

Finest 531

Chapter 531 Entering the City

Li Wuling, who had somehow caught up and was now at the end of the procession, looked at Labuli on the city wall with suspicion. "Brother Lin, have they figured out our plan?"

Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment before shaking his head. "Unlikely. Our disguised assault was a last-minute decision; no one else knows about it besides us. Even if the Turks are clever, they couldn't possibly anticipate our moves. Furthermore, given their temperament, if they had uncovered our plans, they would have acted already rather than waiting for us to be at the gates of Bayanhot."

While his reasoning was sound, Lin Wanrong himself wasn't entirely certain. After all, the situation on the battlefield was ever-changing, and there was no telling what could happen.

As the two conversed, Hu Bugui had already started speaking up ahead. Jabbering in fluent Turkic, he furiously shouted at Labuli. Since it was getting dark, Labuli couldn't make out Hu Bugui's face. Moreover, given Hu Bugui's impeccable Turkic, nobody would guess that he was actually a prominent general from Great Hua, responsible for countless Turkic casualties.

Not being proficient in Turkic himself, except for a few curse words, Lin Wanrong tugged on Hu Bugui's armor. "Brother Hu, what are you saying?"

Hu Bugui whispered, "I told Labuli that I am Sheng Dan, a brave general under the command of the Right Prince Tursun, and I'm escorting war horses to Bayanhot. I demanded to know why he's barring our valiant soldiers from entering the city gates."

Lin Wanrong nodded. "Brother Hu, is it possible that Labuli might recognize this Sheng Dan?"

Hu Bugui chuckled as he shook his head. "No chance. In the Turkic Khanate, Left Prince Batur and Right Prince Tursun come from two major clans and can't stand each other. Their subordinates are no different, each looking down on the other. Labuli is indeed a renowned warrior under Batur, that's certain. However, Sheng Dan isn't all that impressive. He claims to be a formidable general under Tursun, but he could only escort a few hundred men and some horses, and we subdued him easily. Tursun has thousands of such third-rate figures. In a land like the steppes where might makes right, do you think Labuli would even bother knowing him?"

So that was the intricacy of the situation. As Hu Bugui explained, Lin Wanrong gave a long 'Oh,' finally understanding. He hadn't expected that the Turkic people, who purported to be united, also had their own internal frictions. Shaking his head in silence, Lin Wanrong chuckled. "No wonder, with one being the Left Prince and the other the Right Prince, they're naturally set up to be at odds. Even the Turkic Khan must be out of his mind, appointing a Prince on each side. It would be a surprise if these two didn't clash. Ah, the Turks have the same petty problems as us in Great Hua."

The last words left everyone speechless with astonishment. Only a character as audacious and well-connected as General Lin could dare to discuss political matters so brazenly. Anyone else would have already lost their heads for it.

As they were laughing and joking around, Labuli suddenly raised his voice, shouting loudly across the plains with enormous force. Hu Bugui translated: "Labuli says that Bayanhot is a crucial location for provisions. No errors will be tolerated, and so there will be a curfew tonight. All city gates will be closed, and no unauthorized entries allowed. Those from the various tribes who are delivering supplies must wait until daylight. Their identities will be verified before they can proceed."

Lin Wanrong snorted, 'Wait until daylight to enter the city? Then what's the point? I was planning on taking advantage of the chaos, but now you're clearing the waters for me? This is ridiculous.'

"Brother Hu, tell him this," Lin Wanrong fumed, "I have rushed day and night from the royal court to deliver warhorses to the front lines, carrying orders from Right Prince and the Khan. Every moment we delay, more brave Turkic warriors will die in the Helan Mountain passes. While you, Labuli, are deliberately making things difficult for us. Not only are you cozying up with women, but you're also enforcing this absurd curfew, preventing me from delivering the horses. This shows utter disregard for the Khan and Right Prince, as well as disrespect for our brave Turkic warriors. To use a Turkic curse—*Barıp anañdı sïpa!*"

Full of indignation, General Lin let loose, with Hu Bugui translating forcefully, his voice carrying far and wide. Gao Qiu was quick-witted; hearing General Lin's Turkic curse, he got the troops riled up. He led thousands of men slapping their horse's rumps and waving their scimitars while letting out a mournful howl. The spectacle was as sad and forlorn as a lone wolf lost on the plains.

Their shouts and curses, combined with the neighing of tens of thousands of warhorses, created an impressive momentum, aligning well with the wolf-like nature of the nomadic people.

Labuli's face above the city walls turned as dark as ink. He spoke some gibberish, to which Hu Bugui translated: "He says that these are military rules established by Left Prince, meant to safeguard Bayanhot. No one is allowed to break them."

"Left Prince? I might as well be Yama, the god of death!" Lin Wanrong shot a glance at Gao Qiu, who understood instantly. A thousand soldiers began to move covertly, tens of thousands of horses becoming increasingly restless. Their loud neighs neared the green city walls. The winds of the plains whipped up, howling wildly. The flowing manes of tens of thousands of fine horses danced in the wind, resembling waves of wheat, a breathtaking sight.

"Tell this Labuli," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Don't think that having Batur backing you up makes you invincible. If these horses are startled, you won't be able to afford the consequences, even with ten heads. You may be following Left Prince's military rules, but I have the Khan's orders. By not letting me enter the city, you're not just looking down on me, and Right Prince, but also the Turkic Khan. Even if we took this to the Great Khan, I wouldn't be afraid of you. Now, I'll count to five. Open the gates, or I'll turn back and return these ten thousand horses to the royal court. Let's see how Batur and his men treat the brave Turkic warriors I've brought for the expedition."

Hu Bugui spoke urgently and sternly, his words ringing out so loudly that they could be clearly heard by both sides' soldiers.

The twilight deepened, and the cold winds of the grasslands carried a chilling edge, touching everyone's hearts. Thousands of Great Hua soldiers clenched their fists tightly, awaiting the suffocating moment that was to come.

Above and below the city walls, an eerie silence prevailed. Apart from the soft snorts of warhorses, not a single cough could be heard. In the dim glow of the firelight, both sides stood in mute confrontation. R

Labuli clenched his teeth, remaining silent for a long time. Hu Bugui felt an inner urgency and leaned in to whisper to Lin Wanrong: "General, what should we do? Are we really going to retreat?"

Lin Wanrong grunted, his eyes sparkling sharply. "If he really doesn't open the gates, then breaking through by force would only cost us dearly and achieve little else. Sheng Dan may be a third-rate figure, but he has brought with him ten thousand Turkic warhorses—not a small number. Not to mention he's backed by Right Prince and Bilge Khan. This Labuli, no matter how stubborn, would he really dare to turn us away? Damn, I've yet to meet someone braver than myself! Brother Hu, issue the final ultimatum."

"Alright," Hu Bugui resolutely answered, shouting towards the city walls in Turkic: "Barıp anañdı sipa! You cur, Labuli, daring to mistreat our Turkic warriors. I'll count to five; if you still don't open the gates, I'll send these ten thousand warhorses back to the royal court and let the Great Khan decide your fate! Starting now, one..." Hu Bugui was as good as his word, roaring out the numbers so fiercely that his voice carried far and wide.

"Two—"

Lin Wanrong subtly signaled, and Gao Qiu and Li Wuling led a few cavalymen galloping over. With a flick of a whip, the lead horse turned and started sprinting south. Tens of thousands of warhorses slowly followed suit.

Even Labuli, who was stationed on the city walls, seemed taken aback that a man as insignificant as Sheng Dan—sent by Right Prince Tursun—could display such audacity. The Turkic cavalry defending Bayanhot murmured among themselves. The gesture from the Right Prince to aid the Left Prince was unexpectedly being rejected by a general under the Left Prince. This made no sense, neither emotionally nor logically.

"Three—"

The moment Hu Bugui's words fell, thousands of Great Hua cavalry also pivoted their horses, brandishing their whips and driving the massive herd forward.

There was immediate restlessness atop the city walls. With such a vast number of warhorses at stake, who would dare to easily turn them away? Labuli's expression turned frantic.

"Four—" This time, even Hu Bugui turned his horse around, uttering a short 'hei' and lashing out his whip, yelling, "Labuli, we'll meet again in the Khan's camp!"

Seeing that Labuli was adamant, Lin Wanrong broke into a cold sweat. This Labuli was a tough nut to crack indeed. As Hu Bugui shot him an inquisitive look, Lin Wanrong clenched his fists and was about to nod when a shout came from atop the city: "Hold on, Sheng Dan!"

The voice sounded like heavenly music in everyone's ears, and Hu Bugui was instantly overjoyed.

"Don't rush," Lin Wanrong whispered with a slight smile. "Don't forget, we are proud Turkic warriors; we can't change our minds so easily."

Hu Bugui chuckled a few times, lashing his whip loudly as if he hadn't heard Labuli's words, making as if to leave.

Seeing that "Sheng Dan" was truly about to leave, Labuli finally became anxious. "Brother Sheng Dan, please wait. This matter can be negotiated."

"Negotiate what?" Old Hu furiously whipped his horse and shouted, "We, the noble Turkic warriors, never beg for mercy from others. If Bayanhot is not our destiny, then we'll return to the depths of the grasslands. I believe our Khan will do justice for us. Brothers, let's go!"

"Roar!" Gao Qiu and Li Wuling bellowed, joining their fellow soldiers in a collective outcry of "anger."

Facing a daredevil unwilling to yield, Labuli was taken aback by the sight of ten thousand charging warhorses. Although fierce, he was wary not to push things too far. Grinding his teeth, he declared, "Fine. Since Brother Sheng Dan has come a long way with sincere intentions and commands from the Great Khan, I will make an exception today. Open the city gates!"

At Labuli's command, the massive gates of Bayanhot began to creak open with a thunderous rumble. Made of iron and stone, the enormous doors slowly parted, stretching about ten meters wide. All soldiers held their breath, gripped their fists, and awaited that pivotal moment.

Unable to contain his immense joy, Old Hu's voice trembled as he asked, "General, what should we do now? Shall we go in?"

"Go in, of course! We've been waiting so long just for this moment. Only a fool wouldn't enter." Lin Wanrong looked at Labuli's cautious face atop the city walls and chuckled. "Old Hu, get these tens of thousands of horses running as fast as possible. We'll storm right into the city. If Labuli likes warhorses so much, I'll give him a taste of being trampled by them."

Old Hu, being astute, understood his intentions. He chuckled and winked, "Exactly as the General said. Our warhorses have suffered due to Labuli's misjudgments; they're easily frightened. I'm sure General Labuli will understand our predicament."

He turned his horse around and shouted in the Turkic language, "Warriors, let us thank General Labuli for his generosity. To express our gratitude, please send our finest warhorses into Bayanhot. Go!"

"Roar!" The ten thousand warhorses moved, the rumbling of their hooves shaking the endless grasslands. The soldiers roared, their whips cracking in the air as the immense herd of horses, like a cloud covering the sun, surged through the open city gates. The Turkic cavalry on both sides were scattered in disarray, unable to withstand the force.

"Ahead is Bayanhot. Brothers, follow me!" Lin Wanrong shouted, cracking his whip against his horse's backside. His steed leaped forward, hooves off the ground, with Old Hu and Gao Qiu closely following. The thousands of swift horses, like arrows released from their bowstrings, charged into the city with unstoppable momentum.

Chapter 532 Tragic and Majestic

The city of Bayanhot, situated on the vast and flat grasslands, originally stood as a simple mound of earth towering over the open fields. After the establishment of the Turkic Khanate, due to their need for expansion, they built temporary walls and erected sturdy gates around the mound. Bayanhot thus became a transit station between the grasslands and the great desert and a vital logistical hub for the Turks' incursions into the Great Hua Empire. For the nomads, nearly all their war horses and provisions came from here. Its importance to the Turks was self-evident.

The moment they set foot in Bayanhot, a wave of fervent, tragic yet heroic emotion surged through the hearts of all Great Hua soldiers. They were here precisely for this city. Since the moment they had severed the sky-high ropes on the Helan Mountains, everyone knew they had no path of retreat left. The road ahead was bound to be perilous, offering little more than a slim chance of survival. The grasslands would be their final resting place, yet not a single man chose to withdraw.

Generals can die on the battlefield; as the sharp blade thrust into the heart of the nomads by the Great Hua Empire, they would make the fierce Turks tremble. As General Lin had said, the names of each and every one of them would be inscribed in the annals of Great Hua's history.

"Is this Bayanhot?" Gao Qiu, walking beside Lin Wanrong, entered the city and couldn't help but laugh at the sight of the crude walls, scattered tents, galloping war horses, and towering stacks of grain. "The Turks sure talk big. Calling this a 'city,' let alone the 'city of the grasslands'? By this standard, our Cangzhou County office might as well be a celestial palace."

Indeed, what was dubbed as the 'city of the grasslands' looked laughable to Gao Qiu and his men. Apart from the short walls and sturdy gates, Bayanhot was nothing more than a common pasture enclosed by low walls. To put it bluntly, it was inferior even to the most remote county offices in Great Hua. Yet it was this unimposing, enclosed patch of grassland that held sway over the lives of countless people in Helan Mountain and Xingqing Prefecture.

Lin Wanrong patted Gao Qiu's shoulder and sighed slightly. "Brother Gao, often times, the strength of a nation isn't measured by its massive walls and towering buildings. While we can build grand and expansive county offices in Great Hua, many of our common folk live in abject poverty, struggling to feed themselves. What's the point of such ostentatious grandeur built on the suffering of ordinary people? In contrast, these nomads seem more straightforward. No grand offices, no heavy taxes; whether one's an officer or a commoner, everyone rides horses and lives in tents. The conditions might be tough, but at least they're fair. It's no wonder they are so united."

Although Gao Qiu was a palace guard, he was of humble origins. Hearing this, he nodded repeatedly. Hu Bugui had tears in his eyes as he declared loudly, "General, based on your words today, I'd entrust my life to you. If all the civil and military officials of Great Hua shared your perspective and breadth of mind, what couldn't we achieve? And how could we be humiliated by these foreign nomads?"

Lin Wanrong just smiled without saying anything. Ahead, thousands of war horses had already thundered into the city, followed by several thousand soldiers. With the arrival of this massive cavalry, the city of Bayanhot erupted into chaos, filled with the sounds of galloping horses and their resounding neighs.

"Stop! Stop right now!" Came the furious shout from Labuli ahead. "Sheng Dan, what is going on here? Why haven't you properly controlled your war horses? Why are they running wild in Bayanhot? If anything happens, it's on you!"

Labuli had somehow descended from the city walls, his face flushed with anger. Yelling loudly, he swung a rope, lassoing it around the neck of a galloping war horse. Behind him, dozens of cavalrymen mimicked his actions. These Turkic men were natural-born riders; their expertise in taming horses was exceptional. The ropes found their marks with precision, and within moments, five or six runaway horses were restrained. Halted by the lasso around their necks, the horses reared up, front hooves kicking, and let out a skyward roar, unable to run any further.

The soldiers from Great Hua who were escorting the herd had already entered the city—almost a thousand of them. To avoid arousing the Turks' suspicion, the remaining warriors lay in ambush a few miles away, waiting for a signal from the front. Seeing the Turks slowly closing the city gate, Lin Wanrong signaled Li Wuling with a glance. Little Li understood, nodding his head as he slowed his horse, leading several hundred men to trail at a moderate distance from the city gate.

As the war horses galloped like the wind, Labuli and his warriors acted swiftly. Within moments, more than a dozen horses had been tamed. Lin Wanrong's eyes sparkled, and he couldn't help but exclaim, "This Labuli chap is quite the expert with a lasso. Brother Hu, can we figure out a way to lure him over here—"

He drew a hand across his neck, mimicking a beheading motion. Gao Qiu's eyes lit up instantly; he repeatedly rubbed his broadsword against the sole of his boot, his mouth practically watering.

"Very well," said Hu Bugui, suppressing his excitement. Pretending to be furious, he bellowed at Labuli in the distance, "Barıp anañdı sīpa! Labuli, all this mess is your doing. My ten thousand prized horses have traveled thousands of miles from the royal court to get here. We've been on the move for days to reach Bayanhot, and you close the city gates, leaving all the war horses outside with no food or water. If they didn't run wild, that would be strange! I'll report this to the Khan and have you and your tribe decapitated, while taking all your women for ourselves!"

In the tribal plains, stealing women and insulting one's tribe were the most vicious curses—sins washed only by blood. Having come this far, Hu Bugui had completely torn off any pretenses. Labuli's face turned a dark shade of green; lifting his spiked iron club, he urged his horse to charge like the wind. A howl rang out, echoing through the city on the plains, "In the name of the warriors, you mongrel Sheng Dan, I, Labuli, will skin you alive!"

Furious, Labuli was a whirlwind of motion, his steed extraordinarily agile. With a long neigh, it carved a path through the thousands of war horses and charged back. His piercing blue eyes were clearly visible.

Without waiting for Lin Wanrong's command, Gao Qiu was already rubbing his hands together, his eyes locked onto the approaching Labuli. Li Wuling and several hundred horsemen lagged further and further behind, slowly closing in on the few Turks who were in the process of shutting the city gate.

Labuli drew closer and closer—fifty feet, forty feet... Even the felt hat on his head was now clearly visible. Lin Wanrong's grip tightened around the hilt of his war blade, sweat soaking his palms. The atmosphere was so tense it felt as though it could explode at any moment.

"Joq! (No!)" Several shouts erupted from behind the horsemen, accompanied by a deafening scream: "Ulu Hua Atly Askar (Great Hua Cavalry)—Ah!"

Lin Wanrong turned his head to see what was going on. It turned out that Li Wuling and his men had drawn too close to the city gate and were discovered by the Turkic guards. Little Li roared and charged ferociously toward the Turkic guards with a force like thunder. Amidst a spray of blood, the guard who had discovered their secret was quickly cut down under his horse.

It was too late. Labuli, who was galloping along, had already heard the warning cries. With a sudden pull on the reins, his Turkic horse reared up and let out a long neigh.

"Ulu Hua Atly Askar (Great Hua Cavalry)—Kahar (Damn it)!" Labuli roared furiously. As he stood up in his saddle, he hurled his iron mace with incredible force. The weapon shot out like a bolt of lightning, accompanied by a whistling sound, aimed directly at Lin Wanrong's face.

"Brother Lin, watch out!" Gao Qiu yelled, slashing his blade out fiercely. With a loud clang, the blade and mace collided, sending out a shower of sparks that nearly hit Lin Wanrong's face.

The iron mace fell heavily to the ground. Gao Qiu's war blade had suffered a big nick, and his arm felt numb. He couldn't help but exclaim, "What incredible strength!"

"Exactly, I am Lin San, sent by Great Hua Empire!" Lin Wanrong, realizing that his cover was blown, yanked off his felt hat and threw it to the ground. He roared, filled with murderous intent, his voice tinged with tragic grandeur: "Only the blood of the Turks can wash away a century of Great Hua's shame! My brave brothers, for our families, for our siblings, charge with me—kill all the Turks!"

His eyes were bloodshot, and his shiny war blade danced through the air, creating streaks of brilliant silver. The steed beneath him darted forward like a shooting star, outpacing even Gao Qiu. The Great Hua soldiers were fired up; they too removed their felt hats, revealing their yellow skin and black hair—proud faces of Great Hua.

"Kill all the Turks!" This unprecedented slogan represented Great Hua's resolve and courage, as well as the first roar of anger from Great Hua in a century of weakness. On this battlefield of blood and fire, that battle cry ignited the soldiers' blood and passion. They let out sky-shaking roars, spurred on their warhorses, and brandished their war blade, following Lin Wanrong like a fierce torrent, charging directly into battle.

The boundless war cries instantly drove tens of thousands of warhorses into a frenzy. The Turkic horses neighed and scattered in all directions, like a chaotic cloud of black flies. They spread through Bayanhot City, knocking over tents and sending debris flying. Turkic soldiers who were slow to dodge were trampled under the hooves.

For Great Hua's cavalry to penetrate deep into the grasslands and assault a walled city was an unprecedented event. The psychological impact on the Turks far outweighed the physical. Many Turkic soldiers didn't even have time to figure out who was attacking before they were overwhelmed by the horses. Bayanhot City plunged into utter chaos.

Li Wuling and several hundred soldiers had successfully slain over a dozen nomads, working in perfect harmony. Slowly, they pushed open the massive gate, awaiting the arrival of the hidden reinforcements outside the city. The Turks were also clearly aware of the gate's significance; once the reinforcements from Great Hua entered, the city of Bayanhot would be undoubtedly breached. Labuli abruptly turned his horse, mounted the city gate, and with a swing of his battle blade, roared, "Release the arrows!"

Hundreds of arrows, like a swarm of locusts, flew furiously toward the city gate. The soldiers of Great Hua, who were in the process of opening the gate, had nowhere to hide. Screams erupted as more than ten soldiers were pierced by arrows, slowly falling to the ground.

"Let's butcher these sons of—" Seeing his comrades falling one by one, Lin Wanrong was livid. With a long bellow, he turned his horse and charged toward the city.

His face was fierce, as if aided by divine power. His fast horse led the way; his blade swished left and right, cleaving through any Turkic men he encountered. Blood stained his war robe, and his brutal methods seemed even more ruthless than those of the Turks.

Seeing the cavalry of Great Hua charging up the slope toward the city, a deluge of arrows rained down from the Turks, buzzing like a disturbed hornet's nest. Some arrows even skimmed Lin Wanrong's scalp. The Turks were skilled archers; their simple-looking bows had great force, and their arrow attacks abruptly dampened Lin Wanrong's momentum.

Lin Wanrong managed to deflect a few arrows, looked at the fallen brothers near the city gate, and roared, "Gao Qiu, Hu Bugui, follow me!"

Both Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui cleaved through several arrows and followed suit. The three of them, blades swinging incessantly, dashed toward the city. The soldiers behind them were also in a battle frenzy, furiously following their leader. A ceaseless rain of arrows struck them, and soldiers fell silently, but not a single one let out a cry.

The ground shook with the sound of galloping horses, and dust clouds billowed. The soldiers of Great Hua, who had been lying in ambush, finally arrived. In an instant, they had reached the base of the city, their yellow skin and black hair clearly visible.

Seeing the surging cavalry of Great Hua, Labuli became frantic. He wildly gestured toward the city gate and let out several furious roars, his expression incredibly fierce. All Turkic archers immediately redirected their aim, and countless arrows, screaming as they flew, targeted Li Wuling and his men at the city gate.

The oppressive rain of arrows above mysteriously ceased, and Lin Wanrong looked into the distance. His heart almost shattered.

Li Wuling, the youngest among them, let out a long cry, his voice slightly juvenile. Yet the sense of steadfastness and pride shot straight into the sky: "In this vast Great Hua, as a man standing seven feet tall, what is there to fear? Even if my body perishes, my spirit will never die! I call upon my brothers, all of you, join me! Let's go together!"

With that shout, Li Wuling clenched his fist and ran toward the city gate.

"Let's go! Let's go!" Hundreds of brave men roared in unison, their flesh and blood bodies standing resolutely, seemingly oblivious to the flying arrows. Led by Li Wuling, they all joined forces to slowly push open that massive gate.

A scene unfolded that left countless Turks trembling in fear!

Even from a distance, the sound of arrows piercing the warriors' chests could be heard—arrows so forceful that they penetrated the chests entirely, pinning the soldiers directly onto the city gates. Blood gushed from their mouths and chests, and though some had already died, not a single one fell to the ground.

Hundreds of brave men, their eyes wide open, roared with diminishing volume. Their steps grew slower and more hesitant until, at last, the battlefield fell silent. Countless volleys of arrows had been loosed; it was impossible to say how many had been used up. The Turks' arms were numbed from the repeated shooting.

The upright soldiers who had been struck by countless arrows appeared, from a distance, like a tragically beautiful blossom of "blood-wolf flowers" blooming at the grand gateway to the grasslands. Despite their ordeal, the city gates continued to open, slowly but steadily.

All the Turks were stunned. Even though they claimed to be the bravest warriors on the grasslands, none dared believe what they were seeing. Who were these men, so fearless even in the face of death? What more could possibly intimidate them?

Such a heroic feat could only be achieved by the yellow-skinned, black-haired people of Great Hua.

"Damn you Turks! To hell with your ancestors! Kill, kill, kill—" A lone cry of bloody rage broke the battlefield's silence. So stark, so heart-wrenching was the shout that everyone present froze.

A figure, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, tore open his robe, his eyes filled with bloody tears and his face flushed red as fire. Like a frenzied wolf, he brandished his blood-soaked longsword and charged alone into the enemy ranks.

"General Lin—"

"Brother Lin—"

Witnessing Lin Wanrong's mad actions, Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu were the first to snap out of their trance. "Kill the Turks!" Both, tears streaming down their faces, madly rushed toward the city tower.

"Kill the Turks!" At this moment, when life and death had become inconsequential, the Great Hua soldiers who had witnessed this extraordinary scene were filled with boundless killing intent and unparalleled fighting spirit. Like a flood of savage beasts, they charged onto the city walls.

In Lin Wanrong's vision, the faces of hundreds appeared and disappeared, but he could think of nothing. His blood boiled like scalding oil, as if he were on the verge of explosion.

With a clang, weapons clashed, sparking an extraordinary flash of light. Lin Wanrong's face was emotionless, his eyes lifeless, as he dropped his blade.

The Turkic warrior, Labuli, who had come to meet him, had his pupils dilate in an instant. His weapon trembled above his head. A faint, neat line of blood appeared on his forehead, slowly widening. Drops of fresh blood trickled down, and his mace fell to the ground with a clatter, breaking neatly in two.

Chapter 533 Let's Go Home

Both the Turkic warriors and the soldiers of Great Hua were stunned. The notion that someone from Great Hua, a nation known for its frailty, could kill Labuli—a man of great reputation on the plains—in a single round was unfathomable.

Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu were the first to come to their senses, their eyes red as they shouted, "The enemy leader Labuli is dead! Brothers, charge with me! Don't let a single Turk escape!"

"Charge!" Roiling fervor surged within the soldiers' chests. The death of Labuli ignited boundless excitement, while the loss of their comrades drove them to madness. In this storm of emotion and pain, their eyes glinted fiercely, their minds filled with a single thought—kill the Turks! Suddenly, they exploded with an insurmountable fighting spirit. These Great Hua warriors, dressed in foreign attire, burst into the enemy lines like ferocious lions, hacking and slashing. Their ferocity struck fear into the hearts of even the Turks.

Although Labuli was dead, the majority of the Turkic heavy infantry still guarded the walls. With a remaining force of three to four thousand, their brutal nature was fully exposed. The half-high tower of the city on the plains became the contested ground for both sides.

Behind Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu, thousands of their troops fought their way along the city wall, as if they had charged into a hornet's nest; all they saw were swarming Turks. Each advance was a bloodbath, with rivers of blood flowing and countless Turks falling, yet Great Hua soldiers also met their end. At this point, life and death were in the hands of fate. Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu led the charge, screaming, their bodies soaked in blood, their blades nicked and worn. Ahead of them, Lin Wanrong was like a lone wolf at the forefront, his blade rising and falling, severing Turks left and right. His earlier feat of killing Labuli cast a dark shadow over the Turks; none dared to cross his path, and he encountered no worthy opponents. Though his blade was chipped and battered, he seemed oblivious, his face a mask of ruthless intensity.

A thunderous roar erupted as an army of thousands stampeded in. Over six thousand Great Hua soldiers who had been lying in ambush outside the city burst in, crossing the gates of the city that had been opened by the sacrifices of Li Wuling and others. They became a torrential flood, charging straight for the Turks stubbornly resisting on the city walls.

The arrival of reinforcements acted like an adrenaline shot, energizing all the Great Hua soldiers. In contrast, the Turks felt their courage wane.

"For those who dare to invade our great Great Hua, none shall escape punishment, no matter how far! Kill all these Turks!" Hu Bugui yelled, tears streaming down his aged face. He brandished his curled blade, its white glint cutting through the air, his massive frame leading the troops like a soaring bird. With one swing of his blade, he cleaved a tall Turk in two.

Eight thousand divine soldiers who descended from the heavens broke through Helan Mountain and stepped into Bayanhot. Each wore a solemn expression, fearless in the face of death. When they came together, they became the death knell for the five thousand Turkic warriors in Bayanhot.

There were no powerful crossbows, no assisting cannons. From the moment the city gates flung open and the soldiers stepped inside, this battle had devolved into a brutal melee. The final stage of this surprise attack was a contest of life and death—a destiny they could not avoid. Under the veil of night, eight thousand sons of Great Hua and five thousand Turkic warriors fought a brutal hand-to-hand battle on the vast plains.

Lin Wanrong didn't know how long he had been fighting. His thoughts had long since stalled, and his tattered robe was drenched in blood, transforming him into a horrifying figure covered in gore. With a curved war blade piercing through a Turkic man's chest, he felt as though his hands weighed a ton and his body was entirely numb.

"General, General—" Two frantic shouts seemed to come from the edge of the sky. Slowly regaining his senses, he saw two similarly blood-soaked men standing beside him. Their faces were stained with blood, revealing only eyes full of extreme urgency. Lin Wanrong's arms were tightly held by them, and one of them, tears mingling with blood on his face, cried out, "General, stop killing. This man is already dead! He's dead!"

"Dead?" Lin Wanrong looked bewildered. He glanced down and saw the Turkic man lying on the ground covered in blade wounds, a curved war blade penetrating his chest and sinking deep into the earth. The man's face was unrecognizable, his blood spattered everywhere—he was clearly beyond dead.

"Brother Lin, what's come over you?" Seeing his confused expression, the man on his right hurriedly gripped his hand. Old tears mingled with fresh blood, giving him a terrifying visage.

"Are you Brother Gao?" Lin Wanrong asked softly, recognizing the voice but unable to identify the face obscured by blood.

The man hastily wiped away the tears and blood from his face, grinned broadly but awkwardly, and said, "It's me! Brother Lin, it's me, Old Gao! Thank heavens, you've finally come to your senses!"

Lin Wanrong then glanced at the blood-soaked man on his left. "You are Brother Hu?"

Hu Bugui quickly wiped away the tears and blood stains at the corner of his eyes and nodded eagerly, "It's me, it's me, General. You're finally awake. The battle is over. Bayanhot is ours now, it's ours!"

The elation on the faces of Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu couldn't be concealed. Despite the heavy price paid in blood and the fact that Bayanhot was so modest it could hardly be compared to a county office, it was still the first city captured abroad by the weakened Great Hua in a hundred years—and from their mortal enemies, the Turks. Words couldn't adequately express the immense significance of this monumental victory for Great Hua that had been weakened for so long.

"Is that so?" Lin Wanrong responded with an indifferent grunt, his gaze as elusive as clouds in the sky.

"Yes," Hu Bugui nodded urgently. "In this battle, we annihilated 4,802 Turkic cavalymen and captured 198. We seized over 30,000 war horses and innumerable amounts of grain. Preliminary estimates suggest that we have enough food to sustain 300,000 troops for more than ten days. As long as the Helan Mountain pass holds for ten days, the Turks will have to fight us on an empty stomach. General, look—"

Following the direction of Hu Bugui's pointing finger, amidst the blazing torches, countless piles of grain stood tall. Thousands of soldiers held bundles of firewood, placed between the grain piles. One torch dropped, and all that grain would go up in flames.

Lin Wanrong nodded silently, "What are the casualties among our brothers?"

Hu Bugui lowered his head in sorrow and spoke softly, "We lost 1,377 men, and 326 are injured; that's almost a 20% casualty rate."

Lin Wanrong's cheeks twitched, his fists clenched tightly, and his eyes shimmered with tears. "Where are the bodies of Little Li and the others?!"

"They've all been taken care of," Hu Bugui choked up, tears cutting through the grime on his face. "They're waiting for you, General, to send them off on their final journey."

Tears silently streaked down his face as scenes flashed before his eyes—his hundred soldiers, pierced through with arrows, weeping blood in their desperate struggle to open the city gates. "Ah—ah—ah—" Lin Wanrong let out a sky-shattering howl, tears mingled with blood. With a surge of energy, he pulled a blade from the ground and swung it furiously against the city wall. With a loud crash, sparks flew and a section of the thick stone wall collapsed. The impact was so intense that it seemed to make even the plains tremble.

Clang. The blade fell, and Lin Wanrong's face turned pale. The palm gripping the sword even started bleeding. Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu stood silently behind him, their eyes blurred with tears.

The atmosphere was suffocating. After what felt like an eternity, seeing Lin Wanrong standing still as if turned to stone, Hu Bugui softly said, "Dying in battle is the most honorable end for a warrior, General. Please, don't blame yourself too much."

"But Little Li was only thirteen, just thirteen!" Lin Wanrong choked on his words, his fists clenched so tight they almost bled.

Li Wuling was the youngest among the soldiers who had gone on this expedition, personally brought by Lin Wanrong. He was also the only direct grandson of General Li Tai. Capturing Bayanhot could certainly lift spirits, but losing Li Wuling was a massive blow, both to Li Tai and to the morale of the troops. The weight of the loss could not be measured against the victory. Li Wuling's death made the triumph at Bayanhot feel significantly tarnished. Even in victory, there was defeat.

The night wind of the plains lashed against their faces, cold as ice, piercing through to the heart. Thousands of soldiers' bodies were laid out on makeshift wooden racks, lined up in long rows. Night crows circled above them, cawing mournfully.

The remaining five thousand or so soldiers stood in silence, tears hovering in their eyes before silently falling to the icy earth of the early spring plains.

Lin Wanrong, along with Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu, silently walked along this long row of heroic spirits, carefully examining each face that was growing colder and paler. A heavy sorrow filled the air, pervading everyone's hearts.

The most brutal sight was of those hundred-plus brave souls who had pushed open the city gates. Arrows had pierced through their bodies, and many were hung by arrows through their foreheads on the city gate when their bodies were retrieved. To preserve their corpses, the soldiers carefully cut

the arrows off at the shaft, leaving the arrowheads inside. The faces of these hundreds of soldiers were still filled with rage, their eyes wide open even in death.

Facing these brothers—once by his side, now separated by the chasm of eternity—Lin Wanrong choked up. With trembling hands, he touched their cold, stiff cheeks, one by one, gently closing their eyes.

A slightly diminutive figure appeared before them, his youthful innocence still etched on his face. Yet, a sweet smile graced his lips, as serene as if he had entered a dreamland. Among the thousands of fallen soldiers, he was the smallest, the youngest. Yet, his battle cry—"My body may die, but my spirit will never perish"—had forever embedded itself in everyone's hearts.

"It's Little Li," Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu exclaimed simultaneously, their eyes instantly moistening.

Gazing at Li Wuling's youthful face, Lin Wanrong's shoulders trembled slightly. From an angle that no one else could see, tears poured down his face. He wept openly, as helpless as a child.

Li Wuling had been pierced by eight arrows. One in each leg and arm, one in the right rib, one in the left chest, and one in each shoulder. Perhaps because of his small stature and the way other soldiers had instinctively shielded him, his forehead was untouched. The most fatal shot was the arrow lodged in his left chest. His eyes were slightly open, yet a sweet smile still hung on his lips, as if he had entered a dreamland.

Choking back sobs, Lin Wanrong slowly extended his trembling hands to close Li Wuling's eyes. "Little Li, it's Brother Lin's fault for not protecting you well. I've let you down!" His warm tears fell as he softly closed Li Wuling's eyes. Looking up, he saw something unbelievable—somehow, Little Li's eyes had opened again.

"Little Li—" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, not even pausing to wipe away his tears as he hurriedly checked for breath by placing his finger under Li Wuling's nose.

There was no sign of life; his cheeks were already cold. His eyes were half-closed, devoid of any luster. He had passed long ago.

'Was it an illusion? Was Little Li blaming me?' Lin Wanrong thought, his heart sinking further. He sighed softly, and once again closed the eyelids of Li Wuling. Just as he pulled his hand away, something astonishing occurred—Li Wuling's eyes slowly opened again.

Old Gao was also astonished and couldn't help but cry out, "Little Li, my good brother, I know you can't rest in peace. Don't worry, I'll capture a few more Turkic women, behead them all, and send them to be your wives. May you rest in peace!" He extended his hand to close Li Wuling's eyes, but the young man's eyes defiantly opened again. What kind of force was this? Hu Bugui stood nearby, his mouth agape in shock.

Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment and then pressed his large hand tightly against Li Wuling's chest. It felt cold, devoid of any warmth, indistinguishable from the other fallen soldiers.

Shaking his head in disappointment and about to retract his hand, he suddenly felt a faint throb pulsing against his palm. Though it was weak, it filled Lin Wanrong with ecstatic joy. He howled with tears streaming down his face, "He's still alive! Little Li is still alive!"

"Brother Lin, be sorrowful but rational!" Gao Qiu thought he had lost his mind and hurriedly pulled him back. "I've checked. Little Li's breath is cold, and he's not breathing. He's really gone."

"No, Brother Gao, he still has a heartbeat. I felt it!" Lin Wanrong shook his head frantically, grabbing Old Gao's hand and placing it on Li Wuling's chest.

Gazing at the lucidity in Lin Wanrong's expression, Gao Qiu was caught between doubt and belief. He cautiously placed his palm over Li Wuling's chest. With one sentence, Lin Wanrong had ignited hope in everyone present. Countless anxious eyes converged on Gao Qiu, awaiting his verdict.

Gao Qiu held his breath and kept his hand on Li Wuling's chest. After a long, silent wait, he felt no heartbeat. Finally, he let his hand drop and shook his head in silence. Hu Bugui's face instantly darkened, his eyes moistening.

"Impossible!" Seeing the despair in the eyes of those around him, Lin Wanrong vehemently shook his head. "I felt it. Li Wuling is alive; he must be!"

"The loss of Li Wuling has deeply affected the general," Hu Bugui murmured, lowering his head in silent sorrow.

Ignoring what others thought, Lin Wanrong reached out his hand once more, placing it over Li Wuling's chest. A chilling sensation met his palm. Li Wuling's body lay still, no longer stirring in

the slightest. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, he felt no trace of the heartbeat he had sensed before.

‘Did I really hear it wrong?’ Lin Wanrong felt sorrow engulf him, the urge to burst into tears almost overwhelming. Despite a lengthy wait, even he had lost hope. Li Wuling was dead. He was never coming back.

Just as he was about to withdraw his hand, faint but undeniable, a slight pulse radiated from his palm. It was as faint as before, virtually imperceptible. Lin Wanrong was stunned. In that moment, no heartbeat in the world could have been stronger for him!

‘Li Wuling is still alive!’ Lin Wanrong exhaled deeply, holding back his elation. Given his previous experience, he dared not be careless. His palm remained over Li Wuling's chest, waiting for the next heartbeat.

His face was a shifting landscape of sorrow and joy, all observed by Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui. The two men exchanged a look, both shaking their heads in a resigned sigh.

Thump—after a prolonged interval, a second heartbeat finally arrived. It was still exceedingly faint, easy to overlook. But for Lin Wanrong, it was the most uplifting sound, the most precious heartbeat in the entire world. Holding his breath, tears streamed down his face.

"Brother Hu, Brother Gao, come and listen!" Lin Wanrong's voice quivered, though his gaze was resolute.

Slowly, Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu each placed their palms on Li Wuling's chest. Thump—a barely perceptible flutter immediately conveyed itself into their palms. They looked at each other in disbelief, their faces beaming with ecstatic joy.

After another quiet moment, the incredibly faint yet steadfast heartbeat could be heard clearly, time after time. The eyes of both Old Hu and Old Gao reddened instantaneously. "He's alive, Li Wuling is truly alive!"

The two burly men hugged each other tightly, tears flowing like a broken dam.

Lin Wanrong raised his arm and shouted toward the heavens, "Li Wuling is still alive! Brothers, our Li Wuling is still alive!"

"He's alive, our brother is still alive—" The news spread like wildfire. Countless soldiers raised their weapons high, jumping and shouting with indescribable joy. The scene of five thousand stalwart men crying together was etched deeply into everyone's hearts.

Cheering in front of fallen comrades was not a sign of disrespect. On the contrary, it was an expression of the most genuine and simple emotions. Li Wuling represented not just an individual; he embodied the countless heroic spirits of Great Hua who lay forever at rest in the depths of the grasslands. What could be more important than regaining a lost comrade, a brother-in-arms?

The news of Li Wuling's survival was like a spring rain in a drought, nourishing the hearts of all. From Lin Wanrong and Hu Bugui down to the ordinary soldiers, everyone was invigorated, sweeping away the lingering gloom brought by the casualties.

Though they still faced the somber reality of over a thousand fallen comrades, the morale of the soldiers was strikingly different from a moment ago. Just minutes earlier, they had been mournful; now they saw boundless hope. The feelings of having lost and then regained, of being saved from a dire situation, greatly strengthened their confidence and fighting spirit.

As the bodies of the deceased soldiers burned in the blazing fire, Lin Wanrong silently said, "Brother Gao, please gather our brothers' ashes. Let them go home with us."

The word "home" warmed and saddened the heart of Gao Qiu. Wiping away a tear, he nodded heavily and strode away.

"General, look!" Hu Bugui, returning on horseback, called out excitedly.

Lin Wanrong looked up to see a bloody, grotesque head hanging high above the main gate of the grassland city, at the very spot where Li Wuling and others had met their fate. It was the head of Labuli, whom Lin Wanrong had personally beheaded. This public display was an unambiguous act of intimidation—a slap in the face of the Turkic people.

The time for discussing humanitarianism was over. Such was the nature of war.

Looking at the still unconscious Li Wuling on the stretcher, and then at the thirty thousand warhorses left in the city, Lin Wanrong grunted, "Brother Hu, you know what to do with these Turkic warhorses, don't you?"

Li Wuling's survival had lifted everyone's spirits. Hu Bugui, shaking off his earlier despondency, snorted, "Rest assured, General. Not a single Turkic person will get a warhorse or a grain of food. See, it's already begun."

Thousands of horsemen surged forward, arrows flying, blades swinging. In moments, the enclosed Turkic warhorses were whinnying pitifully as blood flowed like a river.

"It's too brutal," Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Brother Hu, think of a more humane method in the future. Warhorses have lives too. If you scare the Turkic children with such gore, that will be on you."

Hu Bugui chuckled, "It was Old Gao who suggested it. He said poisoning the horses was too troublesome and cost money for the poison. We can't afford to waste our military funds like that. Using swords is more practical—it both trains our men in swordsmanship and boosts their courage."

Lin Wanrong shook his head with a wry smile. 'Old Gao, what can I say about you?'

The horizon faintly lightened with a white color similar to that of a fish belly. In just a couple of hours, the red sun would rise over the grasslands, and the cavalry reinforcements for Bayanhot would also arrive. The endless grasslands would witness a dramatic change.

"General, we can start now!" All the heaps of grain were already connected by firewood. Hu Bugui handed the burning torch to Lin Wanrong.

The flickering lamps popped softly, their intermittent bursts accompanied by the crackling of torches. Lin Wanrong looked out to see Gao Qiu and several hundred of his men silently collecting the ashes of their fallen comrades. With a tug of the horse's reins in his left hand and a squeeze of his legs, he spurred his steed into a swift gallop.

In full stride, Lin Wanrong let out a powerful cry, "Burn, Bayanhot!" As his words echoed, he yanked the reins sharply. The horse neighed, and the torch in his hand flew out like a forceful javelin, hitting a haystack squarely at its center.

A resounding "Boom!" followed as a red blaze shot skyward. Thick flames quickly spread, setting the massive supply of fodder and grain gathered by the nomadic tribes ablaze. The sky, tinged with indigo against the dark night, turned red with the flickering flames.

"Roar—"

"Roar—"

The firelight cast eerie glows on the blood-stained uniforms and faces of the soldiers of the Great Hua. They shouted in unison, as if to scatter all their humiliation with these very flames.

The fire grew more fierce. The city was ablaze from end to end. Gunpowder smoke rolled, and fog enveloped everything. The scorching heat soaked Lin Wanrong's clothes through and through. Blood, tears, and sweat mingled, creating an indescribable sensation.

A half-hour later, over half the fodder and grain had burned. Even if a torrential downpour were to occur at that moment, it would be too late. The ground was charred; the city enveloped in smoke and ashes, making it impossible to see anyone within several yards.

The extra warhorses had all been slain, and the remains of the fallen soldiers neatly collected. Over five thousand troops were arrayed in formation before the city gates, ready to depart.

Gazing at the battle-weary, smoke-blackened faces before him, Lin Wanrong paused, then spoke loudly, "You all have seen it. We have done something unprecedented in the history of our Great Hua—Bayanhot, the linchpin of the nomadic tribes, is burning under our feet, reduced to scorched earth. From now on, this fortress will be completely erased from the map of the Turkic people."

"Roar—Roar—" Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui led the way, brandishing their war blades, and the soldiers roared in agreement.

With a sweeping motion of his hands, Lin Wanrong silenced the troops: "Our presence here has completely exposed us to the nomads. To assault a fortress on their own turf is something they've never experienced. More brutal battles on the plains are bound to come. Remember, from this moment on, our strategy must change completely. We will become like rabbits on the plains, evading the hawk's talons. Surviving to return home is our greatest victory."

The field fell silent. All eyes were fixed on Lin Wanrong. Everyone understood that while the mission was accomplished, the harshest part of the journey was yet to come—a route more perilous than any had ever faced. In these vast grasslands, they would become the prey of the Turkic tribes. The dream of safely returning to Helan Mountain seemed more like a fleeting fantasy. Yet, after

enduring countless bloody battles and witnessing the separation of life and death, who could truly say they were afraid?

The gaze of over 5,000 men, unafraid of death, choked Lin Wanrong into speechlessness. With a wave of his hand, the first war horse leaped out of the city gate, followed by the second, the third...

The 5,000 soldiers silently retreated from Bayanhot, their crisp hoofbeats blending with the roaring flames, like a clear pastoral song across the plains.

Lin Wanrong, along with Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu, rode at the rear. As they stepped out of the city gates, the trio couldn't help but look back. The city amidst the grasslands was shrouded in gunpowder and flames. Other than the sounds of fire and wind, no longer were there any human voices or neighs of horses. It was a stark contrast to their arrival.

Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment, then suddenly yanked on the reins and rushed back.

"What is General Lin doing?" Hu Bugui asked, puzzled.

Gao Qiu thought for a moment, then shook his head weakly, "I have no idea. But General Lin has always been inscrutable in his actions. With our wisdom, we can't begin to guess. For instance, could you have believed that he would decapitate Labuli with a single stroke tonight?"

Recalling that thunderous strike by General Lin, Hu Bugui shivered inwardly, shaking his head as he sighed softly, "Profound, truly profound!"

When he reached the city gate, Lin Wanrong dismounted. He found a thick, burning stick by the roadside. The ground was soaked with the fresh blood of slain Turkic horses. He stirred the stick in the blood a few times, then quickly began writing characters on the city wall. These characters were flamboyant and dripping with blood, exuding immense energy. After finishing, he tossed away the bloodied stick, glanced left and right, and then burst into hearty laughter.

Gao Qiu, who had the keenest eyes, could see that although the characters were somewhat awkward, they were enormously large and instantly readable: "Lin San of Great Hua was here! Rebuild it if you dare; I shall return next year!"

No sooner had he finished reading than Hu Bugui laughed aloud, "Excellent! 'I shall return next year!' What momentum, what writing style! This is indeed the style of General Lin!"

"Wonderful poetry," said Gao Qiu as he saw Lin Wanrong gallop back to join them, giving him a thumbs-up, "Perfect rhyming, strictly adhering to poetic form, truly a unique masterpiece and a gift of a lifetime. With this poem and this calligraphy, hundreds of years from now, it could fetch hundreds of thousands of silver taels."

Hu Bugui spoke solemnly, "Indeed, indeed. The handwriting of General Lin is a rare treasure even in our great Great Hua. But what inspired the General to compose such a magnificent work on the wall of the steppe city?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "I am ashamed; it was merely doodling, a habit when traveling. I just worry that the Turks won't understand our Great Hua script, thereby wasting my eloquence."

All burst into hearty laughter, their voices piercing through the vault of the grassland sky...

Gazing at Li Wuling, who lay on the stretcher, pale-faced and still unconscious, Lin Wanrong tightly gripped his hand and smiled, "Brother, let's go home!"

Chapter 534 Reunion with Yueya'er

"Little Li has been hit with eight arrows. Four of them went through both of his hands and feet, one in each of the Jianjing acupoints on his shoulders, and one in the large Quepen acupoint. He also has arrows in his Tianchi acupoints on the right rib and left chest. From what I can see, his main problem is the injury to the Tianchi acupoint in his left chest. This has led to the blockage of his Qi and blood flow, making it difficult for him to regain consciousness. Additionally, I suspect that there must be a clot in his lower abdomen near the Dantian, which is causing him unbearable pain and obstructed Qi and blood flow. To treat this, we need to use saffron as the primary ingredient, mixed with honey, balloon flower, and young chrysanthemums to smooth the meridians," Gao Qiu explained in great detail, his hands moving with fervor as if he were a medical expert.

Terms like 'Tianchi', 'Jianjing', and 'Qi', were beyond comprehension for many. Hu Bugui was wiping sweat from his nose, and Lin Wanrong was also tense, breaking out in cold sweat. According to Gao Qiu's explanation, Little Li's symptoms resembled menstrual cramps. Was Gao Qiu some sort of gynecologist?

"Uh, Brother Gao, can you simplify that?" Lin Wanrong wiped his forehead, full of lingering fear. "Just tell us why Little Li's heart is still beating, but he can't wake up."

Gao Qiu nodded solemnly, "Based on my experience in the martial world and in healing the injured, although the arrows have been removed from Little Li, his meridians are still under abnormal pressure, causing—"

"Brother Gao, are you saying that Little Li's nerves in his chest are compressed, causing insufficient blood supply to the brain and that's why he can't wake up?" Lin Wanrong interrupted, getting straight to the point.

Gao Qiu clapped his hands joyfully, "Exactly, that's what I mean! Ah, Brother Lin, I didn't expect you to be as skilled in medical science as I am. You understood after just a brief explanation!"

"Skilled in medical science? Ptoei!" Lin Wanrong spat disdainfully, clearly not impressed with Gao Qiu's so-called expertise.

Hu Bugui sensed the tension and took Gao Qiu aside, whispering, "Brother Gao, how many patients have you successfully treated before?"

Gao Qiu replied confidently, "Old Hu, you still don't trust me? In my twenty years wandering the martial world, every patient who has come into my hands has recovered. Well, except for those who died."

Hu Bugui rolled his eyes and was utterly speechless.

Four hours had passed since they left Bayanhot. The sky gradually lightened, and the morning mist on the prairie was cool and dewy. It dampened the horses' hooves and moistened everyone's cheeks. Four warriors were carefully carrying Little Li's stretcher. The soldiers spontaneously placed Little Li in the center, shielding him from the cold wind and rain.

Among the five thousand soldiers, when it came to martial prowess, Gao Qiu was undoubtedly the finest. Skilled both in martial arts and medicine, one would assume that Gao Qiu would also excel in the medical field. Surprisingly, he turned out to be all talk and no action. Despite his elaborate explanations, he was less clear than Lin Wanrong's straightforward insights. It seemed as though all the time Gao Qiu could have spent mastering medicine had been squandered wandering the eight great alleys of the capital city.

However, Li Wuling was gravely injured, and among the five thousand soldiers, only Gao Qiu had some semblance of medical expertise; everyone else fell far short. Lin Wanrong looked at Li Wuling, whose eyes were tightly shut and face was pale, gripping his hand and letting out a silent, bitter smile.

Seeing Lin Wanrong remain silent, Gao Qiu blushed for once, awkwardly laughing. "Brother Lin, don't worry. Li Wuling is blessed with a strong constitution. He'll pull through, no matter what."

Lin Wanrong had a rough idea of the situation. Li Wuling was likely in his state due to an arrow wound to the left chest, compressing a nerve and leading to poor blood circulation and respiratory difficulty, further causing him to fall into a deep coma. In his past life, such a critical condition could have been addressed through thoracic surgery. But here they were, in the vast open plains, with five thousand warriors and not a single one capable of performing the necessary surgery.

Lin Wanrong nodded reluctantly and sighed, "Brother Gao, what do you suggest we do to improve Li Wuling's blood circulation?"

Knowing that Lin Wanrong was also an expert in the medical field, Gao Qiu dared not bluff anymore. He cautiously responded, "I've already applied top-grade wound medicine to prevent his wound from festering. However, his internal injuries are difficult to manage. He needs both internal and external treatments to invigorate blood circulation. This would require high-quality medicinal herbs. Li Wuling's heartbeat is extremely weak right now, and he's barely holding on. If we don't treat him promptly, I fear the worst."

Gao Qiu wasn't lying this time. Li Wuling's feeble breathing was evident to all. But where could they find top-quality herbs for activating blood flow in these vast plains? Their army had packed lightly for the journey, even common herbs were in limited supply, let alone premium ones.

A somber silence fell over the crowd; no one knew what to say. Li Wuling's miraculous recovery had given the isolated army an enormous boost in morale and confidence. Losing him again would be a devastating blow to everyone.

"Where can we find the medicinal herbs?" Lin Wanrong muttered, his brows tightly furrowed.

The five thousand cavalry rode swiftly, bathed in the colors of the morning dawn. The clapping hooves trembled the plains. The only sounds were those of the horses; even coughs were absent, as the atmosphere was filled with concern for Li Wuling's condition.

"Report!" A scout rode in from the front, startling Lin Wanrong out of his silence. "General, we've discovered traces of the enemy twelve miles ahead!"

"What?!" Lin Wanrong was shocked. Although he had been prepared for such an eventuality, he could never have expected that the Turks would appear so close—only twelve miles away—after just a few hours.

Hu Bugui wore a face of astonishment and urgently asked, "Where did these cavalry come from? How many are there?"

The scout shook his head, "General, it's not Turkic cavalry. It's a caravan of Turkic people, totaling only a few hundred."

"A caravan of Turkic people?"

Lin Wanrong paused, then broke into elation. "If it's a caravan, they must have medicinal herbs!"

Hu Bugui caught on quickly and said, "Exactly. Tea leaves, silk, and herbs—every caravan from the nomad lands that have been to our Great China would have these treasures. Little Li has a chance now!"

Lin Wanrong gestured broadly, "Order all scouts ahead to hide and keep an eye on the caravan's actions. No one moves without my command."

"Understood!" The scout hurriedly rode off. Hu Bugui exhaled deeply and excitedly pumped his fist, "This is truly rain after a long drought, getting exactly what we needed. The caravans from the Turks never leave our Great Hua empty-handed; they must have excellent herbs."

Lin Wanrong remained silent for a moment before asking, "Brother Hu, have you ever wondered why a Turkic caravan would appear in front of us during this time of war and chaos?"

Hu Bugui was no fool; alarmed, he replied, "General, are you suggesting that this is a trap?"

Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, "I can't be sure if it's a trap. But their timing and location are far too coincidental—so close to Bayanhot, right after our surprise attack on it!"

Once reminded, Hu Bugui also found the situation exceedingly strange. However, he was not fully convinced it was a scheme from the Turkic people. Firstly, news of the attack on Bayanhot must have only recently reached them; they could not have dispatched a caravan beforehand to wait for

them on the plains. Secondly, there was no need for such tricks. If the Turks discovered them, they could simply send a large cavalry force to annihilate them. What would be the point of sending a caravan?

Lin Wanrong had considered all the doubts Hu Bugui had. They were the same questions puzzling him. Could it truly just be a fortuitous meeting?

"A caravan of Turkic people?" Gao Qiu, who had been silent all along, suddenly raised his head mysteriously and said, "Brother Lin, could it be that person?"

He clenched his hands, put them to his mouth, and mimicked blowing a horn. Lin Wanrong was utterly baffled, "Brother Gao, which person are you talking about?"

Gao Qiu chuckled, "Have you forgotten? The one we met in Xingqing, whose roue you've tasted —"

"Yueya'er?" Lin Wanrong was shocked. At a time like this, Gao Qiu was still thinking about a Turkic woman. Besides, Yueya'er played the jade flute, not the horn as Gao Qiu was miming. The two were as different as heaven and earth!

Gao Qiu nodded solemnly, "It's highly likely. Brother Lin, think about it. Of all the Turkic caravans we've encountered recently, only this one stands out. If it's not that Turkic lass, then who could it be?"

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter. There were dozens, if not hundreds, of caravans traveling between Great Hua and the Turkic lands. How could one be certain that this was Yueya'er's? It seemed that Gao Qiu wouldn't rest until he had abducted a Turkic woman.

"General, what do we do now?" Hu Bugui whispered, "Should we intercept this caravan or not?"

Lin Wanrong stared at the sleeping face of Li Wuling on the stretcher and clenched his teeth. "For the sake of Little Li, we have no other choice! Brother Hu, Brother Gao, come with me. Go!"

With a crack of his whip, his Turkic horse neighed and soared forward, galloping away and disappearing into the distant horizon like a tiny speck of dust. Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu hurriedly spurred their horses to follow him.

After a while, they could see, from a distance, a few scouts of their own hiding in the thick grass. Lin Wanrong dismounted and landed beside them, whispering, "Any word on the caravan?"

Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu caught up as the scout whispered back, "The caravan is about one point five miles away. They should be passing through here shortly."

Lin Wanrong nodded without saying another word, and the three of them lay in wait with the scouts.

The damp grass chilled them to the bone, a mingling scent of earth and fresh grass in the air. Lin Wanrong took a deep breath, feeling invigorated.

Ting-a-ling— Ting-a-ling—

From afar, the pleasant sound of camel bells echoed gently, gradually filling everyone's ears. About thirty fine horses slowly came into view. Turkic merchants, riding atop these steeds, wore exotic robes and carried sabers at their waists. Their deep blue eyes glinted mysteriously. Unaware of the danger lurking ahead, they proceeded leisurely, laughing and shouting.

In the middle of the caravan were dozens of large wagons. From the creaking wheels and the burdened camels, one could surmise that these wagons were laden with valuable goods.

"Hmm, where's Yueya'er?" Gao Qiu, hiding next to Lin Wanrong, scanned the surroundings. He had adopted the name "Yueya'er," initially given to the Turkic girl by Lin Wanrong. Despite looking all around, all he saw were Turkic men; no sign of a woman, let alone the celestial beauty that was "Yueya'er." Disappointment was evident in his expression.

Lin Wanrong chuckled. It was better that "Yueya'er" wasn't in the caravan. Otherwise, when the time came to act, would he kill her or spare her?

Suppressing his inner laughter, he saw that the caravan had entered their strike zone. Just as he was about to give the order, he heard a crisp 'ding.' A petite, vibrant blue-roan-colored horse suddenly sprang out from the caravan. The rider wore a golden hat and a red skirt bordered in black and threaded in gold. The rider's long, powerful legs were evident, and her figure swayed like a willow. While the horse galloped, a veil fluttered across the rider's face, revealing glistening skin that shimmered golden in the faint morning light. Her eyes, moist as spring water, held a tinge of deep blue. When she smiled, her eyes narrowed, resembling the most beautiful crescent moon in the sky!

Chapter 535 The Thorny Rose

"Yueya'er!" Lin Wanrong stared in disbelief. He never thought Old Gao would be right—the caravan they were looking at was indeed Yueya'er's. Life was full of such coincidences!

Gazing at the young Turkic woman's graceful figure, Gao Qiu couldn't help but drool. He snickered twice and said boastfully, "Brother Lin, how about it? My predictions are spot on, right? She can't escape our grasp now, and you've got yourself another warm body for the bed."

The Turkic maiden seemed completely unaware of the imminent danger. Her spirited blue-roan-colored horse galloped swiftly, her figure swaying gracefully, her gauzy skirt billowing. From a distance, she looked like a beautiful flower floating over the green fields.

Hu Bugui swallowed hard and whispered, "General, shall we proceed?"

Even a rugged man like Hu Bugui seemed reluctant to lay a finger on Yueya'er. It was evident that the young Turkic woman had an enchanting allure that was hard to forget. Before Lin Wanrong could respond, Gao Qiu chuckled, "Take action, of course! Kill the men, strip the women. Isn't that what the Turks do when they plunder our cities? We've never captured a Turkic woman before, and this young lady would be a worthy maidservant for Brother Lin's wife."

Lin Wanrong shook his head in amusement, "Brother Hu, don't listen to Old Gao's nonsense. Am I someone who's so lustful that I fall for everyone I see? Who would even believe that? Just focus on what you have to do and don't think too much."

His clarification only confused Hu Bugui even more. Whether General Lin was infatuated with every woman he saw was a matter of public opinion, best left aside. But after all this talk, did the general have some relationship with Yueya'er or not? It remained a mystery. Not daring to ask more, Hu Bugui clenched his fists and said, "Understood. Brother Gao, let's charge together when the time comes. It's good to have each other's backs."

"Right, right. Cover for each other," Gao Qiu nodded knowingly, grinning mischievously.

As they spoke, the Turkic caravan began to approach slowly. Hu Bugui stuck two fingers in his mouth and let out a sharp whistle. In the distance, a chorus of warriors echoed in response. With a

wave of Old Hu's battle sword, hundreds of fierce fighters sprung up from the bushes, their faces determined.

"Brothers, charge with me!" he yelled.

Gao Qiu rose simultaneously, his blade gleaming brightly, catching the eye. "Brothers, time to capture some Turkic women! Charge!"

The hundred soldiers behind him were invigorated as they followed, like starving wolves on the prairie, sprinting toward the Turkic caravan.

Caught off guard, the Turkic caravan had never expected to be ambushed on their own turf—the vast grasslands. Seeing a band of ragged-looking, fierce "bandits" wielding blades and charging like the wind, they immediately panicked.

The leading horse of the caravan reared its front hooves and let out a long, mournful neigh. Dozens of horses behind it were startled, turning to flee.

"Steady!" A robust voice erupted from the Turkic cavalry. A burly man, seemingly their leader, expertly rode out from the formation. His left hand gripped the reins while his right held a hefty horse saber, guarding a young woman called Yueya'er. With a thunderous voice, he roared, "Ol dalağın zorbailar!" (They are bandits of the plains!)

Lin Wanrong trailed behind Old Hu and Gao Qiu, captivated by the commanding presence of the Turkic leader. The way he held his blade screamed of a veteran warrior from the plains. Lin Wanrong had scant understanding of the Turkic language, save for a few choice curses. "Dammit, why is his Turkic so regional? Sounds like he's from the outskirts of the royal court; I can't understand a thing. Old Hu, translate!"

Gao Qiu nodded approvingly, "Your observation is spot-on, General Lin. His accent does smell of the soil; must be from the outskirts. No wonder even I can't understand him!"

‘As if you two could ever understand, even if it were spoken by a Turkic baby!’ Old Hu contemptuously appraised the pair, chuckling, "He's simply calling us bandits of the plains."

"What nonsense!" Gao Qiu snorted, clearly annoyed. "These Turkic people are twisting facts. I can understand if they point the finger at me, but when have they seen a bandit as handsome and gallant as Brother Lin?"

"Indeed, indeed," Old Hu chimed in with a laugh.

Lin Wanrong couldn't bear it any longer. He kicked Gao Qiu's rear, fuming, "How many times have I told you not to mock my shortcomings? They're innate, and I can't change them. When will you learn? Do it again, and I'll have you repeat that a hundred times!"

A hundred times?! Sweat trickled down Old Hu's forehead. Seizing the opportunity as he swung his saber, he distanced himself from the pair and bellowed, "Surround them! Don't let a single one escape!"

While he spoke, hundreds of warriors raised their sabers and aimed their crossbows at the caravan, encircling the Turkic riders.

In the merchant caravan, Turkic men formed a protective circle around Yueya'er, a clear testament to her central position within the group. Adoration and devotion filled their eyes; it seemed they would gladly risk their lives to protect her.

The Turkic leader's eyes flashed with rage, his horse saber poised defensively in front of Yueya'er.

Though surrounded, Yueya'er sat composed atop her magnificent steed. Her tranquil beauty was like a freshly bathed goddess; her slender figure draped in a sheer silk dress. Her eyes were calm, their azure depths serene and clear, as if mirroring a lake in the depths of the plains. She cast her gaze over the crowd, her tranquil eyes conveying a sense of unperturbed majesty.

The exotic beauty before them seemed to exude a mystical allure. One glance from her and everyone felt as though they'd stopped breathing, captivated by the depth of her gaze.

"Who knew the Turks could produce such attractive women?" Old Gao mumbled to himself, drooling.

Lin Wanrong, however, had already experienced the enchanting power of this foreign damsel. Among the crowd, he was the only one who remained composed. He shook Hu Bugui, who seemed lost in a daze. "Wake up, wake up! Brother Hu, it's time to get moving!"

"Ah!" Hu Bugui snapped to attention, raising his gleaming war blade and shouting furiously, "Halt! This mountain is mine, this tree is mine. If you wish to pass, you must all stay!"

Damn it! Lin Wanrong almost fainted. Old Hu had shouted this so fluently; did he really think we were bandits? Why didn't he shout it in Turkic? It's just "Yueya'er," what's so hard about it?

Unable to resist, he glanced back at "Yueya'er." He saw the Turkic girl was also observing him, clearly intrigued by his earlier outburst. Sitting quietly on her horse, strands of her raven-black hair peeked out from under a small golden hat, gracing her smooth forehead. Her face was partially obscured by a transparent veil, revealing an exceptionally beautiful profile. Her elegant nose, rosy lips, and slightly upturned mouth corners hinted at a serene wildness.

'What's she looking at me for?' Lin Wanrong checked himself over. His boots were falling apart, his shirt tattered. His clothes were stained with a mix of blood and sweat, and he was covered in dust and grime, hair and beard unkempt. He looked like an unevolved barbarian of the plains.

'Could I attract her attention looking like this?' Lin Wanrong shook his head in disbelief. As Old Gao had said, true handsomeness could never be hidden, just like gold in a mound of sand. It was incurable!

"Yueya'er" took a few more glances at him and then, as if spring water in March, her deep eyes lightened, and she broke into a slow smile.

Her smile was like sunlight breaking through clouds, or like a field of flowers blooming on the prairie. Not only did the Great Hua soldiers gawk in astonishment, but the surrounding nomadic men also dropped to their knees, muttering prayers with utmost devotion.

Lin Wanrong felt his heart race, filled with irritation. 'Damn it, this little girl is so disrespectful! She's clearly eyeing me up. This is intolerable!' He couldn't stand her mysterious smile any longer, spat on the ground, and barked, "I warn you, stop smiling at me. Smile again, and someone's going to die!"

Yet "Yueya'er" seemed not to understand, silently flashing her enigmatic smile, her willowy eyebrows raising ever so slightly, ever so beautiful.

Lin Wanrong was furious. He signaled to Hu Bugui, who swiftly lunged forward, grabbing a Turkic horse from the merchant caravan. With one swing of his blade, a fountain of blood erupted. The horse was decapitated, its blood splattering everywhere.

In the eyes of the Turkic people, horses were as precious as life itself. To kill a fine horse in front of them was a monumental insult. The tribesmen were instantly roused to fury. Yueya'er's face went cold, her eyes shooting daggers at Lin Wanrong, flames seemingly ablaze within her gaze.

The Turkic man leading the group let out a roar of rage, and behind him, dozens of Turkic merchants sprang forward, brandishing their blades and charging at Lin Wanrong.

"Bring it on!" Gao Qiu bellowed, his figure charging forward first, followed closely by a dozen or so soldiers. These were battle-hardened veterans, their combat skills far surpassing those of the mere traders. Within five exchanges, all of the emerging tribesmen were cut down. The leading Turkic man was visibly furious; roaring, he locked blades with Hu Bugui and fought fiercely.

With a wave of his hand, Lin Wanrong ordered hundreds of his soldiers to storm forward like a pack of wolves, charging toward the ten or so large carts in the caravan.

"Toqtat (Stop)!" A sharp, urgent cry rang out, the voice full of spirit. It was the enchanting Yueya'er. Hearing her speak for the first time, Lin Wanrong was astonished. The same Turkic language, when spoken by Sheng Dan and Labuli, sounded coarse. But when Yueya'er spoke, her voice was melodic and captivating. It was true that comparisons were odious.

Hearing Yueya'er's command, the leading Turkic man parried Hu Bugui's blade and quickly returned to her side. Old Hu staggered back two steps, his face flushed and breathing heavily, "That was a powerful stroke; this guy is no ordinary foe."

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively and chuckled, "Don't stop! Keep going, everyone!"

The soldiers quickened their pace toward the carts. Seeing this, Yueya'er clenched her legs against her horse's sides and leaped into the air. Leaning slightly, she whipped her riding crop fiercely at a Great Hua soldier's face.

The finesse in her movements revealed her extraordinary skills. Yueya'er's horsemanship was superb, outclassing even Hu Bugui, not to mention Lin Wanrong.

She swung her whip so fast and furious that it was about to hit the soldier's face when suddenly, it stopped in mid-air.

Straining, Yueya'er tugged on her whip a few times, her charming face flushed crimson. Yet the whip remained unmoving, held firmly by a dark-skinned "wild man"—Lin Wanrong—who sat on his horse, grinning mischievously. "Such a long whip you have, almost as long as mine. Go ahead, Yueya'er, pull! Pull hard! It's elastic, you won't break it. Just like the saying, pull the girl, pull the girl, don't be afraid!"

"Brother Lin, what great skill you have!" Gao Qiu cheered on, clapping his hands, "Yes, little miss, pull as hard as you can! I'd like to see just how long this whip can stretch!"

Seeing Yueya'er in trouble, the Turkic caravan leader at her side suddenly let out an angry shout, slashing his blade toward Lin Wanrong's head.

Gao Qiu parried the attack, locking blades with him, and bellowed, "It's an honor for your young miss to be teased by my Brother Lin. What are you Turks doing, interfering?"

Lin Wanrong felt wronged. It was clearly this young miss who had been teasing him with her whip, yet now it seemed the tables had turned.

With a "clash," the two men's blades met. The bearded Turk let out a furious roar, retreated a step, his face pale as chalk. Gao Qiu also took half a step back, his breaths coming quicker than before. He locked eyes with the stranger, both men surprised. "Who is this foreigner? He possesses such strength."

Seeing her companion halted by Gao Qiu and realizing aid was futile, Yueya'er tightened her grip on her horsewhip, teeth clenched and face flushed in anger. She shouted, "Bos qoy! Bos qoy!"

"Everyone knows I don't understand the Turkic language," Lin Wanrong sneered as he waved at the surrounding men. Soon, soldiers had leaped onto the carriage.

Yueya'er was desperate. With a soft cry, she loosened her grip on the horsewhip, and her horse charged directly at Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong swiftly sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the galloping horse. Just as he did, a flash of cold steel came toward his face—Yueya'er's short saber glinting with a menacing light aimed right at him.

‘Trying to trick me?’ Lin Wanrong snorted coldly and extended his hands swiftly and accurately, gripping her delicate wrists. Yueya'er grunted; her strength waned, and her curved blade plummeted to the ground.

Their horses passed close by. Yueya'er's attack had failed, and her wrists were now in his grasp. Frustrated, she launched herself from her horse, aiming both feet directly at his face.

‘You want to trample me?’ Lin Wanrong chuckled darkly, twisting her wrists sharply and planting a foot on her horse. As the horse whinnied and sprinted away, Yueya'er was left suspended in the air, like a beautiful branch hovering in mid-air. Lin Wanrong gripped her body tightly, pulling her into his arms and onto his horse. He opened his mouth wide, aiming for her cheek.

"Ah—" Even in their brief combat, Yueya'er had not panicked. But now, a disheveled and demonic face was lunging for her beautiful cheek, and even the strongest of women would have their souls frightened away.

A subtle fragrance wafted from her body—it was the scent of the Xiao family's perfume. The young Turkic girl shivered in his arms, her pale blue eyes staring daggers at him, her fists clenched tightly.

"Scared now?" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, pulling his face back and taking a long breath. Just as Yueya'er thought of making another move, the terrifying man suddenly turned, hooking the corners of his mouth upwards and rolling his eyes back, looking as horrifying as possible.

"Ah—" Once again, Yueya'er screamed, this time scared by Lin Wanrong's monstrous face.

Lin Wanrong laughed loudly and forcefully threw her off the horse. Even before she could land, a small curved blade slipped from her sleeve—sharp as could be—and aimed for his lower abdomen.

A rose with thorns indeed!

Lin Wanrong tightly gripped the girl's wrist and sneered, "Little Miss Yueya'er, remember this: don't try any tricks with me. Not only can I scare people, but I can also kill!"