

Finest 526

Chapter 526 So Close, Yet So Far

The news reported back by Li Wuling spread rapidly among the soldiers. It was as if they could all see Bayanhot beckoning to them in the distance. Their spirits were lifted, fatigue dispelled by renewed energy. United in purpose, they forged a muddy trail through the forest, cutting through brambles and obstacles. In just two hours, they reached the headwaters of the stream Li Wuling had mentioned.

Nestled among several towering peaks of the Helan Mountains, the immense lake stretched out before them. Sharp cliffs rose like bamboo shoots sculpted by a blade, reaching skyward. Over millennia, the flow of water had carved out a majestic canyon between the peaks, its path strewn with boulders and treacherous terrain. The lake sat at the heart of this canyon, covering dozens of acres, pure and tranquil like a pool of celestial spring water untouched by worldly dust. The clear, shimmering waters reflected human figures, while a few steaming underground springs dotted the area, their mist making the heavens seem just a little closer.

The lake's water gently lapped against the rocky shore, accompanied by a soft, harmonious sound that was like a poem of serenity. This ethereal lake atop the Helan Mountains was so pristine and quiet, untouched by human presence, that it seemed like a sacred place that no one had ever visited.

Lin Wanrong scooped up some of the lake water and took a sip. Its subtle, warm fragrance filled his mouth and nose, as comforting as a mother's milk, and incredibly sweet.

"Brother Lin, what do you think? Is this the place?" Li Wuling enthusiastically splashed some lake water onto his face, wiping away the droplets before breaking into a proud grin.

"Yes, this is the place," Lin Wanrong replied, his gaze lingering on the horizon where lake and sky merged into one. Suppressing his excitement, he said, "Only the celestial spring water of the Helan Mountains could irrigate the fertile grasslands of Bayanhot. I'm certain the stronghold of the Turks lies just ahead of us."

Hu Bugui clapped his hands in excitement. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's march through the night. With one concerted effort, we can cover another hundred miles and reach Bayanhot."

"We must not act rashly," Lin Wanrong said, shaking his head solemnly. "We've already covered most of the distance, and yet this vast lake has remained undiscovered. That means natural barriers must lie ahead, preventing others from finding this place."

Gao Qiu nodded in agreement. "So, what should we do now? Stay put or continue marching?"

Xu Zhiqing had given them a ten-day deadline, and three days had already passed. Accounting for the return journey, they had to reach Bayanhot within the next three days at the latest. Should they exceed the ten-day window, even if their surprise attack succeeded, the Helan Mountain pass would already be compromised. At that point, their force of 8,000 would be cut off, and the ferocious Turkic warriors would hunt them down across the plains, leaving the vast desert as their final resting place.

Time was not on their side. Lin Wanrong sighed, gritted his teeth, and said, "We can't set up camp just yet. While the sun is still up, we must bypass this lake and push forward another fifty miles. Brother Hu, tell our men to fill their water jugs and let the horses drink their fill. We have another leg of the journey to complete."

Hu Bugui understood Lin Wanrong's intentions and nodded before walking away. Staring at the shimmering lake under the setting sun, Lin Wanrong stood still for a moment before suddenly snapping his whip, urging his horse forward.

The celestial lake of Helan Mountain was expansive; even after walking along its bank for an hour, they hadn't made a full circle. The further they advanced, the softer and more silt-ridden the ground became. It was so muddy that not only the horses but also the people found it hard to step forward. They could only lead their horses cautiously.

"Brother Hu, something doesn't seem right," Lin Wanrong wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and pulled Hu Bugui closer. He glanced cautiously around, his voice barely above a whisper. A few dozen feet ahead of them, Li Wuling and his scouting team were probing the path.

"What's wrong?" Hu Bugui whispered back.

"It's too quiet," Lin Wanrong swallowed nervously, his eyes darting around anxiously. They had reached the far end of the celestial lake, surrounded by a dense, ancient forest. Decayed leaves and pine needles had built up a thick layer on the ground. At this time of dusk, birds should be returning to their nests, but the forest was eerily silent; not even a hint of noise beyond their own breathing.

Indeed, it was unsettlingly quiet. No bird calls, no sounds of insects, and under the dimming sunlight, the forest seemed to shimmer with a faint, eerie glow. Goosebumps rose on Hu Bugui's skin, and he instinctively grabbed the sleeve of Gao Qiu beside him. Just then, a scream pierced the silence, "Retreat, brothers, retreat! Ah—"

The five or six scouts leading the way had barely touched down when they pitched forward. As their screams filled the air, the swamp hidden beneath the layer of leaves and pine needles opened its dark maw and swallowed them whole.

"It's a quicksand deathtrap—stop, everyone stop!" Hu Bugui's shout came too late. The scouts at the forefront had already tilted and plunged, their heads engulfed by the mire before they had a chance to react.

"Little Li!" Seeing Li Wuling, who was at the end of the scout team, step into empty air and pitch headlong into the swamp, Lin Wanrong roared with both urgency and fury, and lunged forward like a mad wolf.

Gao Qiu beside him was horrified, shouting, "Brother Lin, no! That's quicksand—" But Lin Wanrong was already sprinting, Gao Qiu couldn't hold him back. With a powerful forward dive, Gao Qiu grabbed Lin Wanrong's legs. In the split second that Lin Wanrong fell, he managed to grasp Li Wuling's hand tightly.

Li Wuling was sinking deeper into the mire, mud already filling his nostrils, his face flushed red from the struggle as he continued to sink.

"Hold on, Little Li!" Lin Wanrong shouted frantically, gripping Li Wuling's hand tightly and pulling with all his might. But the quicksand, built up over millennia, was incredibly powerful. Despite using all his strength, Li Wuling's body kept sinking.

"I've got this!" Hu Bugui roared, throwing himself onto the muddy ground and grabbing Li Wuling's other hand. Several soldiers behind him dropped to the ground, grabbing Hu Bugui's legs tightly. With a concerted effort, much like pulling a stubborn turnip from the ground, they slowly dragged Li Wuling inch by inch out of the deadly mire.

Of the twenty-plus scouts, only Li Wuling was left; the rest had vanished into the quagmire, their bodies never recovered. Li Wuling clenched his fists, his face drained of color. Staring at the swamp where his comrades had disappeared, his eyes were filled with tears. In that moment, the carefree youth matured significantly.

"Don't cry," said Lin Wanrong, his face stern as ink. Silently, he picked up a broadsword left behind in the mud, caressed it for a moment, and handed it to Li Wuling. "Stand tall—Li Wuling, remember, a man cries only in victory."

Wiping away his tears and sniffles, Li Wuling's expression instantly became solemn. Lin Wanrong nodded, patting him on the shoulder with a gravely serious look. "Remember the names of these brothers. If I make it back alive, I promise you, they will be among the most honored in all of Great Hua."

Li Wuling nodded gratefully, wiping away the last of his tears. Yet his face no longer bore the naive innocence of earlier days.

With the loss of over twenty good men, the atmosphere in the camp turned heavy. The swamp was the only route leading northwest, and they had no choice but to go through. Hu Bugui organized men to fell trees overnight, assembling numerous planks to increase the load-bearing area and gradually pave a path through the marsh. The newly formed scouting team cautiously stepped onto these wooden planks and moved forward slowly. After traversing nearly six miles, they finally exited the forest and stepped onto solid ground.

Upon receiving the scouts' report, Lin Wanrong nodded faintly, his eyes momentarily ablaze as he looked back at the swamp that had claimed over twenty of his brothers.

"To the fallen warriors—salute!" Lin Wanrong shouted.

"Shh—" A multitude of gleaming steel blades drew sharp arcs, raised high in front of the soldiers. The cold light broke through the forest and mountain peaks, piercing deep into the heavens.

By the time they had crossed the perilous mud, it was the wee hours of the next day. The sky was still dark, and any plans for setting up camp had fallen through. Lin Wanrong organized the troops and pressed on for several more miles.

"General Lin, look—" Hu Bugui's voice startled Lin Wanrong from his thoughts. He looked up and saw nothing but mist beneath his feet, a bottomless abyss—a cliff that abruptly ended their path. Across from them, about ninety feet away, a towering mountain peak shot straight into the sky, perilous and lofty. The waters from the Helan Mountain celestial lake flowed here and cascaded down, forming a dazzling waterfall that shook the rocks with its crisp sound. A dead end!

Lin Wanrong's eyes widened in disbelief, cold sweat trickling down. After so much time and energy, not to mention the sacrifice of dozens of good men, just as they thought they'd make it through Helan Mountain, a cliff had shattered all hopes.

"What's so good about this view?" He shook his head, disheartened. "Just a cliff filled with bitterness and enmity."

"No, it's not that," Hu Bugui hurriedly said. "Not the cliff. Look, look into the distance—"

In the far horizon, a crescent moon shone as white as snow. A faint ethereal light covered every corner of the vast grasslands. In the dim sky, morning stars twinkled dimly or brightly. Amidst the monochrome of the distant earth and sky, there was one exceptionally red, little star, constantly flickering.

"What's so interesting about a star?" Gao Qiu chuckled dismissively.

Hu Bugui shook his head urgently, "Brother Gao, you are mistaken. That's not just a star, that's the place we've vowed to find—Bayanhot!"

"What? What did you say?! Bayanhot?!" Lin Wanrong was shocked. He grabbed Hu Bugui by the collar. "Brother Hu, that's not a star? How do you know that's Bayanhot?"

Hu Bugui smiled, "Brother Lin, when it comes to the customs of the Turkic people, you're no match for me. The Turkic tribes live on horseback, often riding hundreds of miles in one night. It's common to lose your way in the vast steppes. Every Turkic tribe lights a large bonfire at night to guide their warriors home. The strength of the bonfire is also a symbol of the tribe's strength—the stronger the tribe, the larger and brighter the bonfire. Since the establishment of the Turkic Khanate, this custom has evolved into lighting bonfires at key locations. Judging by its direction, that brightest 'star' you see to the northwest is undoubtedly Bayanhot. Considering the distance, it should be over a hundred miles away."

‘Could that really be Bayanhot?’ Lin Wanrong was overwhelmed with emotion, unable to express his feelings in words. The sudden appearance of their destination filled him with both surprise and a glimmer of hope.

Silently staring at the fiery red "star" for a long while, Lin Wanrong clenched his fists and turned his gaze towards the cliff opposite them. "Brother Gao, can you shoot arrows?"

Gao Qiu boasted, "Brother Lin, haven't I told you that I'm a jack-of-all-trades?"

"Excellent!" Lin Wanrong shouted. He took a powerful crossbow from Hu Bugui and handed it to Gao Qiu. "Brother Gao, do you see that large tree across the cliff? Shoot through it!"

The crossbow had been modified; a thick rope, several dozen yards long, was attached to its end and coiled on the ground.

Gao Qiu was astonished, "Brother Lin, you mean for us to slide across using this rope? What about our warhorses?"

Lin Wanrong clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, "At this point, we can't worry about that. Bayanhot is the granary of the Turkic people; they should have plenty of horses. Brother Gao, can you just tell me, can we make it across?"

Gao Qiu nodded forcefully, "To steal the Turkic people's horses and women—I've trained for thirty years and now, at last, I can put it to use. Watch my divine arrow—shoot!"

With a furious roar, Gao Qiu drew the powerful crossbow and shot. The arrow, trailing the rope, sped across the chasm. With a loud 'thud,' it struck the trunk of the tree across the cliff, burying itself completely.

"Excellent shot!" Lin Wanrong praised, leading the applause.

Gao Qiu laughed heartily and shot two more ropes, both hitting their targets perfectly. After tying the rope around his waist, he clasped his fists in salute to everyone. Then, like a shooting star, he slid across the rope towards the cliff on the other side.

Chapter 527 Crossing into the Prairie

Everyone was on high alert, their eyes fixated on Gao Qiu as he swiftly slid across the rope. The twang of the rope resonated through the air. In a moment, Gao Qiu had reached the opposite bank and leaped onto the cliff, excitedly waving at everyone.

Lin Wanrong waved his hand and said in a deep voice, "Brother Hu, give the order. Leave the warhorses here. Everyone should carry only rations and weapons. We cross the gorge immediately."

The order was conveyed, and the soldiers felt a mix of excitement and somber resolve. They silently patted their loyal warhorses, their faces showing their reluctance to part.

Hu Bugui sighed and stroked his horse's mane a few times. With a heavy heart, he slapped the horse's hindquarters. The horse neighed and bolted into the depths of the forest, followed by countless others. They formed a cloud of black and white that slowly vanished into the wilderness.

Lin Wanrong tied the rope securely and tested its strength, nodding slightly in approval.

"Go!" he shouted. Releasing his grip, the friction of the rope hummed in his ears as he led the way. Like a bird soaring through the sky, he swiftly glided to the opposite side. Wisps of mist were under his feet, and the sound of the wind whispered past his ears. As Lin Wanrong looked back, the lush mountains and towering cliffs of the Helan Mountain peaks receded into the distance, fading like a wisp of elusive wind.

His slide was swift, and in the blink of an eye, he reached the peak on the opposite side. Gao Qiu pulled him up, gave him a thumbs-up, and securely fastened three ropes. With a light whistle, three figures glided over, as light as swallows in the dark night.

By the time all the men had crossed, the sky had already brightened. The faint chirping of birds filled the air, and droplets of dew felt icy cold on their faces.

"Cut the ropes!" Lin Wanrong commanded. Three soldiers stepped forward, and with swift motions, severed the ropes that had helped them cross the gorge. The ropes fell, disappearing into the mist below, and a feeling of awe-inspiring, tragic determination spread among the men.

After moving a few dozen miles beyond the peak, the slope in front of them became abruptly steep, as if cut by a steel blade. The winding path was full of jagged rocks, barely a foot wide. Behind them was an endless cliff. The eight thousand men clung to the cliff like wall-climbing geckos, moving cautiously, step by step. Sweat turned into droplets that plummeted down the cliff. From the base of the mountain, they looked like sacred totems depicted in the Helan mountain rock paintings, awe-inspiring to behold.

When they descended from the cliff, everyone felt as if they had survived a life-threatening ordeal. Their armor was soaked, their hands and feet numb, as if they no longer belonged to them.

Thousands lay on the cold ground of the gorge, panting heavily. Even Hu Bugui, a veteran who had fought the Turkic people for over twenty years, couldn't help but marvel at the sight.

This short stretch of the journey had taken them from dawn to dusk. A tally revealed that hundreds more brothers had fallen into the abyss, their bodies lost forever. The battle of surprise had not even started, and already over two hundred men were lost on the road. Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth tightly, remaining silent.

After crossing two towering mountain ranges, the physical limits of every soldier had been pushed to the brink. Two days of relentless marching without rest had worn down even the most hardened among them. Hearing a faint rustle of wind from the canyon ahead, Lin Wanrong finally gestured for his men to set up camp and rest.

The formation had long loosened; men lay on the ground, too drained to move. Four days of forced marches had left the soldiers' faces unshaven and gaunt, their armor battered. They looked like defeated troops freshly withdrawn from the front lines.

"I see it, I see it!" A voice bellowed as its owner, red-faced and panting, sprinted toward them after taking a gulp of water.

Lin Wanrong grinned, "Ah, Brother Gao, weren't you with Li Wuling scouting ahead? What did you see?"

Catching his breath, Gao Qiu tried to steady himself, "Brother Lin, I've seen it—a vast grassland stretching as far as the eye can see!"

Leaping to his feet, Lin Wanrong grabbed Gao Qiu's hand, "What did you say, Brother Gao? Say it again!"

Tears began to well up in Gao Qiu's eyes as he stuttered, "Brother Lin, we've made it! A green grassland teeming with life—the Turkic people's grassland is right before us!"

‘The Turkic people's grassland? Right in front of us?’ Lin Wanrong's throat was dry as tinder; he tried to speak, but his voice cracked. Gao Qiu tugged at him, dashing toward the opposite hillside.

Weighed down as if by lead, each step felt like a marathon. When they finally reached the hilltop and swept their eyes over the vista, Lin Wanrong felt a sudden wetness in his eyes.

In the dim twilight, the sprawling grassland appeared infinitely expansive. Green grass, blue sky—even the air carried a light scent of fresh grass. Below the hill lay a serene, emerald lake shimmering in the setting sun, its surface gleaming gold. Countless cattle and sheep roamed leisurely by the lake, and from a distance, the drumbeats sounded like rolling thunder. Amidst it all, thousands of Turkic steeds galloped freely, their neighs echoing through the air. Their manes, both black and white, fluttered in the fading sunlight like willows in March. On the distant lakeside, more than twenty white tents glimmered like tiny, radiant flowers blossoming on the green canvas.

‘The grassland! The Turkic people's grassland! We've really arrived!’ Lin Wanrong clenched his fists, yearning to howl at the sky, to vent the pent-up frustrations that had long clogged his heart. It felt like eating ice cream on a hot June day—utterly exhilarating.

Unbeknownst to him, a crowd of brothers had already gathered beside him. Every eye widened, every mouth agape, as they stared at the boundless grassland before them, their expressions a mix of stupefaction and awe.

For a hundred years, the Turkic cavalry had repeatedly trampled the border cities and fortresses of the Great Hua, wreaking havoc on their fertile lands, killing, looting, and committing unspeakable atrocities. Countless brothers and sisters had been abused and brutally killed under their iron hooves; their blood and bones were buried under the shifting sands of the great desert, marking centuries of shame for the Great Hua.

Countless frontier soldiers had dreamt of galloping across the Turkic grasslands, of washing away the humiliation and sufferings endured by their nation for hundreds of years with their blood-stained blades.

The dream of a hundred years was finally realized today by a group of soldiers who descended from the heavens. Their faces were emaciated, their clothes tattered, and their military bearing unspeakable in its disarray. Yet, at this very moment, the shining blades in their hands represented the unyielding spirit of Great Hua! What an exhilarating moment it was!

Tears of mixed sorrow and joy fell upon the weather-beaten faces of the soldiers, many of whom broke into silent sobs. Their mournful yet proud cries echoed across the vast plains like the soft whimpers of silkworms on a spring night.

"General, please allow me to die here," Hu Bugui said, his voice choked with emotion as he unsheathed his long blade with a whoosh. He swung it fiercely towards the sky, the swift glint of the blade slashing through the grassland and pointing at the heavens.

Lin Wanrong patted him on the shoulder, offering a silent smile. His gaze swept across the many faces before him—faces both haggard and excited. Countless hopeful and eager eyes were trained on him, filled with love, respect, and a willingness to entrust their lives to him. Lin Wanrong's voice caught in his throat for a moment. Then, with a sweeping motion of his arm, he bellowed, his voice piercing through stone and soaring into the sky: "Warriors, the history of our great nation is rewritten at this very moment! You—my dearest brothers—will be the first to break through these Turkic grasslands! Your figures will be etched in the annals of our history as monuments to be remembered for all eternity! Where are your blades?!"

"Roar!" came the reply as blades were drawn in unison, their gleaming surfaces reflecting countless flushed faces. The frigid light of ten thousand blades seemed to cleave the grasslands in two.

After four days of life-and-death travel, and with the lives of more than two hundred soldiers as sacrificed, it was clear that nothing had been in vain. The moment they saw the grasslands, everyone understood: the vast Helan Mountains had been left behind, and an even more brutal journey lay ahead.

"Brother Hu, what kind of people do you think are camped across that lake?" Lying on the slope and idly chewing on a piece of grass, Lin Wanrong casually pointed to the distant tents and asked.

After days of relentless travel and finally seeing the grasslands, both fatigue and excitement surged through the troops. They had long since set up camp to rest. Lin Wanrong was discussing the current situation with Hu Bugui and a few others.

If Hu Bugui's estimates were correct, they were only about seventy or eighty miles away from Bayanhot. That meant the Turkic people could appear in front of them at any time. Given the difficulties they had faced crossing the Helan Mountains, it made sense that the Turks would establish supply stations in Bayanhot. The sudden appearance of Lin Wanrong and his eight thousand soldiers would surely bring an unparalleled psychological shock to the Turks.

As soon as he stepped onto the grasslands, Lin Wanrong reverted to his old playful manner, more laughter evident in his speech, utterly at ease.

"At present, it's hard to say," Hu Bugui shook his head, his eyes fixed intently on the distant tents. Faint light emanated from within, scattered like lonely stars on the grassland. "But one thing's for sure—they don't number many, a few hundred at most, not exceeding a thousand."

"I can see that much myself," Lin Wanrong chuckled, then continued, "Are they herdsmen?"

"Absolutely not herdsmen," Hu Bugui said with utter certainty.

Lin Wanrong gave him a puzzled look. Hu Bugui explained with a smile, "Although the Turks are nomadic, they would never send hundreds of people to graze at once. The number of people on the opposite side is just too many."

Lin Wanrong nodded in agreement. Even if the Turks were foolishly rich, they wouldn't dispatch such a large group just to herd sheep. "Secondly," Hu Bugui continued, pointing at the distant tents, "You can tell from the way they've set up camp that these are not herdsmen. Look— their tents are meticulously arranged in a large circle, the outermost tents densely packed. As you move towards the center, the tents become fewer, signifying higher status. Ordinary Turkic herdsmen travel as entire families, and their camps are much more loosely arranged. They wouldn't be this orderly."

Lin Wanrong nodded. Bringing Hu Bugui along had indeed proven to be a wise decision. His years of experience fighting against the Turkic tribes had already come in handy. "So, if they're not herdsmen, they must be Turkic cavalry," Lin Wanrong surmised.

"Exactly," Hu Bugui chuckled. "Otherwise, what would they be doing with so many warhorses?"

The mention of warhorses caught Lin Wanrong's attention. They had left all their horses on the other side of the mountain pass, and here in the sprawling plains, to be without horses was to handicap oneself. He looked towards the opposite lakeshore, where thousands of horses rested quietly. From afar, they looked like a dense mass of dark clouds, stirring an unquenchable desire within him.

"Aha," Lin Wanrong exclaimed, clapping his hands, "I get it now. These Turks are transporting warhorses to Bayanhot. They've halted here because it's too late to travel, and they will proceed to Bayanhot tomorrow morning."

Considering Bayanhot's strategic location, Lin Wanrong's guess made perfect sense, and Hu Bugui nodded in agreement. Lin Wanrong felt his heart race with excitement at the thought that Bayanhot was so close. "Brother Hu, are these Turkic horses tamed? Can we ride them?"

Hu Bugui understood his concern, nodding as he said, "These horses have just come from the nomadic pastures. They haven't yet been trained to recognize their masters. That happens only once

they reach the hands of the Turkic cavalry. The ones we had to kill last time in Wuyuan were such trained Turkic horses."

"So, you're saying that, at this stage, these horses don't distinguish between us and the Turks? They'd allow anyone to ride them?" Lin Wanrong's eyes sparkled.

Hu Bugui grinned and nodded, "Exactly. At this point, these horses don't differentiate between the Turks and us. If we train them well, they might very well become loyal to our own people."

Gao Qiu stood by, listening to the conversation between the two. Upon hearing their words, he burst into laughter. "Well, well! I thought these Turkic horses were so exceptional that they'd never betray their homeland. Turns out, they're no different from our Great Hua horses. Treacherous beasts, the lot of them!"

The group broke into laughter, dispersing the gloom that had hung over them for the past few days. Lin Wanrong stared intently at the lake before him, lost in thought for a long moment before suddenly asking, "Brother Hu, in your experience, how long will it take to deal with those Turks across the lake? I want every single one of them taken care of."

Hu Bugui grinned confidently, "The Turkic people are only formidable when they gather in large numbers. This is just a few hundred men; they're isolated. As long as we keep them confined to their camp and prevent them from mounting their horses, they'll be easy to deal with. I'd say no more than an hour."

Having spent some time with Lin Wanrong, Gao Qiu had gotten to know him well. Overjoyed, he exclaimed, "Brother Lin, are we finally going to slaughter those rascals? Take their women and steal their horses? This is the day I've been waiting for, becoming a nomad in the nomad's own lair! No one would believe it!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled and patted him on the shoulder, "Brother Gao, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed this time. Not only will I not steal their horses, but I'm actually going to give them horses."

"Give them horses?" Gao Qiu was stunned, unable to grasp Lin Wanrong's intentions.

Hu Bugui, savvy and experienced, immediately understood the essence of the plan. "Give them horses? Brilliant! They'll never see it coming."

Seeing that Gao Qiu was still puzzled, Hu Bugui leaned in and whispered a few words in his ear. Realization dawned on Gao Qiu as he raised his thumb, "Brother Lin, you're a tactical genius, truly masterful in the art of war. This will surely give the Turkic people something to chew on."

Lin Wanrong grinned but said nothing. However, Hu Bugui furrowed his brows as if recalling something. "General Lin, your plan is certainly excellent, but we have to deal with these Turkic men first, without letting a single one escape. That's going to require some thought."

Lin Wanrong's concern was exactly this. He nodded and sighed, "Brother Hu is correct. If even one of these Turks escapes, our efforts will have been in vain. The greatest challenge is how to annihilate them in the shortest possible time."

The two men frowned in deep thought. Gao Qiu, glancing across the lake at the enemy camp, suddenly asked, "Old Hu, can these Turkic people swim?"

Caught off guard by the abrupt question, Hu Bugui paused before chuckling, "The nomads don't bathe all year round; they're terrified of water. Brother Gao, do you have some clever idea?"

"A clever idea? Not really," Gao Qiu chuckled, pulling out a large package from his robe and fondling it with a lascivious smile. "I just remembered a tactic Brother Lin used before—one that was absolutely ingenious and awe-inspiring."

Chapter 528 Wondrous Medicine and Barefooted Soldiers

Lin Wanrong blinked twice, elated beyond words. "Oh my, Brother Gao, you've actually brought all these treasures with you. I admire you, I really do."

"Of course," Gao Qiu replied with unabashed pride. "These treasures are indispensable for any journey or adventure. I'm sure you, Brother Lin, must have just as many on you. Heh heh!"

Grinning from ear to ear, Lin Wanrong pulled out a paper bundle from his bosom. It was considerably larger than the one in Gao Qiu's hand. "Ah, I'm humbled. You've seen right through me, Brother Gao. As you know, I rely solely on these treasures to hold my own. Whether I am wandering the martial world or standing unyieldingly, apart from my unparalleled martial arts, it is these that deserve the most credit. Ah, such invaluable items—I'm really reluctant to use them!"

Both men chuckled wickedly, leaving Hu Bugui utterly baffled. After staring at the paper bundle for a while, he finally inquired, "Brother Gao, what on Earth are these? You talk about them as if they're treasures."

"They are treasures! Don't underestimate this paper bundle. It's the object of every young hero's affection and the nightmare of every heroine. These items are so rare, you couldn't buy them even if you had a thousand gold pieces." Gao Qiu unwrapped the paper bundle solemnly, revealing dozens of tiny medicine pouches. "See this? This one's called 'Quite the Log,' and this one 'Damsel Disrobed,' and then there's this top-quality 'Mongolian Sweat Medicine.' You wouldn't be able to buy these authentic items in reputable stores in the capital without connections."

Hu Bugui wiped his sweat-soaked brow and looked at Lin Wanrong. "General, could those be the same kind of illicit drugs in your possession?"

"What are you talking about, Brother Hu? Do you not know my character? Only lowlives would deal in such vulgar items." Lin Wanrong straightened his face. "What I have here are exotic items that only decent people would use for spicing up their love life. Take this, for example. It's called 'Titanium Vigor Pill'—such an honorable name. It originates from the same source as the Titanium Vigor Finger technique! Just one of these tiny pills has the effect of two of Brother Gao's pouches. One pill per night, highly efficient and long-lasting, solves all your troubles. And this one is called 'Happy Fierce Wife Chant.' The name might be a bit vulgar, but its effects are even more so. Take it, and whether you're a fierce wife or a chaste woman, even if you're a wild horse or she-wolf, you will return to nature and sing joyful songs every night. These two items alone have brought the good news of joy to countless men. Compared to them, the remaining sweat medicine and laxatives are so trivial, I'd be embarrassed to even recommend them to you!"

Listening to Lin Wanrong's description of his exotic potions, Hu Bugui was drenched in sweat. After a long pause, he cautiously asked, "General, Brother Gao, are you planning to use these miraculous medicines against the Turks?"

Lin Wanrong nodded solemnly. "I am reluctant, indeed. Such wonderful items, I haven't even had the chance to test them on a few heiresses or young ladies from reputable families. And yet, I must let these nomads have the first taste. It's infuriating. But for the sake of the safety and security of our great nation, I am willing to sacrifice even my own chastity and life, let alone a bit of powder. Whether it's aphrodisiacs, laxatives, or sweat-inducing drugs, let's have the nomads taste them all, so that they know how powerful our Great Hua is."

General Lin spoke with righteous indignation and fervor that filled the air, earning him the full admiration of Hu Bugui. After hesitating for a long while, Hu Bugui finally spoke, "General, the sacrifices you've made for our Great Hua are truly commendable. But as excellent as this medicine may be, how are we to administer it? How can we approach the Turkic camp undetected?"

Seeing Gao Qiu's smug grin, as if he already had a well-thought-out plan, Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Brother Gao, why don't you enlighten us on your ingenious strategy?"

"I never thought I'd have the chance to play the role of a military strategist," said Gao Qiu, his face flushed with excitement. Pointing to the expansive lake in the distance, he grinned, "Want to get close to the Turks without them noticing? Easy, nature has provided us with a pathway."

Hu Bugui glanced at the seemingly endless lake and had a sudden realization. "Brother Gao, you're suggesting we swim across."

Gao Qiu nodded grandly. "Many of our brothers in the army come from Weishan Lake and the Jiangzhe region; they are excellent swimmers. We can pick eight hundred to a thousand men to quietly swim across and hide near the enemy camp. Then, select a few agile and capable men to sneak into their camp and poison their food and water containers with both sleeping and aphrodisiac drugs. Those who consume the sleeping drugs will merely fall into a deep sleep, but as for those unfortunate enough to consume the aphrodisiacs... Well, you've heard what they can do, haven't you, Brother Hu? With no women around, the Turks will become so frenzied they'll jump into the lake whether they can swim or not. Our brothers hiding underwater can easily seize them. When the time is right, the rest of our forces will charge in, and the enemy will be completely eradicated."

"My, how sinister," Hu Bugui drew in a sharp breath. He wondered what would happen if hundreds of men in the Turkic camp, devoid of any women, were simultaneously affected by the aphrodisiac. The thought was tantalizing.

Although Gao Qiu's plan seemed laughable, it was not without merit. The tactic of swimming and poisoning had been employed in countless battles throughout history. Gao Qiu was simply applying existing knowledge.

"That settles it," Lin Wanrong gave a wry smile. "Brother Hu, go ahead and select men who are good swimmers. As for the one who will infiltrate the camp and administer the poison, we need someone clever and courageous. Brother Gao, since you have experience in administering such drugs—having tried them on numerous heroines—perhaps you should undertake this mission yourself."

Gao Qiu chuckled modestly, "Brother Lin, where are you getting that from? I've always believed in winning people over with virtue; emotions come first, drugs are just an auxiliary means."

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter and gave Gao Qiu an approving pat on the shoulder. "You're as thick-skinned as I am, Brother Gao."

Hu Bugui pondered for a moment, then suddenly shook his head. "Ah, there's a flaw! Brother Gao, I fear your plan may fall apart."

"Why?!" Gao Qiu tensed up instantly. He had finally contributed a decent idea; it couldn't be shot down so easily. Where would he put his face then?

"Brother Gao, the drug is a good idea," Hu Bugui managed to say with a straight face, "and it would work if there were no females in the Turkic camp. However, I just remembered something that might ruin your grand plan—while they may not have women, they do have thousands of mares!"

Old Hu, that scoundrel—silent as a stone until he made a move, and then, how astonishingly he acted! The three men glanced at each other, sharing a moment of silence, before bursting into uproarious laughter.

...

The pale crescent moon hung high in the night sky, its face obscured by a few wisps of dark clouds. Its ethereal glow stretched across the vast desert plain, cold and eerie. Across the way, the Turkic camp had fires burning beside their tents. Large pots steamed over the flames; whatever they were cooking emitted a faint, pleasant aroma that spread across the plain.

Hundreds of tiny, dark spots slowly moved across the lake, appearing like floating twigs, barely noticeable. The heavens favored them; a light breeze blew from the south to the north over the plains that night, easing the soldiers' efforts as they swam across. The surface of the lake was cold, but the water below was surprisingly warm. After swimming for nearly half an hour, the group of hundreds only showed slight signs of fatigue.

"Brother Lin, are you truly known as the 'Great Tiger on Land' and the 'Little White Dragon in the River'?" Li Wuling, panting heavily, had a hard time keeping up with General Lin, who swam with ease, effortlessly switching between dog paddle, backstroke, and butterfly.

Lin Wanrong laughed and nodded, "Would I lie? Everyone knows I never lie. Hey, Little Li, where did you learn to swim? Your dog paddling actually looks decent!"

It was no empty compliment. Although young, Li Wuling was an adept swimmer, capable of following Lin Wanrong without falling behind—a feat that required true skill. No wonder he had insisted on being part of the first wave to swim across. On the other hand, the haughty Gao Qiu who had plunged into the water had been a great disappointment to Lin Wanrong. The man's dog-paddling was so atrocious it was painful to watch; his rear end nearly poked out of the water. Thankfully, his martial skills were formidable enough that, despite his clumsy technique, he managed not to fall behind.

"Never lie? Pfft!" Li Wuling mentally omitted Lin Wanrong's claim, and chuckled, "It's just swimming. When I was in the capital, no one could out-swim me. I've swum in every river and lake there. When you came to the capital on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, I had just finished swimming."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, dismissing the boast with a shake of his head.

"By the way, Brother Lin, do you remember the lantern you picked up on the river on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month?" Li Wuling gave him a mysterious look. "Heh heh, do you know who set it afloat?"

At the mention, Lin Wanrong recalled the mysterious lantern with the poem. To this day, he didn't know who the young lady behind it was.

"What, you know?" Lin Wanrong asked, intrigued.

Li Wuling chuckled, "Brother Lin, how can you be so dense? Have you ever thought about how many women in the capital are as talented and skilled as that?"

"It's Miss Xu!" Realization dawned on Lin Wanrong, and a strange feeling surged in his heart. 'So, on my very first day in the capital, I had unknowingly picked up a lantern set afloat by Xu Zhiqing. Life indeed is full of surprises.'

Li Wuling grinned, "And there's something even more surprising. Let me tell you, when you picked up that lantern, my Aunt Xu was actually among the crowd, watching you and memorizing your face—"

"What?!" Lin Wanrong was so shocked that his mouth hung open. He almost choked on the lake water. "So you're saying, Miss Xu knew me all along? Ah, did she also arrange for us to take shelter

from the rain at the Jade Buddha Temple? She was the one spying on me, and to think she even shot an arrow at me!"

Li Wuling chuckled, "I don't know about all that. You'll have to ask Aunt Xu when you get back."

'So this young lady is quite the schemer, and she's kept it from me for so long.' Lin Wanrong felt a warmth in his heart as he recalled the tearful expression on Xu Zhiqing's face before he left.

"Pay attention, slow down." They were less than a hundred yards from the shore. The tents and bonfires of the Turkic camp were clearly visible, and there were a few sentries patrolling back and forth. Lin Wanrong quickly reined in his playful thoughts and whispered the command to those behind him.

Hundreds of men stopped gliding across the water and drifted forward with the wind. As they neared the Turkic camp, the scene within became clearer. The Turks had clearly never dreamed that men from Great Hua would cross the lake to invade. Their tents were right by the lake, and while sentries patrolled the other three sides, the side facing the lake was laxly guarded with only a single person on duty.

Not far from the lake, a few large pots were set up on crude stakes above roaring bonfires. The aroma was tantalizing, though it was unclear what was cooking. Further away, a temporary corral was made of rough wood, holding tens of thousands of Turkic horses. Hundreds of Turks were milling about, seemingly doing a headcount.

As they drew closer, the light from the bonfires cast a red glow over the water, and the stubble-covered face of the Turkic sentry by the lake became clearly visible.

"Silence." Lin Wanrong gestured, holding his breath. The hundreds of men in the water instantly ceased moving.

Li Wuling swam over to him and whispered, "Brother Lin, I counted. There are over five hundred Turks, fewer than six hundred."

The count was in line with Lin Wanrong's own assessment. He nodded and turned to Gao Qiu, "Brother Gao, do you see that moving Turkic sentry? We're about fifty yards away from him. How certain are you that we can take him out without making a sound?"

"100%," Gao Qiu responded with full confidence.

"Good!" Lin Wanrong ordered softly, "Li Wuling, take two of our best swimmers to cover Brother Gao as he goes. Remember, the sentry must not notice anything."

With the enemy so close, Li Wuling was exhilarated by the chance to do something so daring. He quickly selected two skilled swimmers and began to submerge slowly with Gao Qiu. Four small, hollow bamboo stalks peeked out just above the water's surface, looking like fishing floats, moving slowly with the wind.

The Turkic sentry was sitting on a rock, tearing viciously into a piece of half-cooked lamb. He had no idea that hidden just beneath the water were Great Hua's elite forces.

Thirty yards, twenty yards, ten yards... As Li Wuling and his men inched closer, everyone involuntarily held their breaths. Lin Wanrong clenched his fists tightly, watching the floating bamboo stalks, feeling his heart rise with anticipation.

The foremost float slowly rose, and Li Wuling's head stealthily emerged, like a buoyant gourd. Just as he was about to move, something unexpected happened. The Turkic sentry suddenly stood up and glanced at the lake.

Discovered? Sweat beads trickled down Lin Wanrong's forehead as he tightly gripped the hilt of his war sword, prepared to fight.

The Turk muttered something under his breath as he ambled toward the lakeside. His heavy footsteps resonated in the hearts of everyone present. All the soldiers' hearts raced, their swords gripped tightly underwater, ready for combat at any moment.

Li Wuling had just submerged his head back into the water when the Turk stepped closer, unfastening his trousers. The sound of a stream of water splashing made Lin Wanrong both irritated and amused.

"Nomads, morally corrupt, utterly conscienceless!" Lin Wanrong mentally hurled every harsh word he could think of at the Turk, but it did nothing to quell his rising anger. To urinate in such clear lake water, not only polluting the environment but treating him like a urinal, was simply intolerable.

Hu Bugui clenched his teeth in rage, "Damn it, how dare he flaunt that little thing in front of me? Just wait, I'll have Old Gao castrate him later."

After relieving himself, the Turk let out a satisfied sigh and turned to grab a piece of mutton, chewing heartily.

"Uncivilized swine," Lin Wanrong cursed under his breath. Ahead of him, Gao Qiu couldn't hold back any longer. He slowly surfaced, honing in on the Turk's location. With a soft splash, he sprang from the water like a fish, silently approaching the guard. With a fierce palm strike, he hit the Turk square on the back of the neck.

The Turk fell silently. Li Wuling and two other comrades quickly emerged from the water, taking cover behind a large rock.

Their movements were clean and swift. Most of the Turk's attention was on counting their war horses; they had considered the lake to be the most secure location, and most of their guards were stationed elsewhere. Who would have thought something would go awry on what should have been their safest front?

No other sounds were heard apart from distant shouts from Turks counting war horses. Old Gao quickly stripped the fallen Turk, hastily putting on his clothes. With his burly physique and full beard, once he adjusted the feather on his felt hat, from a distance, he looked just like a real Turk.

The first skirmish was won; hundreds of soldiers underwater began to move silently forward, nearing the lakeside.

Old Gao stood up, viciously stepping on the remains of the mutton the Turk had been eating. Not satisfied, he spat on it, picked up the meat, and strode toward a large pot billowing with oily smoke.

"Monza, qoy tuysy zhäne seniń äyeliń, qaysysy dämi jaqsy?" A Turk called out, chuckling as Old Gao wobbled toward the large pot.

Lin Wanrong tensed up. Old Gao didn't speak Turkic. He turned to Hu Bugui, "Brother Hu, what did the Turk say?"

Hu Bugui, experienced in fighting the Turks and fluent in their language, chuckled, "He asked: Meng Zha, which tastes better, the lamb leg or your woman?"

Lin Wanrong's tension peaked just as Old Gao yelled out something in reply. Lin Wanrong didn't understand, but the Turks in the distance burst into laughter. Even Hu Bugui couldn't help but squint his old eyes in amusement, "Not bad. Brother Gao's Turkic is pretty fluent!"

Lin Wanrong's mouth fell open, "Brother Hu, Old Gao actually speaks Turkic?"

Hu Bugui nodded, "Brother Gao has been with me these past few days and has learned this phrase. He's practiced it so well that he's even more proficient than the Turkic people."

"So Old Gao is quite the diligent student," Lin Wanrong said, curious. "What does the phrase mean?"

"That's hard to translate," Hu Bugui replied, looking slightly embarrassed. "It's a greeting to the mothers of the Turkic people."

Lin Wanrong burst into laughter. "Ah, Old Gao truly knows how to avoid getting the short end of the stick."

While they were talking, Gao Qiu had calmly walked over to the large pots, tossing in both the lamb and the medicinal powder. He stirred it vigorously, and then sauntered around a few times before leisurely returning to his lookout post.

The Turks finished counting their warhorses and returned to the bonfire in small groups. They grabbed the meat from the pot and began devouring it. Some even took out wineskins, filling the entire camp with a strong aroma of alcohol. Unperturbed by the presence of others, they feasted and drank to their hearts' content. Seeing this, Gao Qiu gestured excitedly to Lin Wanrong.

The Turks drank wildly for nearly an hour before they finally dispersed. Lin Wanrong was growing increasingly impatient. "Why hasn't anything happened yet? Could the medicine have expired? If I'd known, I would have tested it first."

Just as he was getting anxious, a Turk suddenly burst out of a tent near the lake, his beard curled upwards and face flushed red. He screamed and scratched his chest violently, startling even Gao Qiu.

Seeing Old Gao, the Turk lunged at him, pinning him to the ground and rubbing his face against him frantically. The man was incredibly strong, and Old Gao struggled to free himself. Panicked, Old Gao finally managed to kick him away and pointed frantically towards the lake, "Water, water, over there!"

The Turk, his mind clouded, couldn't tell if it was Chinese or his own language being spoken. Seeing the expanse of water before him, he jumped into the lake with a splash.

Before Old Gao could catch his breath, dozens more Turks rushed out from the tents, their eyes bloodshot and acting like madmen, grabbing anyone they could see.

"My God!" Realizing the consequences of feeding people aphrodisiacs, Gao Qiu's legs gave way, and he too splashed into the lake.

Realizing that water could douse their 'fire', a few slightly more lucid Turks followed Gao Qiu's lead and jumped into the lake. The others followed suit, causing splashes in the lake as hundreds of Turks plunged in one after the other.

'Ah, using this medicine really is inhumane,' Lin Wanrong shook his head and chuckled. Like underwater dragons, his eight hundred warriors firmly held the Turks underwater.

"Uly Hua jayau joldasynyn kütpegen üzgerisi!" A fierce Turk suddenly burst out from a central tent, swinging his saber and shouting loudly.

Hu Bugui translated, "It seems like he's the leader. He's saying that it's a surprise attack by the Great Hua cavalry!"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, surging from the water and leading the charge. "I am not a cavalryman; I am a barefoot soldier. Brothers, let's show these Turks just how fierce we are—Charge!"

Chapter 529 A Complete Loss of Backbone

"Charge!" A few hundred soldiers who had been lurking behind him burst forth from the water, their upper bodies bare and their battle blades held high. Each one appeared exhilarated as they stormed toward the enemy camp like a gust of wind.

As soon as the two sides clashed, the crisp sound of swords and blades colliding filled the air. Gao Qiu and Li Wuling led the charge, hacking down several Turkic warriors in quick succession. Blood splattered everywhere, and the atmosphere was filled with murderous intent.

The enemy camp consisted of only five to six hundred men, most of whom were half-asleep due to the effects of drugs and intoxicants. Their combat effectiveness was less than a third of their usual capabilities. How could they withstand the ferocious onslaught of the imperial troops? The charge instantly shattered the hastily assembled Turkic formation, leaving hundreds of their warriors decapitated. Their blood dyed the lake red.

The Turkic warriors were uncharacteristically weak, a sight the imperial soldiers had never seen before. As if venting all their pent-up anger at this moment, hundreds of warriors' faces flushed with excitement. They charged forward with swords and blades, quickly approaching the central tent of the Turkic camp.

The leading Turkic warrior stood before the tent, shouting angrily in an unintelligible language. With rapid swings of his saber, he led about sixty of his remaining warriors in a desperate defense.

"Artqa qaytu!" The leading Turkic warrior shouted something, and suddenly two burly figures emerged from the opposing camp. With disheveled hair and brandishing their sabers, they headed straight for the horse pen.

Hu Bugui yelled urgently, "They're trying to escape! Brothers, kill them! Don't let a single one get away!"

A surge of fighting spirit erupted among the hundreds of soldiers, forming a torrent of fury. They charged toward the remaining sixty or so Turkic warriors. Hu Bugui roared as he cleaved open the head of a Turkic soldier beside him. Taking large strides, he pursued the men who were retreating toward the horse pen.

The two retreating Turkic warriors were agile, leaping onto their horses with remarkable speed. Just as they were about to spur their steeds and make a break for it— "Shhh!" "Shhh!"—two arrows whizzed through the air, as fast as falling stars, heading straight for their throats.

"Ah—" Long, agonizing screams echoed. The arrows seemed guided, striking both Turkic men directly in the throat. Their eyes widened in disbelief as they fell silently from their horses, not even a drop of blood spilling from their wounds.

"Excellent archery!" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily.

"Charge! Kill the Turkic invaders!" From the outskirts, around eight thousand additional soldiers roared like wolves and flooded in like a raging torrent, surrounding the remaining Turkic warriors. A multitude of gleaming blades descended upon them.

The Turkic warriors lived up to their ferocious reputation. Realizing there was no hope for survival, the remaining fifty or so gathered outside their central tent and let out a unified roar. They charged forward, their eyes red with desperation.

"For the countless fallen brethren, kill them all!" Li Wuling let out a howl, his pupils dilated and his face turning purple with rage. The soldiers formed a circle, and countless spears, accompanied by the sound of whistling wind, thrust forward in unison.

"Aah—" A dreadful scream pierced the air, and then the battlefield fell into an eerie silence, as if time itself had stopped at that moment. The bodies of over fifty nomads were pierced by thousands of long spears, resembling a honeycomb. They struggled, their eyes wide open, corners of their mouths oozing fresh blood. Regardless of the spears puncturing their flesh, they lunged forward desperately. Amidst clanging noises, their shining battle blades wavered a few times before falling to the ground.

The soldiers clenched their teeth tightly, gasping for air. They had focused all their strength onto their spears, with not a trace of pity in their eyes. The faces of countless deceased loved ones, comrades, and brothers floated before them, fueling a raging fire in everyone's chests and boundless killing intent soaring to the heavens.

"Ptui—" Li Wuling's face glinted with malevolent light. Spitting out a mouthful of bloody saliva, he quickly withdrew his long spear. A Turkic corpse fell straight down, silently collapsing before him, blood splattering in all directions.

"Father!" Li Wuling suddenly let out a sky-shattering wail, dropping his long spear to the ground and slowly falling to his knees, weeping and covering his face. "I've avenged you, Father! Can you see it?"

His cry immediately filled the eyes of everyone present with tears. This vivid scene was a reflection of the experiences of countless displaced citizens at the frontiers of Great Hua.

"Little Li, get up," Lin Wanrong sighed and helped him up. "Your father was a hero of our Great Hua, revered and loved by many soldiers. Stand tall."

Li Wuling nodded, silently wiping away his tears and standing aside. His face revealed a look of determination, and Gao Qiu softly comforted him, embracing his shoulders.

"Reporting to the General, a total of 568 Turkic cavalymen have been annihilated in this battle. Twelve were captured alive, and 9,766 Turkic warhorses have been seized. We have lost eighteen brothers, with thirty-three injured," Hu Bugui quietly reported to Lin Wanrong after finishing the cleanup of the battlefield.

This was indeed a major victory. Not only had they seized numerous warhorses, but this isolated and unique army now had a firm footing. They were also just a stone's throw away from the nomad stronghold of Bayanhot.

Lin Wanrong's eyes flashed, "Brother Hu, are you certain that our movements haven't been discovered?"

Hu Bugui solemnly responded, "Of the 580 Turks escorting the warhorses, not a single one escaped; all are here. Even if the nomads have eyes that can see everything, they will never imagine that our Great Hua's cavalry could bypass their blockade and penetrate deep into these vast grasslands."

Lin Wanrong nodded in satisfaction, his gaze sweeping around. The night was deep, and the bloodstains on the ground had already turned ink-black. Inside the tents, the lanterns flickered gently, as hundreds of soldiers were burying the corpses of the Turkic warriors. By tomorrow morning, the crystal-clear lake would return to its tranquil state, and no one would guess that just a few hours before, a bloody battle had taken place here. And what would happen in Bayanhot, which was about twenty miles away? Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed quietly.

Suddenly remembering something, Hu Bugui laughed, "Oh, I almost forgot. We've captured the leader of those nomads alive. General, do you want to go and have a look?"

"Oh? You have the leader of the Turkic group here?" Lin Wanrong was immediately intrigued. "Let's go see, let's go see. I can even practice that new Turkic phrase I learned."

Hu Bugui was taken aback. General Lin had a million things to attend to; when had he learned Turkic? But seeing the general's high spirits, he naturally didn't press the matter.

Before they even approached the tent where the Turkic leader was imprisoned, raucous shouts and roars, like thunderclaps, erupted from within. Lin Wanrong grinned. "Brother Hu, what's he saying? Translate for me."

Hu Bugui gave an awkward smile. "Well, it's rather unpleasant. Perhaps we shouldn't translate."

"Do you think I can't understand?" Lin Wanrong's face darkened. He stormed into the tent and delivered a hefty kick to the Turkic man's rear, roaring at him, "I speak Turkic too—Barıp anañdı sīpa!"

‘Ah, so that's the phrase he learned,’ Hu Bugui thought, struggling to hold back a laugh.

The captured Turkic man had a hawkish nose and sunken eyes. Despite being bound hand and foot, he still looked defiant. Lin Wanrong wasted no time in kicking him to the ground and stomping on him repeatedly. The Turkic man grunted, struggling to lift himself up using his nose as support, then began to scream loudly.

"Do you recognize me?" Lin Wanrong said, attempting his own version of the Turkic language. He chuckled a few times, and suddenly brandished a sharp dagger. He first rubbed the blade against the Turkic leader's nose, then proceeded to make swift motions with it, dazzling even Hu Bugui.

Standing before the Turkic leader was a fearsome figure, bare-chested and bloodstained. The Turkic man stared for a moment before breaking into an enraged howl.

"Damn, can't you speak a human language?" Lin Wanrong sneered, and with a swift motion, thrust the dagger into the Turkic man's mouth. The leader let out a shocked cry, his mouth agape and his face flushed with anger, but he dared not speak again.

"See? I've always said, when dealing with Turkic people, a knife does the talking." Lin Wanrong was triumphantly pleased, probing further with his dagger. "Brother Hu, do the translation. Ask him his name and what his role is among the Turkic."

After translating, Hu Bugui conveyed, "He says his name is Sheng Dan, and he's a warrior under the Turkic Right Prince Tursun."

"These Turkic names are so weird; one moment it's 'Batur,' and another it's 'Sheng Dan,'" Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Ask Brother Sheng Dan how far we are from Bayanhot."

Upon hearing the translation, Sheng Dan's face changed dramatically, and he screamed in fury. Hu Bugui translated, "He says that we, the people of Great Hua, are sneaky and cowardly, only capable of attacking from behind."

"Who said I can only ambush from behind?" Lin Wanrong smirked. He lifted his foot and planted it squarely on Sheng Dan's face. "Look closely; I can ambush you head-on as well!"

Sheng Dan's face was pinned under Lin Wanrong's boot, his bound hands and feet quivering with rage, as he continued to scream. Hu Bugui translated, "He says that in the name of the warriors of the grasslands, Sheng Dan challenges you to a duel."

"A duel, excellent!" Lin Wanrong burst into laughter. "Brother Hu, bind his hands and feet. Then send a thousand men to accompany him outside for this duel."

Upon hearing the translation, Sheng Dan's cheeks flushed red as he shouted indignantly. Hu Bugui felt too embarrassed to continue translating. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "You thought I couldn't understand? I can speak the Turkic language too—Barıp anañdı sïpa!"

Hu Bugui burst into laughter. "Your grasp of the Turkic language is getting more and more authentic, Brother Lin."

"A Turkic warrior with a tough mouth, eh?" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Brother Hu, tell him that I've recently become enamored with the Turkic script. I especially enjoy writing letters to my little Turkic lover. However, these are perilous times, and it's quite possible that my letter might unfortunately end up in the hands of Prince Tursun. Of course, I won't write anything too complicated—just casually praising a certain brave warrior under the command of the Right Prince. He's been kind enough to lead our Great Hua cavalry into the grasslands without anyone noticing. Even more touching, he's presented me with over five hundred of his Turkic brothers as a greeting gift, along with ten thousand war horses. He's truly the best friend Great Hua could ask for. The people of Great Hua will eternally remember his kindness. I'll have to stuff some silk into his tent as thanks. I wonder if the Right Prince would reward such a brave warrior."

As Lin Wanrong spoke, Hu Bugui translated. Before he even finished, Sheng Dan's face had already undergone drastic changes. He banged his head on the ground and shouted angrily.

"This is slander! You deceitful, shameless, despicable people of Great Hua!" This time, Lin Wanrong didn't need Hu Bugui's translation to understand what was being said.

"How is this slander?" Lin Wanrong said, patting Sheng Dan on the shoulder. "Don't worry. I know the Turkic people have strong ethnic pride. You'd rather die than become a traitor loathed by everyone. If your tribesmen find out about your dealings with Great Hua, whether true or false, they will definitely abandon you. Your reputation and your family will be destroyed. So, when I write to my little lover, I will certainly not mention your name. That way, the Right Prince will never know you are our informant in the Turkic army. Honestly, Brother Sheng Dan, I'm really looking out for you. You don't have to be so grateful."

"Ah—" Sheng Dan howled in rage, feeling as if a surge of hot blood was about to erupt from his chest. His eyes turned bloodshot as he stared intently at Lin Wanrong, wishing he could tear him apart.

Lin Wanrong glanced outside, yawned, and muttered to himself, "It's getting late. I should go back and write that letter. My little darling must be getting anxious. Don't worry, Brother Sheng Dan, I won't write your name; no one will know you're involved."

As he walked away, Sheng Dan resembled an enraged lion, his hair standing on end, and his eyes bloodshot. After roaring emptily for a while, he finally dropped his head in defeat.

"Brother Lin, Sheng Dan has confessed! He's confessed!" Hu Bugui rushed into the tent, shouting excitedly.

"He gave in already?" Lin Wanrong shook his head, looking at the two stick figures he had just drawn on a piece of paper, a look of disappointment crossing his face. "I had finally decided to draw an educational comic strip. How could he give in so quickly? That's disappointing; he has no backbone!"

Chapter 530 Surprise Attack

"According to Sheng Dan, we are currently about twenty miles away from Bayanhot. A fast horse could reach it within an hour. Up ahead, the Turkic Left Prince Batur and the National Tutor Lu Dongzan are fully committed to attacking the Helan Mountain Gorge. They launched their first round of heavy assaults on the entrance of the gorge yesterday. Our forces held them off for a day, thanks to the natural fortifications. The Turks suffered heavy losses. As a result, they are currently mobilizing a large number of reinforcements, including warhorses and supplies, through Bayanhot to sustain their frontline," Hu Bugui's voice was tinged with excitement and agitation. Indeed, this

was the first news they had received about the Helan Mountain Gorge after being separated from the main army for nearly five days. From the Turks' heavy mobilization, it was evident that the war was not going well for them. Miss Xu was keeping her promise through her actions.

"Good, we finally have news from Helan Mountain," Lin Wanrong let out a slight sigh. "Since the Turks have suffered heavy losses, our side must also have sustained considerable damage. Advisor Xu must be under a lot of pressure."

Hu Bugui nodded gravely, "Indeed, that's the case. Fortunately, we're already close to Bayanhot and can act at any time."

Lin Wanrong gave a nod, "Brother Hu, did Sheng Dan mention how many Turks are currently stationed at Bayanhot?"

"Of course he did," Hu Bugui replied. "In their quest to take Helan Mountain Gorge, the Turks have mobilized three hundred thousand elite cavalry, practically depleting their manpower. Only a little over three thousand remain at Bayanhot. Including small contingents that have arrived with supplies, the total number won't exceed five thousand."

On the open plains, although their eight thousand soldiers had numerical superiority over the five thousand Turkic warriors, the Turks were formidable fighters. The battle would not be easy. Fortunately, they had the element of surprise on their side.

"Who leads the Turks stationed at Bayanhot?" Lin Wanrong further inquired.

"He is another fierce general under Batur, named Labuli. I encountered him on the battlefield ten years ago. He excels in wielding a wolf-headed iron mace, has a menacing appearance, and is extraordinarily strong. He is highly esteemed among the Turkic cavalry, even once cutting down hundreds of our soldiers in a single night. He was subsequently titled 'Hundred Man Slayer' by the Khan."

Labuli? Hundred Man Slayer? Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Brother Hu, since he's an old acquaintance of yours, I'll leave him to you. Remember my principle—don't bother with chivalry or fair fights when dealing with the Turks; it won't work. The more deceitful and ruthless you are, the more they'll fear you. I suggest you prepare some quicklime, ropes, and hidden weapons. When you encounter Labuli, aim for his eyes with the quicklime and use your hidden weapons. Disable him."

Serving under General Lin, even the most upright men would be corrupted. His tactics were crafty and vicious, markedly different from the traditional combat style of the empire, but it specifically

targeted the Turks' weaknesses. The Turks would probably find it hard to adapt to this sudden change in fighting style.

Hu Bugui chuckled and nodded, "I understand, General. This time I'll bring Old Gao along. No matter how capable Labuli is, he won't be a match for Old Gao's methods."

Lin Wanrong squinted his eyes and grinned, 'Gao Qiu is an utterly rotten man, head to toe. With him on our side, we have enough to give Labuli a run for his money.'

"Then go ahead and do it," Lin Wanrong gestured dismissively. "If you mess this up, you'll disgrace me, and I won't let you off lightly."

"Understood!" Hu Bugui responded excitedly before rushing out of the tent. Just as he reached the doorway, he suddenly stopped and turned back, "One more thing, General. What should we do with Sheng Dan now that we've questioned him?"

"Sheng Dan? Who's Sheng Dan? I've never met the man!" General Lin opened his hands wide, a picture of innocence.

"Exactly, exactly, we've never met him," Hu Bugui chuckled. "I get it, I'll go take care of it."

"One more thing," Lin Wanrong pulled Hu Bugui closer and whispered something into his ear. Hu Bugui's face lit up, and he gave Lin Wanrong enthusiastic thumbs-up. "Brilliant! General, your wisdom and courage surpass others. You are truly the backbone and cornerstone of our army. To serve under you is my greatest fortune!"

'Old Hu really couldn't stand the test, could he? He used to be such an upright man. How did he become this sycophantic after following me? It's all my fault!' Lin Wanrong sighed, lamenting the loss of one more "upright person" from the world.

After days of rapid marching and restless nights, the soldiers slept peacefully by the lakeside that night, cushioned by the fresh blood of the Turkic warriors. Even Lin Wanrong had a vivid, long-forgotten dream.

Beautiful women roamed the vast grasslands, their smiles enchanting. Their silk robes slipped off, revealing legs like jade and soft, glowing chests, outshining even the moonlight. Qingxuan, Xian'er, Luo Ning, and Eldest Miss—all were irresistibly charming, their eyes seemingly capable of

drowning men. Just as he was about to touch them, a fierce roar broke through the wind and sand. A vicious lion leaped out of nowhere, its jaws gaping wide, menacingly lunging at the beauties. Even the skilled Qingxuan couldn't dodge in time and was about to fall prey to the beast...

"My God!" Lin Wanrong jolted awake from his dream, his forehead slick with cold sweat, his body shivering. He looked outside; the night was still young, barely the third watch. After catching his breath, he wiped the sweat from his face, his heart still pounding.

The dream, a mixture of fantasy and nightmare, had shaken him. Though not superstitious, he couldn't help but see this as an ominous sign. Even the formidable Xiao Qingxuan was almost devoured by the lion in the dream. Where did such a fearsome lion come from?

Lost in his thoughts, Lin Wanrong was jolted back to reality by the rustling of the tent's entrance. The curtain lifted, and a ferocious Turkic man stormed in.

‘An attack by the nomads?!’ In his shock, Lin Wanrong drew his war blade and slashed at the intruder.

The "nomad" dodged quickly and exclaimed, "Brother Lin, it's me, Old Gao!"

Lin Wanrong hesitated, then looked more closely. The man who had rushed in had a high-arching mustache and a fierce appearance, but his facial features were familiar. Wasn't this Gao Qiu?

"My God, Brother Gao, are you attending a masquerade?" Lin Wanrong sheathed his war blade and eagerly patted his chest, looking at Old Gao with a mix of annoyance and amusement.

Gao Qiu chuckled, "Didn't you ask Hu Bugui to choose men to disguise as nomads? How do I look? Do I pass?"

‘You more than pass; you scared the soul out of me,’ Lin Wanrong thought to himself. Old Gao was tall and plump. With a felt hat on his head, dressed in nomadic clothes, a smudge of yellow powder on his face, and a tuft of whiskers, he looked like an unevolved Turkic seedling—save for the blue eyes.

Lin Wanrong sized him up and down before nodding, "Brother Gao, with your physique and your methods, you're even more 'nomad' than a real nomad. You're perfect for the role of their leader."

"Thank you for your kindness, General!" Gao Qiu responded with a laughing bow of his fist.

Another "nomad" burst into the tent; this time it was Hu Bugui. With his robust build, when he donned a felt hat and nomadic robe, he was just as convincing as Old Gao, maybe even more so. Having fought against the nomads for years, he was quite familiar with their customs and temperament.

Hu Bugui handed a nomadic robe to Lin Wanrong, smiling, "It's getting late. Time for you to get dressed, General."

Lin Wanrong put on the felt hat and threw on the robe haphazardly. Having been on the march for several days, his facial stubble had already grown full. From a distance, he resembled a bandit more than a general.

"How do I look? Do I resemble a Turkic man?" He grinned with delight as he strapped his war blade to his waist.

Gao Qiu looked him up and down, and after a while, said, "You do, for the most part. But there's one regrettable flaw we can't fix."

"What's that?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

Gao Qiu stared back with a solemn expression, "The biggest flaw is that you're too handsome, too striking. There's not a man in the nomadic tribes that could match your looks. In a crowd, they'll spot you first. So the biggest vulnerability in our army is, alas, you."

"Come on, Brother Gao, stop focusing on my flaws. I've been trying to fix this natural disadvantage for years," Lin Wanrong chuckled, clearly enjoying the flattery.

As they left the tent, thousands of "Turkic men" were already mounted on large Turkic steeds, awaiting them. These were all sturdy young men that Hu Bugui had picked out overnight. Apart from the eye color, they looked 70-80% like actual nomads. Lin Wanrong nodded approvingly, "Not bad, not bad at all. Never seen such good-looking nomadic lads before. Both of you, tell everyone to slow down. Let the horses eat more grass, and the men run slower. By the time the sun sets, we should just about reach Bayanhot. We don't want to arrive too early."

Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu exchanged puzzled looks. The distance from the lake to Bayanhot was only about 20 miles. Reaching there too early was actually the tricky part. But since General Lin had spoken, they could only obey. They ordered their men to unload and reload their baggage repeatedly, wasting time and treating it as physical training.

By the time the sun approached its zenith, the bellies of the warhorses were full. Lord Lin had already completed a leisurely lap across the lake, while the slow-moving "nomads" finally got themselves organized. Thousands of cavalry, leading a seemingly endless herd of warhorses, marched magnificently towards Bayanhot.

This was their first time marching across the vast plains. The sky was clear, the sun shone brilliantly, and the endless stretches of green grass beneath the azure sky lifted everyone's spirits—a stark contrast to the sandy winds beyond the Great Wall.

‘No wonder these nomads are all excellent horsemen. With such fine plains, who wouldn't prefer horseback to bicycles? It'd exhaust them to death!’ Lin Wanrong grumbled to himself, unimpressed by the horsemanship the Turkic people had been forced to adopt.

Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui, the two who looked most like Turkic people, naturally took on the roles of leaders. "Both of you speak Turkic. If you don't lead, then who will?" said Lin Wanrong. Throughout the journey, Gao Qiu practiced his Turkic curses to perfection, proudly leading the way, adorned with an "I speak Turkic" badge.

Following General Lin's advice to take it slow, their marching speed was only marginally faster than a snail's pace.

As they approached Bayanhot, the number of nomads they encountered on the road increased. All seemed to be in a hurry, reinforcing the belief that the war situation near Helan Mountain was indeed tense.

To prevent any suspicions, Hu Bugui adhered strictly to Lord Lin's teaching: "I am a Turkic man; I shall strut as I please." He stretched the formation wide, filling the plains with their imposing presence. Anyone who dared look their way would be sternly rebuked by Hu Bugui from a distance, while Gao Qiu brandished his scimitar and roared beside him. Together they intimidated, looking almost wolf-like. Even the bravest of nomads would think twice before crossing them.

At last, the setting sun cast its reddish glow on the faces of the soldiers. The previously relaxed mood vanished, replaced by a spreading tension.

"After six hours of forced march, we're finally approaching Bayanhot. Now, only six miles remain to our ultimate destination," Lin Wanrong announced grandly, a flicker of killing intent flashing across his face.

Covering fifteen miles in six hours—such a "forced march" was laughable. Gao Qiu managed to keep a straight face and nodded gravely.

Unashamed, Lin Wanrong continued, "Brother Hu, have all the scouts ahead returned?"

"The scouts have reached Bayanhot and have all been recalled to avoid detection," Hu Bugui confirmed, adding, "According to their reports, everything in Bayanhot seems normal, with no unusual movement from the Turks."

Lin Wanrong sighed in relief. As he saw the sunset disappearing below the horizon and darkness enveloping the plains, he nodded slowly, issuing a grave command: "Order the men to abandon all nonessential equipment, carrying only dry rations and weapons. From this moment on, the entire army enters combat readiness and proceeds at full speed."

As the command filtered down, the soldiers were immediately both exhilarated and tense. The trials and tribulations of the past few days would soon bear fruit. This was going to be the first major battle that Great Hua's troops would engage in deep within the plains in a hundred years. The consequences would be earth-shattering, sending ripples of shock through both enemy and ally.

The rhythmic clapping of horse hooves shattered the silence of the plains as tens of thousands of galloping steeds were driven by the soldiers, racing northward. As night began to fall, there was no longer a worry about being discovered by the nomads. Lin Wanrong spurred his horse into a mad dash, covering a distance of three miles in one breath.

"General, look!" Hu Bugui's loud shout jolted Lin Wanrong out of his headlong rush. Lifting his eyes, he saw a green fortress rising in the distance, several miles away. This fortress looked like a protruding cylinder on the plain, its walls were about two men high and covered in lush, green grass. Hu Bugui had told him before that the fortresses on the plains were built from the earth itself. Although the walls were not particularly high, the greenery lent them a unique charm.

Inside the fortress, hundreds of wolf banners fluttered in the wind. Countless tents, like blooming white flowers, were scattered around. The towering stacks of grain and fodder seemed like an

unending extension of the Helan Mountains. The occasional neighing of large Turkic horses sounded as powerful as thunder, making people's eardrums tremble.

Staring at the bustling fortress before him, Lin Wanrong clenched his fists and spat out a name venomously, "Bayanhot!"

Hu Bugui nodded solemnly, his expression gradually becoming more serious.

The most challenging moment was approaching. The soldiers' pace had imperceptibly slowed; their heart rates skyrocketed, gripping their weapons tightly. Lin Wanrong nodded to Hu Bugui, giving him a meaningful glance.

"Yah!" Old Hu cracked his whip, striking it heavily against the rump of a leading horse. Tens of thousands of Turkic steeds surged forward, their hoofbeats shaking the earth as they charged toward the fortress walls. Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu rode like the wind, leading thousands of soldiers closely behind the horses.

Two miles, one point five miles, one mile... Amidst the dust and commotion, the fortress drew nearer. The raised claws on the fluttering wolf banners became increasingly visible. Every clattering hoof seemed like a heavy hammer pounding on one's heart.

"Toqtat (Stop)!" From the fortress wall, a thunderous shout suddenly rang out, its depth and power somehow surpassing the noise of the galloping horde.

The man was burly, with arms thicker than a baby's head, a chiseled face, and deep-set eyes that glowed a radiant blue. In his hand, he held a massive iron mace topped with a wolf's head.

"It's Labuli!" Hu Bugui exclaimed in astonishment.

Labuli, the leader of the Turks in Bayanhot? Lin Wanrong's internal shock was no less than Hu Bugui's. As the green fortress walls loomed ever closer, and the massive gates remained tightly shut, Lin Wanrong's heart clenched involuntarily.