streams, making for exceptionally beautiful scenery. Countless petroglyphs decorated both banks of the valley, creating a vivid gallery that chronicled the history of the Helan Mountains through depictions of the sun, moon, and stars, cattle, horses, sheep, hunting scenes, religious rituals, and weddings.

With such enchanting scenery, they initially did not feel fatigued. The procession meandered westward at a swift pace, breaking through rocky forests.

After covering a distance of seventy to eighty miles in one go, the landscape abruptly changed. The forest grew denser, the mountain rocks steeper, and the valleys were full of scattered, jagged stones of various sizes. Horses slipped and sunk deep into the rocks, making it impossible to ride. Everyone had no choice but to dismount and lead their horses on foot, significantly slowing their pace.

Lin Wanrong looked up; tall mountains and thick forests blocked the sunlight. The dim light inside the forest made it difficult to distinguish the directions.

Getting lost in the mountains was a grave concern, and Lin Wanrong was well aware of this. He took out his compass to confirm the direction. Seeing that they were on the right path, he finally exhaled a sigh of relief.

"General Lin, where do we go from here?" Gao Qiu took a gulp from his water flask and quietly asked. At this moment, they were deep within the vast Helan Mountains, and the farther they went, the more desolate it became. The forest stretched as far as the eye could see, and the wild grass grew taller than a man. The path had long since disappeared, and their war horses had to frequently backtrack.

In Lin Wanrong's memory, there were at least two valleys through which they could cross the east-west expanse of the Helan Mountains—of course, that was in a past life. Straining to search his residual memories, and carefully comparing them to the crude and pitiful sheepskin map that Hu Bugui had found, he nodded solemnly, "Yes, we are in the right place. This is the first mountain range marked on the map. Brother Hu, look—"

The sheepskin map had weathered many years, its ink already faded and incomplete. Hu Bugui could only make out that the triangles on the map represented mountains, but the rest was indecipherable. "Judging by the looks of it, this seems to be the first mountain depicted on the map," he hesitated before adding, "but we have reached a dead-end. Where should we go next?"

Lin Wanrong took a deep breath. They had ventured deep into the forest, where the underbrush was thick and progress was strenuously slow. Worse still, neither the map nor his memory provided any clues on how to proceed. Wandering aimlessly in the forest would not only make it impossible to reach Bayanhot, but they might also risk their lives.

As the commander, he couldn't afford to show his anxiety. He paused to collect his thoughts when a soft sound of flowing water reached his ears. Looking up, he saw a clear stream gently flowing nearby. It washed over the grassy earth, carving a shallow ditch through the forest, where a few pale pebbles lay submerged. A couple of warhorses tethered deep in the woods stretched their necks to drink from the clear water, the scene extraordinarily serene.

"Brother Gao, hand me the compass," Lin Wanrong suddenly shouted, dashing toward the stream.

Gao Qiu complied and hurriedly handed him the compass. Lin Wanrong set it down silently and observed it for a moment. A broad smile lit up his face. "Brother Hu, take a look—"

Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu looked simultaneously, noticing that the stream flowed at an angle to the north-south direction indicated by the compass. "Hmm, it seems the stream flows from the northwest," Gao Qiu remarked.

"Exactly, the northwest," Lin Wanrong abruptly looked up, a gleam in his eyes. "Brother Gao, do you remember what Bayanhot is most famous for?"

"No need to think about it, it's the steppe sheep and golden pelts," Gao Qiu answered without hesitation.

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Correct. According to Advisor Xu, the plains before the mountains of Bayanhot are expansive grasslands, rich in resources, especially abundant in steppe sheep. Being a plain formed by alluvial deposits and located near the Helan Mountains, where do you think the fertile soil and abundant water of the Bayanhot grasslands come from?"

"Of course, from the Helan Mountains," Hu Bugui suddenly exclaimed. "Ah, I see now—General, are you saying that the source of this stream could very well be the same source that nourishes the Bayanhot grasslands?"

Lin Wanrong smiled, gently dipping his hand into the stream. The icy sensation seemed to pierce his heart. He dug out a small pebble from the mud and studied it for a moment before speaking softly, "Notice this stream—powerful enough to carve a ditch through such a dense forest. Now look at this pebble, naturally formed through centuries of water erosion. What does this tell you?"

Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu exchanged puzzled glances. Without waiting for their answer, Lin Wanrong emphatically waved his hand, "—It tells us that the source of this water is highly active and forceful, and it's very likely the same source that feeds the Bayanhot grasslands."

Lin Wanrong observed carefully and analyzed with impeccable logic. Gao Qiu listened intently, nodding his head in agreement. Hu Bugui excitedly said, "General, are you saying that if we follow this stream to its source, we will reach Bayanhot?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Even if we don't reach Bayanhot, we'll likely be very close. Brother Gao, relay my order—change our entire army's direction. Neither man nor beast shall rest. Follow this stream upwards and send scouts ahead to investigate its source."

Having settled on a course, the gurgling stream became their best guide. Over 8,000 soldiers and officers turned their horses and moved upstream. Along the way, they encountered thick undergrowth and accumulated mud on this untrodden path; the difficulty they faced was unimaginable. Every now and then, men and horses would get stuck in the mud, causing alarmed shouts to reverberate throughout the vast, untouched forests of the Helan Mountains.

To prevent veering off course, Gao Qiu constantly checked his compass. The stream, indeed as Lin Wanrong had predicted, consistently led northwest, boosting everyone's confidence. Although the path ahead was still fraught with difficulties, they no longer feared.

The mist in the primeval forest was thick, and they advanced along the stream, stepping into mud that was sometimes deep, sometimes shallow. Every person was drenched and extremely uncomfortable. By the end of the first day, they had lost twenty horses to the mud and over a hundred soldiers had suffered from bites from snakes, rats, and ants. The second day was even worse, with about two hundred people injured.

Travel was hard! And it was even harder within the limitless Helan Mountains! Lin Wanrong deeply sighed.

After two days of such progress, the stream seemed endless. Excluding the time spent sleeping, all other hours were devoted to pressing ahead. Lin Wanrong roughly calculated that they had traveled more than three hundred li in these two days, and their feet were blistered. Yet, the source of the stream was still nowhere in sight. Had it not been for the compass confirming their direction, he would have doubted the path they were on.

"Brother Hu, have the scouts ahead sent any word back?" Lin Wanrong licked his dry lips and poked the branch he was using as a walking stick into the stream for a sip of water, before asking breathlessly. To conserve energy, all the soldiers had been using branches to assist their walking. It was already noon on the third day, and there was still no news from the front. Thinking of the ten-day deadline he had promised Xu Zhiqing, Lin Wanrong felt an urgency like a fire burning within him. What made it worse was not knowing the current situation in the Helan Mountains or whether the great war had begun between Great Hua and the Turks. This feeling of being cut off from the world left him anxious yet helpless.

Hu Bugui wiped the sweat off his face and nodded, "I sent Li Wuling out early this morning. He took a team of twenty scouts to investigate. I don't know what's keeping them; they haven't returned yet."

"Li Wuling?" Lin Wanrong was astonished. "Little Li also came along? Brother Hu, this is exploiting child soldiers!"

Choosing soldiers had been Hu Bugui's task, and Lin Wanrong had not inquired about it. Occupied with finding the way for the last two days, he had been unaware that Li Wuling had also entered the primeval forests at the foot of the Helan Mountains. If Miss Xu found out, what would happen then?

Hu Bugui chuckled bitterly, "General, you know what kind of person this kid is. During the Battle of Wuyuan, he charged behind me and took down two Turkic warriors with a single spear thrust but still wasn't satisfied. He kept complaining that you didn't let him enter Wuyuan City. This time, he nagged me to no end. When I went to use the latrine, he practiced his swordsmanship behind the outhouse, making such a racket that I couldn't even relieve myself. I had no choice but to bring him along. Fortunately, he's agile despite his youth, and taking a scout team suits him."

Practicing swordsmanship outside the latrine? Little Li really would do anything. Lin Wanrong shook his head and smiled, recalling what Li Tai had told him before they left the capital: to train Li Wuling. He never expected the boy would take the initiative. He wondered how Miss Xu Zhiqing would react when she found out about Li Wuling's whereabouts.

Thinking of Xu Zhiqing, Lin Wanrong remembered her standing atop a hill in the Helan Mountains, her loving gaze, and her melodious farewell song. Such affection would melt any man's heart. Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth. If he returned alive this time, he'd definitely make Xu Zhiqing his. Old Xu would be the one laughing, gaining such a remarkable son-in-law for free. He chuckled at the thought, lost in his daydream, when he saw someone rushing from a distance, splashing through the stream and drenching his clothes, yelling, "Move aside, move aside! I have urgent military news to report!"

"It's Little Li," Hu Bugui exclaimed, taking quick strides to grab Li Wuling's sleeve. "General Lin is here."

Li Wuling, drenched and haggard, clung to Hu Bugui, panting heavily.

"Is he scared or just worn out?" Lin Wanrong slapped him on the shoulder and laughed, "Not bad, Little Li. Your running form is becoming as handsome as mine. What news have you gathered?"

"Brother Lin," Li Wuling gasped, his eyes widening, "There's a lake up ahead, a really big lake."

"A lake?" Lin Wanrong excitedly grabbed Li Wuling's shoulders. "Where is this lake?"

Li Wuling grimaced from the grip, and Lin Wanrong quickly let go, smiling, "My apologies, I got carried away. Where is this lake you speak of?"

Rubbing his sore shoulders, Li Wuling exhaled and grinned, "It's straight ahead, about sixty li away. I saw it with my own eyes—Brother Lin, does this mean I've rendered a great service? During the surprise attack on Bayanhot, you can't leave me to just watch again."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Well done, kid. After we steal the nomadic women, I'll make sure to give you a couple of fair-skinned ones."

"Tsk," Li Wuling waved dismissively and snorted. Hu Bugui burst into laughter.

"With the lake in sight, Bayanhot can't be far," Lin Wanrong mused, a feeling of joy swelling within him. He surveyed the troops and bellowed across the wilderness, "Spread my orders. The entire army is to speed up. We must reach the source of this stream before sunset today!"