

Finest 561

Chapter 561 Truly Gone

That night, he had held Sister An in his arms, sleeping soundly and peacefully. Even in his dreams, he was smiling, as if he had found the most precious treasure in the world. The night seemed short, and by the time he woke up, dawn was just breaking. He lazily turned over, and the woolen fur that had been draped over him fell off, letting in a slight chill.

At some point, Lin Wanrong's clothes had been removed. Looking at his bare chest and arms, he chuckled in a daze, "Master Sister, I was sleeping so well, why did you take off my clothes?"

He yawned and reached out to embrace the person next to him, but immediately felt something was amiss. His eyes snapped open. The space beside him was empty, with only a faint fragrance lingering in the tent. There was no sign of An Biru. A foreboding feeling surged in his heart, and he jumped out of bed without even bothering to dress, pulling back the tent curtain and shouting, "Master Sister, where are you? I'm scared, please come back!"

The horizon was just beginning to lighten, and the dawn camp was silent. His shouts echoed everywhere, attracting curious glances from the soldiers. They looked at him with strange expressions, as if they wanted to laugh but didn't dare.

Thinking that it was his bare chest that had shocked everyone, Lin Wanrong didn't care and kept calling out for Sister An. But her figure, like the stars of the previous night, had disappeared with the dawn.

"The stars are beautiful, but they can only shine at night—"

"Don't worry, even if you chase me with a blade, I won't leave today. After all, you owe me so much —"

Every word and smile of An Biru came back to him. It turned out that every word and smile of Sister An had a deeper meaning. Lin Wanrong shook his head in regret. Love made people old. Would this unpredictable Sister An take his life?

He reluctantly returned to the tent. A faint scent entered his nostrils, the fragrance of An Biru. Recalling the previous night when they cuddled together, her exquisite figure, captivating laughter, and charming face all seemed to have vanished by morning, like a dream.

A chill came from his bare upper body. The silk thread that had been tied around them the previous night to prevent Sister An from leaving without notice was gone, and even his clothes were missing.

Every time he competed with Sister An, he never came out on top. Lin Wanrong smiled bitterly and shook his head. Glancing around, he noticed a brand-new robe neatly folded at the head of the bed, emitting a faint fragrance. He didn't know what material the robe was made of, but it felt soft and weightless. Wearing it felt warm and fragrant, extremely comfortable.

Underneath the robe was a white note. A few delicate words caught his eye: "Little brother, since you dared to tie my clothes, I took yours off. We're even. Hehe. I took your clothes to prevent other women from taking them off in the future, ruining your integrity."

So it was Sister An who had taken off his clothes. He wondered if she had taken any advantage of the situation. Lin Wanrong read the note with a mix of surprise and joy. His heart felt both sweet and sour, and he quickly wiped the corners of his eyes before continuing to read.

"Last night, I slept wonderfully for the first time in years. I didn't do anything, didn't think about anything. I was enveloped in an embrace as wide and comforting as a teddy bear's. The bed was small, but it was warm, and I love being held by the teddy bear."

An Biru deftly drew a charming smile on the paper, a spitting image of her own. Looking at this vivid countenance, Lin Wanrong felt like smiling. But his nose tingled with emotion. Had he actually become the teddy bear for An Biru, this cunning fox of a woman? Was he really that adorable?

"The only downside was that, little teddy bear, you're incredibly foolish when you sleep. With a beauty like me beside you, you slept like a log, completely unaware that I was undressing you. I was quite annoyed. So while I was at it, I took some liberties. Don't complain; you can take your turn next time," she wrote with a chuckle.

"I have to go back to the Miao Village. This time I sneaked down the mountain, leaving behind my ninety-nine beaus. Who knows what the village has turned into? Everything around you has been properly arranged, so proceed without worry; no one will harm you. Remember my words, be cautious of that foreign woman. I'll wait for you at the Miao Village, linked by our shared secrets and spots. You better not be late, or I'll favor one of my ninety-nine beaus each day. Like you, I'm

an honest person who never lies. Tee-hee. One last advantage—A handwritten note from Master Sister."

At the words "one last advantage," there was a fresh red lip print on the white letter paper. The faint fragrance that wafted into his nostrils was as intoxicating as flower dew, leaving him nostalgic. Imagining An Biru's red lips lightly touching the paper, Lin Wanrong's heart burned like fire. He wished he could transform into that piece of paper, savoring the sweet kisses of the captivating An Biru.

Her note was both serious and playful, filled with a sincerity she couldn't hide. It was like a bubbling stream cascading from a mountain, clear and pure, washing over him.

He hadn't expected An Biru to leave so suddenly. She came and went like a refreshing spring breeze on the grasslands—gone in a blink, but leaving behind the deepest emotions and unforgettable memories.

Staring at the red lip print on the paper, Lin Wanrong sighed softly, mumbling, "Master Sister, you always take advantage of me and then leave. Where in the world can you find such an easy deal?—I'll take advantage of you too, and you won't even be able to resist, heh heh."

He kissed the red lips on the paper. The sweet scent lingered on his lips.

A soft chuckle came from outside the tent, followed by a seductive voice, "So this is what you mean by 'can't resist.' I've never seen you this cheeky before. What were you up to last night that made you so well-behaved?"

The voice was unmistakably familiar. Lin Wanrong sprang up as if jabbed with a needle, "Master Sister, you haven't left?"

Dashing out of the tent, he saw a white figure swiftly fading into the distance. Judging by that graceful silhouette, who else could it be but An Biru?

She moved incredibly fast, as if she didn't want him to catch up at all. Seeing the distance between them grow, Lin Wanrong, in his desperation, stopped in his tracks. Clearing his throat, he shouted at the top of his lungs, "Master Sister, I miss you. I miss you—"

An Biru's figure quivered ever so slightly, her steps slowing down. After a long hesitation, she finally turned around, her captivating face adorned with a sweet smile. Her clear eyes shimmered, filled with glistening tears.

"Little brother," she chuckled and waved vigorously, her tears falling like rain. "Remember the way to Miao Village; I'll be waiting for you there. You must come, okay? I have to go now. Don't look at me!"

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"Master Sister!" Lin Wanrong shouted, ready to chase after her. An Biru met his gaze, smiled gently, turned, and in a flash, was hundreds of feet away.

"Sister An, I'll definitely find you. You have to wait for me! You must!" Lin Wanrong's angry roar echoed far and wide. As An Biru hurried away, she looked back at him, smiling faintly through her tear-blurred eyes. Her alluring figure transformed into a wisp of white smoke, gradually fading into the distance.

She had truly gone this time. Lin Wanrong stared dumbfounded at An Biru's retreating figure. He felt a sense of bitterness in his heart but was also somewhat relieved. Sister An had chosen not to leave without saying goodbye. Her hesitation outside the tent, her torn feelings between staying and leaving, all revealed her inner conflict and lingering affection.

If his previous farewell at Prince Cheng's mansion was filled with regret and heartache, this time it was completely different. It offered a deep sense of anticipation and hope. Even though there were tears, they were accompanied by smiles. Imagining the joy and laughter of reuniting with Sister An, Lin Wanrong was so moved he could barely contain himself. What would be the point of living if one did not cherish and love such a sentimental woman?

"Brother Lin. Brother Lin." A few low calls snapped Lin Wanrong out of his reverie. Turning his head, he saw Gao Qiu sizing him up, his eyes darting here and there. Next to Gao Qiu stood Hu Bugui, who looked at Lin Wanrong's face, sweat trickling down his forehead.

"Oh, Brother Gao, Brother Hu, you're back?" Lin Wanrong hurriedly wiped away the tears at the corners of his eyes and smiled.

"We're back, we're back," Gao Qiu said, grinning as he stared at Lin Wanrong's cheeks. He spoke mysteriously, "Too bad we came back late and missed the wonderful drama."

Both Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui had met An Biru when they were fighting against the White Lotus Sect in Shandong. Although they had been far away from her, a divine being like An Biru was impossible to forget once seen. Lin Wanrong waved it off, saying, "It's just a sorrowful farewell. What exciting drama are you talking about? You both are just making fun of me."

Gao Qiu winked and chuckled, "Brother Lin, you're too modest. Farewells may be sad, but they can also be quite enchanting. Someone with your romantic fortune is something others couldn't enjoy in eight lifetimes."

Seeing Gao Qiu speak so mysteriously and Hu Bugui also turning to snicker, Lin Wanrong was puzzled. "What do you mean by 'enchanting,' Brother Gao? I don't understand!"

Hu Bugui was more straightforward. He ordered someone to bring a basin of clear water and smiled, "General, please look!"

The water was crystal clear, reflecting Lin Wanrong's face. His hair was neatly tied back, his face cleanly shaven, looking exceptionally dashing. However, on each cheek, there was a small, bright red lipstick mark. As the water rippled, the marks seemed to wobble, like a vibrant little mouth silently speaking.

Lin Wanrong was stunned for a moment. 'So, this was how Sister An took advantage of me. When had she left this mark? And how had I slept through it?' Filled with regret, he gently touched his cheek, oscillating between joy and sorrow, as if An Biru's teasing and vexing expression had vividly reappeared before his eyes.

"Brother Lin, you should wash up," Old Gao said with a sly smile. "Otherwise, what will Yueya'er think? She might cause an uproar!"

'What do I care about that Turkic woman!' Lin Wanrong snorted. Recalling Sister An's parting glance and her silent tears, he clenched his teeth and pushed away the basin of water. "What's there to wash? I'll get used to it! In fact, I think I look rather handsome like this. Anyone who asks me to wash my face will hear it from me!"

Old Gao and Old Hu exchanged glances, finally bursting into laughter. 'Brother Lin is really a romantic. If you have no shame, why should we care? The others have all seen it, and the laughter has subsided.'

Lin Wanrong carefully guarded his cheek and cautiously asked, "Brother Gao, how did your scouting turn out up front? Are there any Turkic tribes ahead?"

Old Gao chuckled, "We covered sixty to ninety miles yesterday. Along the way, we encountered a few small tribes, none larger than a thousand people—no threat to us. But according to reports from the scouts, there's a large Turkic tribe about two hundred miles away, called Chita. Apparently, it's one of the most prestigious Turkic tribes, with a peak population of over a hundred thousand. Many of the Turks attacking Helan Mountain come from there. There are still about twenty or thirty thousand left."

"I've heard of this Chita," Hu Bugui continued. "The Turkic Left Prince Batur comes from this tribe. They have a large number of warriors, are fond of raw meat, and are known as the strongest tribe on the grasslands."

Lin Wanrong waved his hand, "Two hundred miles is enough distance for us to maneuver. Chita is not our immediate concern. Right now, I'm most concerned about Ejina and Ha'er Helin. Brother Hu, how did you handle Heliye's affair?"

At the mention of this, Hu Bugui gave a thumbs-up. "Brother Gao's medicine is as effective as rumored. Heliye collapsed on the outskirts of the Ha'er Helin tribe. He was discovered by the nomads in less than an hour."

"Really?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Did they find the golden blade and the letter?"

Hu Bugui shook his head in awe, "General, you haven't witnessed the scene. The moment the Turkic people saw the golden blade and the letter, they were as agitated as if they had lost a father. They mobilized their army overnight, packed enough provisions, and two tribes—totaling six to seven thousand men—set off early in the morning."

Six to seven thousand men?! Lin Wanrong was speechless with astonishment. This would mean that all the fighting men from the two tribes had left. What could be so urgent that they'd abandon their homes?

The Turkic girl—Yujia!

The three men looked at each other and simultaneously took a deep breath.

Chapter 562 Journey to a Mysterious Place

The allure of the Turkic maiden was truly extraordinary. The moment her golden blade appeared, the entire tribes of Ejina and Ha'er Helin had mobilized. Yujia's appeal exceeded everyone's expectations.

Recalling what he had seen the previous night, Lin Wanrong inquired seriously, "Brother Hu, you're worldly and wise. Tell me, what does it signify if a Turkic person has a golden wolf tattooed on them?"

"A golden wolf tattoo?" Hu Bugui pondered for a moment, furrowing his brows before shaking his head. "As far as I know, the leaders and esteemed warriors among the various Turkic tribes like to get tattoos of wolves. These can be on their chests, backs, wrists, and even foreheads, representing ferocity and supremacy. I've seen tattoos of blue, gray, and black wolves in my years of battling the Turkic tribes. I've never seen a golden one, though."

The golden wolf on Yujia's chest naturally signified a status far superior to those with blue or gray wolves. This was almost identical to Lin Wanrong's speculation. However, Yujia's true identity remained a mystery. Fortunately, they were en route to the Turkic royal court—a long journey that would give him ample time to uncover the secrets of the Turkic maiden.

Lowering his voice, Old Gao said, "Who cares if it's a black wolf or a golden wolf? Let's just take them all down. Brother Lin, all the fighting men from Ejina and Ha'er Helin tribes have left their villages and are headed towards where we camped last night. Their villages are vulnerable. Shall we take action now?"

"No rush," Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively. "Let's wait until their forces have moved far away and our scouts bring back reports. Then we can act. Brother Hu, give the order for our troops to continue advancing into the grasslands lightly armed. Nobody stops without my command."

"Understood!" Hu Bugui nodded and hurried off to make arrangements.

Only after covering up all the traces of their previous night's encampment—burning fires, cooking meals, and pitching tents—did Lin Wanrong signal for the army of five thousand to mount their horses and head deeper into the grasslands.

The further they went, the more they felt the vastness and grandeur of the grasslands. Blue skies, white clouds, and fragrant flowers filled the view, lifting one's spirits and providing a sense of peace

and awe. Among such grand landscapes, one felt remarkably insignificant, like a grain of sand in the ocean.

As he gazed into the distant horizon where earth and sky blended together, he suddenly recalled what Sister An had said last night, "These grasslands are our paradise." Her words still echoed in his ears, but she was already nowhere to be found. He couldn't help but feel his eyes moisten, wondering when he would next wander these heavenly grasslands with Sister An.

Though they were on the march, scouts were continually dispatched to report on the movements of the Ejina and Ha'er Helin tribes. Every hour, messengers arrived on horseback. Turkic scouts were also expanding their search area, looking for traces of their adversaries. Unfortunately for them, Lin Wanrong had skirted around Ha'er Helin, advancing directly into the depths of the grasslands. They had taken an unexpected route, diverging significantly from the Turkic tribes, a possibility the Turkic people had never considered.

"Brother Hu, how far are we from Ha'er Helin?" After a grueling three-hour ride, they finally took a break. It was midday in early spring, and the sun's rays warmed the grasslands. Sweat poured from the soldiers, their faces flushed from the exertion. Lin Wanrong, on the other hand, appeared unphased. The clothes Sister An had made for him were extraordinarily breathable and cool. Even after hours of travel, not a drop of sweat was visible on him.

Old Hu wiped his brow, shaking off beads of sweat that had turned dark from the dust. "We're about sixty miles away. If we consider the pace of the nomads, they should be over ninety miles away from Ha'er Helin at the moment."

"Very well," Lin Wanrong nodded. "Brother Hu, give the order for everyone to stop and rest. Take note that we are deep within the grasslands. Chita is only around a hundred and twenty miles away. It's highly likely that nomad scouts are operating in the area. We need to be extra vigilant. No one is allowed to make noise, and absolutely no cooking fires. We'll make do with drinking water and eating dry rations for now."

Gao Qiu looked around, puzzled. The terrain was flat and open, making it difficult to set up hidden outposts but ideal for cavalry charges. "Brother Lin, there's still some time until nightfall. Why are we setting up camp so early? Are we spending the night here?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head, remaining silent. He looked toward the direction of Ha'er Helin. Hu Bugui caught on and softly asked, "General, are we planning a detour attack tonight?"

Lin Wanrong sighed. "Time is not on our side. We can't wait for Miss Xu's message any longer. Regardless of what's happening in Helan Mountain, we must go to the Turkic royal court. Even if

we only leave behind a footprint, it will be the indelible mark of our people. A resounding message to the nomads not to underestimate us. Brother Hu, this might be a perilous journey with no return. Are you afraid?"

Old Hu paused, then burst into hearty laughter. "Afraid? What's there to be afraid of? Raiding the nomads' lair is the dream of every patriot in our Empire. If I die, I'll die laughing!"

Lin Wanrong glanced at Gao Qiu. "What about you, Brother Gao?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Gao Qiu chuckled. "Ever since I followed you, Brother Lin, I've fought joyously and killed exhilaratingly. Where else could I find such thrills? Going to the Turkic royal court sounds exciting. Maybe we can even abduct a couple of women—Old Hu takes one, and I take one! If I die, I'd rather die in the arms of a Turkic beauty!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, his eyes distant. "Brother Hu, Brother Gao, let's not talk so lightly about life and death. We still have many things to enjoy. I have several wives waiting for me at home—Qingxuan, Qiaoqiao, and Xian'er. There's the lonely Fairy Ning on Thousand-Forsake Peak, and the fox-like Sister An in Miao Village. I promised her a return to the idyllic grasslands. So, we cannot die; we must not die! We all have to make it back alive."

He clenched his fists tightly, taking a deep breath, as if mustering courage for everyone around him. His tone was as steadfast as a rock. Influenced by his aura, Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui gripped their hands tightly together and declared, "We will return alive!" **Return to the Grasslands**

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter and said, "Excellent. Relay the orders—let the whole army rest, water the war horses, check the weapons, prepare water and dry rations. We'll set out when the sun sets."

The decision silently rippled through the crowd, immediately casting a solemn hush over them. Every soldier understood that tonight's battle was a new beginning, and a far more brutal campaign awaited them. No one shrank back in fear. In fact, there was a subtle sense of excitement and anticipation. Ever since they ventured deep into the grasslands, the issue of life and death had ceased to be a concern.

Lin Wanrong patrolled the ranks, meticulously inspecting each soldier's equipment and supplies. He could not afford the slightest negligence. Tonight's battle would deplete their reserves, and it was unclear when the next resupply would come. The more they prepared, the more hope they had.

When he returned to his war horse, he noticed that on it, a Turkic girl was tightly bound. Her long, flowing black hair obscured her beautiful face. She lay quietly, motionless, her bosom heaving gently, drawing tantalizing waves.

"Miss Yujia, did you sleep well last night?" Lin Wanrong said, untying her ropes with an indifferent smile as he helped her off the horse.

Having been bound for a long time, her blood circulation was poor. The moment her feet touched the ground, her legs trembled uncontrollably, and she collapsed.

As Lin Wanrong reached to help her up, the Turkic girl fiercely slapped his hand away. Grinding her teeth, Yujia forcefully steadied herself against the horse's back and slowly regained her footing. She lifted her head, her eyes flickering with an indomitable flame.

Lin Wanrong looked at her and was instantly shocked. Just overnight, she seemed to have lost considerable weight, her vibrant lips now a shade paler. Her flawless face bore no smile, but the fire in her light-blue eyes confirmed that this was still the living, breathing Yujia.

Despite being enemies, from a character standpoint, this resilient woman was truly admirable. Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly.

Yujia glared at him coldly. "What do you want to say, Great Hua man? Isn't the insult I've endured from you enough?"

Her clothes had been torn by An Biru, and what she was wearing now was an old garment previously worn by Lin Wanrong. The oversized, loose-fitting clothing enveloped her graceful figure but bore an oddly distinctive charm.

"Miss Yujia, perhaps you've never come to terms with being a captive," Lin Wanrong said calmly. "Consider what would happen if one of my kinsmen fell into Turkic hands. Then look at your current state—perhaps you should be thanking the god of the grasslands that you remain unscathed."

The bandit's eyes were cold as icy stones, and a disdainful sneer spread across his dark face, radiating an air of superiority and invincibility. Startled, Yujia quickly shook her head and retorted, "Don't flatter yourself. You've kept me here only to exploit me. You think I don't know that?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Little sister, you're incredibly clever, no wonder Sister An sings your praises!"

Upon hearing the mention of that fox-like and cunning woman, a deep pain flashed across Yujia's face. She clenched her fists, as if giving herself a pep talk, murmuring, "I'm not afraid of her; I must defeat her!"

Lin Wanrong laughed, 'It seems Sister An's methods are effective not just on me, but also on this Yueya'er.'

Hearing his laughter, Yujia shot him an annoyed glare. Two bright lipstick marks on his dusky face were conspicuously eye-catching, like two blooming flowers. She gritted her teeth and turned her head away, scoffing, "Where's your Master Sister? Gone missing? Weren't you overjoyed just last night? To still be so cheerful after being dumped—you're a rare spineless man indeed!"

"Keep poking at my sore spots, and I might just rip your clothes!" Lin Wanrong cackled and feigned a move to grab her.

Startled, Yujia clutched her chest and paled, as if reliving the events of the previous night. She and Lin Wanrong both had experienced Sister An's brutal methods firsthand.

Lin Wanrong sighed, "True love is long-lasting; it's not about spending every waking moment together or constantly touching each other. My feelings for Sister An are like drinking water; only I know its warmth or coldness. How could an outsider like you ever understand?—Nevermind, let's not discuss these inappropriate matters. Little sister Yueya'er, I have some great news for you—"

He grinned slyly, making an exaggerated circle with his hands. Yujia watched in trepidation, "What great news?!"

Lin Wanrong smirked, "I've already chosen a group of strong and able warriors for you—from Ejina and also from Ha'er Helin. They are robust and vigorous, and will soon come to meet you—"

The clever Yujia, hearing this, was both anxious and alarmed, "You used my golden blade?! You despicable man! Wo Lao Gong, I hate you! Just kill me!"

Unable to contain her tears, Yujia broke down, weeping as if the golden blade was her lifeblood.

'Isn't it just an old blade? Only you Turkic people would consider it a treasure,' Lin Wanrong sneered dismissively.

A sliver of the setting sun bloodied the sky, casting a melancholy red hue over the blue prairie. Hu Bugui quickly rode over and whispered, "General, it's about time."

Lin Wanrong responded calmly, "Order everyone to discard all their baggage and miscellaneous items. Only bring weapons and supplies. Our destination is Ha'er Helin. Move out!"

"Move out!" Hu Bugui swung his arm, and five thousand men cracked their whips in unison. The crisp sound of horse hooves rose like spring thunder, stirring up a cloud of dust that glowed in the vivid sunset before slowly disappearing into the horizon.

"Where are you going?!" Yujia was hoisted onto a horseback and asked amid her tears.

Mounting his horse, Lin Wanrong smiled slightly, "To a mysterious place, perhaps one you've long yearned for."

Chapter 563 Helan Mountain Will Never Fall

The sky of the grasslands changed as easily as a child's face. When they set out, it was clearly the calm of sunset, but after riding for just a couple of hours, a drizzling rain started to fall. Rain on the grasslands differed from that on the plains; without mountains or valleys to obstruct it, rain fell like pillars, stinging the face as it struck. The winds on the grassland were erratic, howling with wild abandon, tossing the mist and rain this way and that, sometimes east, sometimes west. A heavy blanket seemed to cover the silent, darkening expanse, enshrouded in the green mist that hung between heaven and earth.

This was the first rain they had encountered since entering the grasslands. It fell neither too early nor too late, teaching Lin Wanrong the full extent of nature's whims.

The rain wet the hooves of the horses, making the lush grass slick with moisture and turning the soil to slippery mud. The pace of the warhorses had to slow. The soldiers marched in the rain, their clothes soaked through. From a distance, this cavalry appeared like clouds drifting through the heavy mist, moving rapidly yet in perfect formation.

"The horses are slipping, and our speed is seriously affected. At this rate, I fear we won't reach Ha'er Helin until the early morning," Hu Bugui said, wiping the rain and sweat from his face, a worried look in his eyes.

This was truly bad luck. Lin Wanrong had accounted for many things, but not the weather. He sighed, "Rain in the west while the sun rises in the east. What worries me is that while we are caught in this downpour, the allied forces of the Ha'er Helin and Ejina tribes may be marching under a clear, starry sky. Their speed would greatly outpace ours. If they reach Dalanzha and find no trace of us, they will surely rush back. The Turkic people would ride day and night to rescue Yujia, and likewise, they would ride back just as fast. If we're not careful, we may end up cornered."

Lin Wanrong's concerns were valid. After much effort to lure thousands of capable men from Ejina and Ha'er Helin, his aim was to exploit this time difference and launch a surprise attack. But this unexpected heavy rain threatened to ruin that advantage. If caught by the Turkic people, escaping would become a difficult task.

Hu Bugui nodded gravely, "General, you are absolutely right. While it rains here, the weather in Dalanzha could very well be clear. The unpredictable weather on the grasslands is like a child's face; no one knows when it will change. Our scouts up ahead have not returned yet, so we don't know the situation there."

"So what should we do now? Advance or halt?" Gao Qiu asked anxiously.

"We can't stop," Lin Wanrong declared firmly. "We are in a race against time. Our window of opportunity is equal to that of the Turkic people. If we halt now, by the time those Turkic troops return to their tribes, all our efforts would have been in vain. Who knows when we'll get another chance to pass through Ejina and advance on the Turkic court. Brother Hu, what are your thoughts?"

Hu Bugui nodded solemnly and said, "I agree with the general's opinion. This is a heaven-sent opportunity we cannot afford to miss. War is, by nature, a risky business."

"Excellent," Lin Wanrong waved his hand vigorously. "Order all our men to spare no horses. Speed is of the essence now. We'll replenish our warhorses and supplies once we take Ejina."

The trio resolved, without further ado, to move forward. Leading five thousand soldiers, they advanced through the rain. Navigating the vast, dark grasslands required a keen sense of direction. To avoid getting lost or scattered, Hu Bugui, the most experienced in grassland terrain, took the lead while Gao Qiu brought up the rear. Together, they coordinated smoothly and headed toward Ha'er

Helin. The only carriage in the procession was reserved for Li Wuling. No matter how dire the circumstances, they would never abandon one of their own.

As the rain intensified, visibility plunged. Lin Wanrong could only chuckle wryly at the heavens, for even his horse had trouble maintaining its footing on the suddenly treacherous plains.

After an indeterminate amount of time, soaked to the bone, Lin Wanrong shivered uncontrollably. He glanced at the nearby horse. The Turkic girl riding it was just as drenched; her wet clothes clung tightly to her body, emphasizing her striking physique. Rainwater saturated her hair, streaming down her cheeks in clear rivulets. She appeared pale, her eyes shut tight, her delicate form shivering in the harsh wind and cold rain, like a fragile blade of grass.

‘The heavens are impartial,’ Lin Wanrong sighed. ‘Both the people of Great Hua and the Turkic tribes suffer under the same sky.’

Pulling a robe from his bag, a garment that was among the few belongings he had left, and one sewn by Qiaoqiao herself, Lin Wanrong draped it over the shivering girl.

A flicker of warmth thawed her cold body. Opening her eyes, she found herself enveloped in a fragrant, new robe. Raindrops splashed onto the fabric, leaving fresh wet marks.

"I don't want—don't want your false compassion!" she snapped, turning her head away in anger. Her face flushed, tear tracks—or were they rain?—slid down her cheeks.

Wiping the rain off his face, Lin Wanrong shook his head and chuckled coldly, "Call it false compassion, then. When will your Turkic people learn to offer even that?"

Rain streamed down his dark face. His once neat hair was now disheveled, and the vivid lipstick marks had faded under the relentless rain. Immersed in the downpour, his entire demeanor seemed changed, tinged with a form of disarray that was different from before.

The young girl huffed, "It's none of your business what we Turks do." Her voice had unintentionally softened, and beneath the cold, she instinctively burrowed deeper into the warmth of the robe.

Observing the shivering Yujia curled up, Lin Wanrong chuckled and remarked, "The robe is warm, isn't it? My wife spent several nights sewing it by hand before I went off to war. In our Great Hua tradition, before a soldier departs for battle, his wife or lover would personally sew clothes for him,

hoping for his safe return. But as time passes and seasons change, how many of these brave warriors actually return from the battlefield? Countless beautiful women wait their entire lives, turning into 'waiting wife stones' on the mountain cliffs—a sentiment deeply rooted in our Great Hua culture. It's something you Turks will never understand."

Yujia became instantly irritated, "It's not only in your Great Hua that such devoted lovers exist. Our Turk men and women share the same sentiments. Every Turk woman's lover battles on the frontlines. They too risk their lives and face eternal separation from their beloved wives."

"Why the hell do you keep instigating wars then? For fun?" Lin Wanrong roared in anger, his eyes blazing. With a swift motion, he whipped the steed carrying Yujia. Holding the reins, the horse neighed and pranced, causing Yujia's figure to sway gracefully. ~~RA#0ES~~

Witnessing Lin Wanrong's furious, flushed face, Yujia's chest heaved rapidly, "Wo Lao Gong, how dare you insult me?"

"Insulting you is the least of it," Lin Wanrong retorted with a dark expression, "If you anger me further, I'll show you what a real bandit is like. You think you're beautiful? I'll strip you bare and let the wolves of the plains and your own people admire your beauty!"

His sudden change in demeanor was startling. One moment he was speaking gently, and the next, he was raging like a wild beast. The fiery intensity in his eyes sent chills down Yujia's spine.

She gritted her teeth and defiantly raised her face, "War is waged so that my people and future generations can acquire richer lands. So they can escape the harsh elements and lead prosperous lives. What's wrong with that?"

With a sharp slap, Lin Wanrong struck Yujia's curvaceous behind, the crisp sound echoing in the distance.

"What's wrong? Just because you want your people to live better, you think you can invade others' lands and slaughter other races?" Lin Wanrong, now truly angered, slapped her again, the sound clear and distinct. "Every rogue in the world desires you. Does that mean they can tie you up, strip you, and do as they please? How can you justify such bandit logic? Open your eyes and see. The wars you instigate lead to the devastation of two nations and rivers of blood. What have you gained? Rich lands? Prosperous lives? Ask your people. When they die in battle, do they find wealth and abundance? I really want to punch you!"

He had asked a question and then slapped Yujia on her buttocks. The loud sound startled everyone around. The soldiers passing by stared at the furious dark-faced commander, wanting to laugh but not daring to. Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu exchanged glances. Old Gao nodded, "Brother Lin has lost his temper. The Turkic girl is in trouble now!"

Humiliated by this bandit and watched by the laughing people of Great Hua, the Turkic girl whimpered. Her cheeks turned bright red in an instant, and her chest heaved rapidly. She glared at him fiercely, her voice trembling with rage, "Wo Lao Gong, kill me. Just kill me."

Lin Wanrong flexed his sore wrist, thinking about how bouncy the girl's buttocks were, making his scalp tingle. He chuckled coldly, "Why would I kill you? Weren't you so keen on conquering others? I want to show you how you and your people are conquered by others!"

"We, the Turkic people, will never be conquered!" Yujia struggled continuously. Raindrops hit her body and face, and her slightly blue eyes were filled with tears of defiance.

"Never be conquered?" Lin Wanrong sneered, slowly moving closer to her face, "Miss Yujia, look into my eyes."

The girl unconsciously lifted her head, meeting Lin Wanrong's dark pupils. The despicable bandit's eyes were clear as water, as transparent as crystal, deeper than the starry sky. It felt familiar, and Yujia was momentarily stunned. Tears rolled down like rain, and she quickly lowered her head, "Look, look at what?! I won't look!"

Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, "I want you to remember my black eyes and yellow skin. This is a nation that has never been conquered. They have a vast culture and profound civilization, standing tall in this world for thousands of years, never falling. But your Turkic people," he waved his hand dismissively, "in a few hundred years, the name 'Turkic' will only exist in history."

Yujia gasped, "Nonsense. We Turkic are invincible. We will continue forever!"

"Continue forever? With your constant wars and killings? Wake up, little sister!" Lin Wanrong said, patting her cheek, "Humans shouldn't think with their buttocks—ouch—you bit me again!"

In his moment of triumph, his finger had landed near Yujia's lips. The Turkic girl bit down hard, showing no mercy. The intense pain made Lin Wanrong scream and pull back his finger, which now bore clear bite marks, oozing blood. Yujia stared at him, her eyes gleaming with vengeful satisfaction.

This little she-wolf! Lin Wanrong snorted and casually patted her buttocks again. Yujia whimpered, her face as red as blood, filled with shame and anger.

After disciplining the little she-wolf, the storm continued on the grassland. They were now only around twenty miles away from Ha'er Helin.

"General Lin, General Lin—" Hu Bugui rode his horse, braving the rain and wind, rushing from the front of the team. He was followed by several fast horses. They stopped in front of Lin Wanrong, and as Hu Bugui dismounted, tears began to form in his eyes.

"Brother Hu, what's wrong?" Lin Wanrong was startled. A tough man like Hu Bugui would never shed tears, even if it killed him.

Hu Bugui hurriedly shook his head, wiping away the tears in his eyes. He chuckled, "No, no, it's not what you think. I'm happy, General. Look, who's this?"

With a grin, he stepped aside, revealing a figure behind him—a young man of about sixteen or seventeen, his face sunburned, looking competent and elated as he stared at Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong was momentarily stunned, then he hugged the young man and roared, "Little Xu, Xu Zhen! Is it really you? How did you get here? How did you find us? My god, it's like a pie falls from the sky!"

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Xu Zhen joyously clenched his fists and said, "General, Advisor Xu sent me!"

Advisor Xu? Xu Zhiqing? The name was both familiar and unfamiliar. Lin Wanrong felt a surge of emotion, almost to the point of tears. Although they had been apart for only a short time, amidst the bloody battles across these grasslands, Helan Mountain and Miss Xu seemed as distant as clouds in the sky, seemingly having no relation to this isolated army.

Now, with Xu Zhen's sudden appearance, Lin Wanrong felt a return to reality. Though he had no idea how Xu Zhen had managed to find him, Xu Zhiqing's sentiments were as solid as the mountainous walls of Helan.

"General, this is a letter from Advisor Xu to you," Xu Zhen said, suppressing his excitement. He took out a small piece of sheepskin from his boot, unwrapped it, and revealed a clean letter inside.

A letter from Xu Zhiqing? Lin Wanrong took the letter, his palms slightly trembling. For this army deep in the grasslands, Helan Mountain was their root.

"The Battle of Bayanhot. Your reputation soars. You've penetrated the grasslands, cut off enemy supplies, and defended our homeland with your flesh and blood. The Turks tremble at the mention of your name. To express my gratitude, I have only this to say: Xu Zhiqing may die, but Helan Mountain will never fall!"

"Xu Zhiqing may die, but Helan Mountain will never fall." Just this one sentence said it all. Lin Wanrong grabbed Hu Bugui's hand and said softly yet firmly, "Brother Hu, Helan Mountain is still in our hands."

Old Hu wiped his tears and broke into a hearty laugh. "I knew it! Advisor Xu would definitely hold Helan Mountain. Du Xiuyuan, this bookish fellow, is quite something. Xu Zhen, all of you are remarkable! Our fights on these grasslands have not been in vain!"

"Your feelings are known to me, but the journey ahead is long and fraught with danger. Please take care of yourself and don't make people worry. I'm dressed in my best, half-buried in the sand. Day and night, I pray for your triumphant return."

The letter was like Xu Zhiqing herself: exceedingly simple, yet incredibly resolute. "Half-buried in the sand, awaiting your triumphant return"—this cryptic last sentence was their private code, understood only by Lin Wanrong. Though the letter was short, it was laden with unsaid emotions and profound implications.

Lin Wanrong gently caressed the white letter, overwhelmed with emotion. Rainwater hit his hair and face, mingling with his tears and dripping down. For a long time, he remained silent.

Chapter 564 The National Tutor of The Turks

Gao Qiu caught up from behind the ranks, and upon seeing Xu Zhen, was ecstatic. The men hugged and laughed, tears filling their eyes.

Observing Xu Zhen, Lin Wanrong noticed the man's sunburned face and dusty appearance. His clothes were tattered and torn. Clearly, the journey had been arduous. After a moment of silence, Lin Wanrong sighed and asked, "Little Xu, how did you get into the grasslands and how did you find us?"

"The story is quite long," Xu Zhen's eyes reddened slightly as he began. "Three days after you, General Hu, and Brother Gao entered the canyon, hundreds of thousands of Turks launched a frenzied attack on the Helan Valley. These Turkic tribesmen are fierce and mighty. Each wave of their attack amassed more than ten thousand men, assailing both passages leading to Xingqing Prefecture simultaneously. In three days, there were over forty full-scale charges."

"Advisor Xu issued a death order: from her rank downward, the entire army could only advance, retreating was not an option. With men still standing, the gate would hold; if the gate fell, all would perish. Swearing to defend Helan Mountain to the last breath! She personally oversaw the western pass and hadn't closed her eyes for three straight days. Over two hundred thousand of our brothers fought a life-and-death battle against the Turks in Helan Mountain. Not one person retreated. Blades glittered on both sides of the canyon, rivers of blood flowed. Our artillery, having been fired continuously, became so hot they could no longer fire. Those brothers simply drew their swords and charged. In just three days, we lost more than forty thousand men."

As he spoke, Xu Zhen's eyes grew increasingly red. Lin Wanrong, Hu Bugui, and Gao Qiu clenched their fists tightly, gritting their teeth in silence.

The thought of hundreds of thousands fighting a bloody battle, even without being present, painted a vivid picture of gruesome chaos. Helan Mountain was like the backbone of Great Hua; heads could be severed, blood could be spilled, but the backbone would never collapse!

"Helan Mountain's two canyons were captured several times, and reclaimed just as many. Of the tens of thousands in the suicide squads, only eight hundred survived. Brother Du's left arm was injured, General Zuo Qiu was wounded in the right rib, even Advisor Xu—"

"What happened to Advisor Xu?" Lin Wanrong gripped Xu Zhen's arm, his face filled with alarm.

Realizing his slip of the tongue, Xu Zhen quickly wiped the corners of his eyes and lowered his voice, "General, please don't ask. Advisor Xu forbade me from telling you."

Lin Wanrong's eyes flared with anger, "What do you mean, don't tell me? Do you listen to her or to me? Are you trying to kill me with worry?"

Xu Zhen, who had been brought from Shandong by Lin Wanrong himself, dared not disobey the man whose glare was so intimidating. With reddened eyes, he whispered, "While defending the pass, Advisor Xu was seriously injured by an arrow and has been bedridden for days. She instructed me not to report this to you, or else she would invoke military law."

Though Xu Zhen was vague, Lin Wanrong felt his heart ache. Xu Zhiqing herself was a renowned healer; if she had been bedridden for several days due to an arrow wound, her injuries must have been severe.

"General, don't worry," noticing Lin Wanrong's gloomy face, Xu Zhen hurriedly reassured him. "Before I left, Advisor Xu looked much better. She personally saw me off and asked me to tell you that everything in the army is fine, so you need not be overly concerned."

'Call that fine? She's severely injured!' Lin Wanrong sighed helplessly. Miss Xu was as stubborn as ever. He used to find her stubbornness, even her obstinacy, rather annoying. But now, wasn't that very trait what set Xu Zhiqing apart from everyone else? He thought of the moment they had parted, of how Miss Xu had softly sung on the mountainside and bid him a melancholy farewell. The thought brought a tinge of sourness to his nose.

Gao Qiu, listening to Xu Zhen speak only halfway, grew increasingly anxious, as if scratched by a cat. He quickly grabbed Xu Zhen's arm and asked, "What happened next? What about Helan Mountain? Did the Turks attack again? How did you get to the grasslands, and how did you find us? Little Xu, can't you just tell it all at once? I'm dying of suspense here!"

Wiping the corner of his eyes, Xu Zhen gave an embarrassed smile before continuing: "Three days after the Turks launched their fierce attack, the field was filled with corpses, and the losses were severe. In the following days, they changed their tactics. They used harassment strategies, feigning an attack before retreating, then feigning another. We never knew when their feigned attacks would turn real. Our troops grew exhausted from days of such defense. Suddenly, one night, the Turks attacked as if they had gone mad. They mobilized all their forces and struck hard at the Western Foothill Passage. Led by Left Prince Batur, hundreds of thousands of Turks darkened the base of the mountain. The battle lasted a day and two nights. We fought in and out of the Western Foothill Passage and eventually regained control of the gorge. Advisor Xu was severely wounded in this battle. Unable to break through, the Turks retreated thirty miles by the third morning. That evening, we received news that General Lin had captured the Turks' grain depot in Bayanhot, setting fire to supplies meant for an army of 300,000. That was the Turks' last counterattack! Upon hearing the news, our troops were exhilarated, cheering and leaping for joy—even the severely injured Miss Xu wept with happiness."

"Miss Xu cried?" Lin Wanrong murmured to himself. At that moment, he understood Xu Zhiqing's complex emotions better than anyone in the world.

Xu Zhen nodded, "The Turks retreated thirty miles. A few days later, we heard that there was a large force of bandits from the Great Hua raiding Turkic merchant caravans and tribes on the grasslands. We also heard a strange name among the Turks, and Miss Xu said it must be you, General. She knew what you were planning, but had no way to contact you."

"And how did you enter the grasslands?" Lin Wanrong asked solemnly.

Xu Zhen's face lit up with excitement: "Just when we were at a loss, a mysterious figure delivered a letter to Miss Xu with just six words—"Through the Gorge, Into the Grasslands.'" This reminded Advisor Xu that if you could pass through Helan Mountain to get to the Alxa plains, so could we. The next day, she ordered me to lead a group of more than ten brothers, following the path you had blazed. Strangely enough, as soon as we entered the gorge, we found road markers to guide us. Although the journey was fraught with hardships, we indeed entered the grasslands. Looking back, those road markers had all vanished." rAÑÖ B EŞ

‘A sage? A guidepost?’ Lin Wanrong was dumbfounded. ‘Could it be the work of Sister An? But when I decimated Labuli in Bayanhot, that was her masterpiece. According to the timeline, she was with me all along. Even if Sister An could duplicate herself, it wouldn't be possible for her to be both in the Helan Mountains and the grasslands simultaneously. This is truly mystifying.’

"It's just unfortunate that a recent heavy rain has washed away the roads in the canyon. It's now impossible to cross the Helan Mountains to enter the grasslands," Xu Zhen said, clearly disappointed.

Now that Bayanhot had fallen, the strategic significance of this mysterious path was lost if the Turks retreated to the grasslands. Lin Wanrong was not particularly disappointed. What amazed him was how Xu Zhen had found their current location.

"After entering the grasslands, we first arrived at Bayanhot, then moved to Dalanzha. We nearly encountered the Turkic cavalry several times. But at every critical moment, someone guided us!" Xu Zhen said, retrieving a small ball of paper from his sleeve and handing it to Lin Wanrong.

The paper was a simple map that sketched the locations of several tribes. The bold, dark lines indicated Lin Wanrong's journey. A recently-added tribe on the map was Chita, which was more than a hundred and twenty miles away from them. The lines were clearly drawn, with elegant

penmanship that seemed to be from a woman. However, the identity of the author was impossible to deduce from the simple lines alone.

"We followed this map all the way and were discovered by scouts in the front. That's how we found you, General," Xu Zhen finally finished explaining their journey. He took a deep breath and gratefully drank several gulps from the water skin handed to him by Hu Bugui.

Raindrops pattered on the paper, making a faint rustling sound. Lin Wanrong stared at it, his mind awash with questions. The person who could draw such a detailed map would have to know the whereabouts of these 5,000 troops extremely well. The most suspicious person would naturally be Sister An. But Sister An left only this morning and didn't mention this matter; she should be in the dark. Moreover, based on the timeline, Sister An had been with him all this time, leaving her no opportunity to guide Xu Zhen.

There were only a few women capable of both aiding him and remaining undetected. Xian'er, Qingxuan, Sister An, and Ning Yuxi all had this ability. The first two were far away in the capital, and the latter had just left. That leaves—

"It's Fairy Ning!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, startling himself into jumping up and quickly looking around.

Amidst the mist and rain, the sky was dim; his soldiers were marching forward diligently, not slackening in the slightest. There was no sign of Fairy Ning. Upon closer examination of the lines on the paper, they began to resemble Ning Yuxi's delicate eyebrows more and more. Given Fairy Ning's temperament, if she were secretly following, she would be even quieter and harder to detect than An Biru.

'So both Sister An and Fairy Ning had been accompanying me all along.' Lin Wanrong felt a mixture of unspoken sorrow and joy, his eyes involuntarily moistening. With these two extraordinary women, one virtuous and one mischievous, accompanying him for thousands of miles—how could anyone else claim to be the luckiest person in the world but him?

Amidst the swaying wind and rain, Lin Wanrong found himself entranced. For a fleeting moment, the storm morphed into the entrancing figure of Ning Yuxi.

Noticing his dazed expression, a mixture of joy and sorrow, Gao Qiu hastily patted him on the shoulder. "Brother Lin, what's wrong with you?"

Shaken from his reverie, Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "I'm just too happy. We've got news of Helan Mountain and Miss Xu, and we've met Xu Zhen. How could I not be thrilled? Brother Gao, Brother Hu, I have no doubt that we'll make it back alive!"

While the news of Helan Mountain was certainly uplifting, Gao Qiu and Old Hu exchanged puzzled glances, sensing that General Lin was withholding some other good news.

"General, there's one more thing," Hu Bugui said, pausing to furrow his brows. "The scouts up ahead have returned. Just as you predicted, the allied forces of Ejina and Ha'er Helin failed to discover our whereabouts in Dalanzha and have quickly turned back. Accompanying them are the twenty thousand Turkic cavalry we lured to Wuyuan earlier."

Lin Wanrong uttered a nonchalant "Oh" and grinned. "So they've rendezvoused? By that account, their returning forces must number at least thirty thousand, correct?"

Hu Bugui nodded gravely. "Easily more than thirty thousand. And they're moving fast. With clear weather on their side, they're just over sixty miles away from Ha'er Helin."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, his face brimming with confidence. "Thirty thousand it is then. We don't have to engage them head-on; thirty thousand or three thousand, it's all the same. Let's see who's faster. Xu Zhen, you and these brothers arrived just in time. We're about to make a big move. Give the order to march towards Ha'er Helin at full speed."

News of Xu Zhen's arrival spread rapidly throughout the army, fueling their passion. The unbreakable vow to never let Helan Mountain fall resonated in the ears of every warrior deep in the plains. Their eyes filled with fervent tears, a sense of blood-bound kinship they hadn't felt in a long time.

The torrential rain couldn't dampen the blazing spirits of the Great Hua cavalry. Tapping into every ounce of their potential, they galloped freely. Laughter spread across their faces as the rain became a baptism of their fervor.

The Turkic forces seemed to realize something was amiss; they raced back without stopping. It became a test of speed and endurance for both sides.

By the time word arrived that the enemy was just sixty miles away, five thousand Great Hua cavalry had already appeared, silent and menacing, on the outskirts of Ha'er Helin.

Under the azure sky, the sprawling Turkic camp looked like a giant umbrella, its numerous tents appearing pale and powerless in the storm. Awaiting them were the fiery hooves of the Great Hua soldiers.

"General, let's make our move," said Xu Zhen, who had just joined Lin Wanrong. The young man's face radiated murderous intent. To him, the fiery raids on Bayanhot and Dalanzha were merely legends created by General Lin. This was his first real skirmish against the enemy on their own turf. The bloody battle of Helan Mountain vividly replayed in his mind as flames flickered in his eyes. Veins bulged on his face as he requested permission to engage the enemy from Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong gave a slight nod, his eyes widening as they swept over the ranks of 5,000 valiant warriors standing before him. "Brothers—are you ready?!"

A collective roar erupted from the soldiers, piercing through the dissipating wind and rain, soaring up to the heavens.

With a wave of Lin Wanrong's hands, the tumultuous roar abruptly ceased.

"Our ultimate goal is not this small tribe of Ha'er Helin. But it's a path we must traverse. I have but one demand. Let your blades be swift, accurate, and ruthless. Crush the Turkic tents under your invincible hooves. We won't linger, but the pain we inflict will be forever etched in the hearts of the Turks!"

His clear and resonant voice reverberated in the ears of the soldiers, igniting their spirit.

"Light the torches!" Hu Bugui's shout broke through the clouds. With a "whoosh," countless fire starters ignited simultaneously. The blazing torches illuminated half the sky in an instant, flushing the soldiers' cheeks with excitement.

This sudden burst of light, akin to lightning flashing across the sky, jolted the slumbering Turkic people awake. Bleary-eyed, they rushed out of their tents, only to witness a scene they would never forget for the rest of their lives.

The torches lit up the sky, revealing numerous cold and merciless faces close at hand, devoid of any emotion. The only thing ablaze were the flames in their eyes.

"The people of Great Hua are here!" A shrill cry from an unknown source instantly roused the Turkic people. They turned and ran like mad, rushing toward the stables.

"For our fallen brothers at Helan Mountain, attack!" Xu Zhen's battle cry shattered the heavens. Countless galloping steeds, like swiftly moving clouds, charged toward Ha'er Helin. The Turkic people, who hastily rose to face the enemy, had no time to equip their bows and arrows; bare-chested and wielding large blades, they met the onslaught of Great Hua's elite forces.

As Xu Zhen's blade rose and fell, a severed head, drenched in blood, spiraled through the air, landing squarely on the face of a nearby Turk. His indomitable presence struck terror even in the battle-hardened Turkic warriors. Before they could react, the cold blades of Great Hua were already plunging into their bodies.

It was a foregone conclusion. The two sides were not evenly matched. Hooves trampled over the white tents, while numerous blossoms of fresh blood bloomed on the white fabric. Knowing time was of the essence, the soldiers executed their commander's "swift, accurate, and ruthless" mantra to the fullest. The Turkic camp was soon engulfed in flames.

"General, the Turks are accelerating! Their vanguard is now just fifty miles away from us!" A scout reported as Ha'er Helin burned to cinders in the background. Lin Wanrong nodded and gestured to Hu Bugui beside him.

Old Hu spurred his horse forward, brandishing his battle blade. "All units, hear my command! Our next target is Ejina. Move out!"

As Yujia had so aptly described, Great Hua's cavalry was like a band of marauding bandits drifting across the grasslands. After plundering one tribe, they promptly moved on to their next target. No one could stop their whirlwind advance.

The Ejina tribe was situated close to Yiwu, marking the obligatory route to the perilous Sea of Death, the Lop Nur. A mere hundred miles away from Ha'er Helin, the infuriated Turks advanced at an almost unbelievable speed. When they were still sixty miles away, they split into two groups. One group headed for Ha'er Helin, while the other dashed desperately towards Ejina, which had yet to be attacked.

As five thousand soldiers stood before the Ejina tribe, Hu Bugui brought the latest news on the Turks. "General, the Turks are just eighteen miles away from us."

While a storm raged in Ha'er Helin ten miles away, Ejina enjoyed clear and refreshing air. The moon was high, and the warmth in the air was palpable. Faint roars from the distant desert sands could be heard.

Looking out, Yiwu, which was connected to Ejina, was a mix of lush green grasslands on one side and endless snow-like silver sands on the other. The contrasting shades of green and white glistened under the radiant moonlight. Ejina and Yiwu served as gateways to the infamous Sea of Death, Lop Nur. For a thousand years, it was said that no one had ever returned alive from the Sea of Death. Even the ferocious Turks dared not venture into this notorious wasteland. Ejina was the tribe closest to the desert, marking the boundary between the grasslands and the Lop Nur.

Inside the tents of the Ejina tribe, frightened Turks were crammed together. Facing the arrival of the mighty forces from Great Hua, many couldn't believe their eyes. After numerous confirmations, they finally accepted the grim reality. On one side lay the Sea of Death, and on the other, the iron cavalry of Great Hua—a dilemma with no way out. Their eyes were filled with fear and despair.

Living next to the desert, the Turks were all too familiar with its merciless nature. Compared to the threats of the Sea of Death, they'd rather face the wrathful soldiers of Great Hua.

"What a vast desert, its sands like snow; and the moon over the Yanshan Mountains seems to hang low," Lin Wanrong softly recited, seemingly indifferent to the scene before him in Ejina.

Hu Bugui grew anxious and carefully said, "General, the Turks are only eighteen miles away now!"

Eighteen miles— even if the Turks could fly, they wouldn't reach them in less than an hour. And an hour was enough time to accomplish many things. Lin Wanrong smiled and raised a few fingers. "Brother Hu, is three cups of tea's time enough for you?"

Three cups of tea was indeed a short span, but facing this utterly one-sided battlefield, Hu Bugui found no reason to refuse. With a hearty laugh, he spurred his horse forward, his troops following him like a whirlwind into the Ejina tribe.

Like Ha'er Helin, the Ejina tribe had already seen its able-bodied men drafted away. The few hundred men left were not even enough to fill the gaps between Great Hua's cavalry's teeth.

True to Lin Wanrong's words, it took only the time of a few cups of tea before the Wolf Banner of the Turks slowly fell at their feet.

Both Ejina and Ha'er Helin, as two of the Turks' larger tribes, were well-supplied. Without waiting for Lin Wanrong's orders, the troops replenished their food and water, and switched their horses, preparing for the final leg of their journey into the desert.

With his body laden with food and water bags, Hu Bugui walked over, his demeanor full of vigor. He chuckled, "General Lin, we're all set. When does the army march into the desert?"

Old Hu was an impatient man. "Why the rush? We're heading into the desert, not going to a wedding ceremony," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Hold on, the Turks haven't had their final meal yet."

"Their final meal? What do you mean?" Hu Bugui looked at him, puzzled.

Lin Wanrong gave a mysterious smile and shook his head. "Brother Hu, how's the collection of all the tung oil left in Ejina going?"

"We've gathered all that was left, except for some we kept as backup," Hu Bugui nodded, looking curiously at him. "General Lin, you told us not to burn the tents and instead gather all this tung oil. Are you planning to start a fire?"

"Indeed, I am planning to start a fire, but it's for the nomads." Lin Wanrong grinned. "Brother Hu, gather a few hundred men and sprinkle this tung oil on the Turkic tents. Make sure you sprinkle some on each tent and lay dry straw in between them. Then add more tung oil. Let's play a game of 'burning the camp' with the nomads."

"So that's the plan!" Hu Bugui finally understood, his eyes lighting up. "Even on the verge of entering the desert, you still haven't forgotten to give the Turks a hard time. You really are something else, Brother Lin."

The cold moonlight bathed the vast desert. In the far distance, plumes of smoke rose into the sky, accompanied by a low, rumbling sound of horse hooves that echoed like spring thunder. The ground itself seemed to tremble. "The reputation of the Turkic cavalry is truly well-deserved," Hu Bugui observed, after listening carefully.

"This isn't about them respecting us," Lin Wanrong smiled wistfully. "After the fall of Ha'er Helin, they've deduced that our next stop will be neighboring Ejina, and have thus sent a heavy force to chase us. Even among the Turks, there are wise men."

With a sweeping gesture, Lin Wanrong led his five thousand soldiers to mount their horses. They adjusted their provisions and set off toward the border between the grasslands and the desert.

As they neared the desert, eerie whistling winds raced past their ears. Everyone instinctively pulled their collars tight and buried their faces in their garments. A gust of wind-blown sand smacked Lin Wanrong across his mouth and face. He spat out the grit in disgust. "This old hag of a desert hasn't even brushed her teeth, and she dares to get intimate with me? Preposterous!" Everyone burst into laughter, lightening the tense atmosphere as they neared the 'sea of death'.

Halting at the edge of the desert, Lin Wanrong signaled to his subordinates. "Xu Zhen, Brother Gao, lead the men into the desert immediately—"

Both Xu Zhen and Gao were startled. "What about you?"

Lin Wanrong grinned, "I'll stay behind with Brother Hu to play a game of 'burning the camp' with these Turks."

Despite not fully understanding Lin Wanrong's plan, the deep trust built over time made them nod in agreement. Xu Zhen gave a firm nod, "Your orders will be obeyed!" He turned his horse around and, with a wave of his hand, led the five thousand soldiers into the boundless sands.

The trust that comes in life-or-death situations is the most touching of all. Seeing the faith his soldiers had in him, Lin Wanrong clenched his fists tightly and let out a low roar to pump himself up.

"General, the Turks have arrived!" Hu Bugui gestured with a sweep of his hand. Amidst a sky filled with swirling dust, dozens of wolf banners fluttered high in the wind. A dark mass of mounted Turks, like a whirlwind, kicked up endless dust and sand as they charged through the tents of the Ejina tribe, rushing toward the edge of the desert.

Just as Hu Bugui had described, there were indeed more than twenty thousand Turks before him. Their vanguard had already passed through the Ejina tents, while the following cavalry still waited outside the tents, forming an extended line that seemed to have no end in sight.

The leader of the Turks, when several hundred yards from the desert's edge, abruptly gestured with his hand. Instantly, the Turks behind him came to a unanimous stop. Aside from the snorts of war horses, the battlefield fell eerily silent.

In the distance, where the grasslands met the desert, two war horses stood still. Seated atop them were two men of the Great Hua Empire. One held a blade and the other a bow, both men with dark faces and yellow skin, emanating a solemn, chilling aura.

A piercing neigh broke the silence as one of the Great Hua horses reared its head and whinnied. The rider tightened his grip on the reins, his body swaying with the horse's movements. Bathed in dim moonlight that seemed to touch his back, the winds of the vast desert sent his long robe and hair flying. Sand and dust pounded against his back and face, a sense of bleak desolation filling the air, yet also a kind of indescribable murderous intent.

"Lin San of the Great Hua is here! Who dares to challenge me?" The dark-skinned man from the Great Hua Empire roared, his voice piercing through the grasslands and desert. His cold eyes and stern face appeared as if a dark god of death gleamed in the crystal-clear moonlight, terrifying all who looked upon him.

His voice traveled far, and although the following Turks were still rushing towards the Ejina tents, the front lines on both sides remained eerily quiet.

The leading Turk slowly removed his helmet, revealing sunken eyes and high cheekbones. His deep-blue eyes flickered slightly. From a distance, he raised a fist toward Lin Wanrong and called out in a slightly awkward Hua language, "Master Lin, long time no see! Lu Dongzan is here to welcome you to the grasslands!"

So it was Lu Dongzan, the National Tutor of the Turkic people! No wonder the pursuing Turks had such wits—he had actually rushed back to the grasslands from Wuyuan.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and responded with a fist and palm salute, "What honor and merit do I have to warrant the personal welcome from the esteemed National Tutor? It's most gratifying to see that you, Brother Lu, appear even more spirited than before!"

Lu Dongzan spurred his horse forward, looked at Lin Wanrong, and raised his thumb, sincerely saying, "Master Lin, you rode deep into our grasslands, cut off our life supplies, and saved Helan Mountain from disaster. From the enemy's perspective, I should hate you. But in terms of strategy and courage, you are the smartest man in the Great Hua and the one I, Lu Dongzan, respect the most!"

Chapter 565 "Anything is Possible"

Lin Wanrong chuckled heartily and declared loudly, "Lu Dongzan, you're too kind. To be honest, among the Turks, you're the one I admire the most. If not for the war, sharing a drink and a chat with you would be an incredibly joyous occasion."

"Master Lin, your words fill me with immense pride," replied Lu Dongzan, the Turkic National Tutor, a trace of pride and delight appearing on his face. "If you wish to drink and talk, I'd be more than happy to accompany you, and even surprise you in ways you'd never expect! But for now, I'd suggest you retreat from the edge of the Sea (Desert) of Death. Even my bravest Turkic warriors dare not venture there. I would hate to see a man I admire so much meet his end in such a place."

Lin Wanrong grinned, "So, you're suggesting that I retreat from the Sea of Death only to await your capture? That's a pretty neat calculation you've made!"

Lu Dongzan quickly shook his head, "Why would I capture you? You misunderstand, Master Lin. You're the most intelligent person in Great Hua, and few among us Turks could rival you. We Turks admire strength and valor. You have proven your mettle through your wit and courage. As long as you retreat from the Sea of Death, I assure you, the Turks will treat you with the respect accorded to a national hero. You can have any official title you desire; Bilge Khagan will bestow it upon you."

"Any official title, you say? You Turks really hold me in high regard." Lin Wanrong chuckled, "So, Lu Dongzan, can I really choose any position?"

Seeing that he was interested, Lu Dongzan eagerly nodded, "Any position, Master Lin, the choice is yours!"

"In that case, if I wanted to become your Khan, that would be alright too, yes?" Lin Wanrong said with a playful grin.

The expressions of the Turks opposite him changed dramatically. Angry glares and murmurs erupted.

Lu Dongzan gestured awkwardly to silence his subordinates, "Master Lin jests. You may choose any position below that of the Khan."

Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, waving his hand dismissively, "Well, that's no fun. You know my status in Great Hua, Brother Lu. Both of my wives are Princesses, and my father-in-law is the current Emperor. I could have my way in the Great Hua court if I so wished. Why would I come to the Turks to be subjected to anyone else? If you're really sincere, offer me the position of Khan, then I might consider it. Heh heh."

"Such arrogance! This Great Hua man is simply intolerable!" The Turks behind Lu Dongzan erupted in indignant shouts. Unable to contain their fury, the Turkic advisor gritted his teeth and declared, "Master Lin, I can't promise you that. All I can assure is that if you have the ability, miracles might just happen."

"So, you're saying I can't be Khan, after all?" Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed, "What a shame, what a real shame, Lu Dongzan. It seems we'll meet on the battlefield then!" With that, Lin Wanrong resolutely brandished his steel blade, his determined visage leaving no room for doubt.

Lu Dongzan glanced at him and shook his head slightly. "Why bother, Master Lin? Behind you is the Sea of Death with no way back, and in front of you are the invincible Turkic cavalry. You have nowhere to go! I hope you will think carefully."

"There's no need for careful thought!" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and urged his war horse forward a few steps. "Although my character is not the brightest, I know what can and cannot be done. We men of the Great Hua would rather die standing than live kneeling! Brother Lu, your Turkic people enjoy duels, don't they? Well, then, in the name of the compassionate Guanyin Bodhisattva, I challenge you to a duel. Do you dare accept?"

"A duel?" Lu Dongzan burst into laughter, eyeing the two lonely figures in front of Lin Wanrong and then glancing back at his tens of thousands of troops. "Master Lin, aside from your exceptional cunning, you also have impressively thick skin! In a situation where you are already ensnared in a death trap, is a duel even necessary? Lu Dongzan is not such a fool!"

"You're absolutely right, Brother Lu; you are truly wise!" Lin Wanrong sighed and shook his head. "However, I don't entirely agree with your assessment that I'm in a death trap. At the very least, I still have one powerful move left to play."

"What move?" Lu Dongzan's expression shifted slightly, as if he had thought of something.

Lin Wanrong advanced his horse two steps and smiled. "Nothing much, just a small golden blade. Oh, Brother Lu, you should have received that blade, right?"

A glint of sharpness flashed in Lu Dongzan's eyes. Suddenly, he revealed a finely crafted curved blade in his hand—delicate and beautiful, glittering in gold. It was the golden blade so precious to Yueya'er. "Master Lin, can you tell me where the owner of this blade is now?"

Lu Dongzan's eyes flickered, but his expression remained stern, betraying no emotion. Lin Wanrong chuckled. "I can't tell you her current whereabouts, but she's probably faring better than I am, not having to face so many hidden dangers and open threats."

"That's good to hear," the Turkic National Tutor nodded gravely. "Master Lin, Lu Dongzan is willing to negotiate a condition with you."

"What condition?" Lin Wanrong blinked.

"As long as you are willing to release the owner of this golden blade," Lu Dongzan solemnly stated, "I swear by the name of the God of the Plains, we will allow you to leave the grasslands safely."

Leave the grasslands safely? Lin Wanrong felt a stir in his heart. Lu Dongzan was really pulling out all the stops. What exactly was Yueya'er's identity?

"What do you say?" Seeing Lin Wanrong deep in thought, Lu Dongzan pressed urgently.

Lin Wanrong looked up and smiled. "It's somewhat intriguing. However, Brother Lu, as you know, I come from a business background. I don't engage in loss-making deals. Surely this Miss Yueya'er is worth more than that?"

Quite the businessman—valuing Yueya'er by the pound. Seeing Lin Wanrong grinning slyly, even the normally calm Lu Dongzan couldn't suppress his anger. "So what exactly do you want?"

"What else could I want? Raise the stakes, of course!" Lin Wanrong said casually. "For example, your Turkic people could admit defeat, sign treaties, disband the army, cede territories, pay reparations, offer annual tributes, establish free trade between the two countries, teach the Great Hua language, allow free migration, commerce, intermarriage, and postal communication between our lands, and so on..."

In a single breath, Lin Wanrong listed a myriad of points. Lu Dongzan's face went pale with fury. Waving his hand dismissively, he bellowed, "Master Lin, you are insufferably arrogant! If that's how it is, then I must take offense. Once I capture you, finding the owner of the golden blade won't be difficult. Men, capture Lin San alive! The reward is a thousand head of cattle and sheep, and three fine steeds! The title of 'Bravest Warrior' will be yours!"

'A thousand cattle and sheep, three fine steeds? So, in his eyes, I'm worth only livestock prices!' Lin Wanrong was so angry he felt like spitting blood. Lu Dongzan was showing him no respect. Unaware of the Turkic system of rewards, he felt he was being shortchanged. Little did he know, this offering of a thousand cattle and sheep and three fine horses was practically a fortune, among the highest material rewards the Turkic people offered.

Stirred by the promise of rich rewards, the dust swirled into the air. Thousands upon thousands of Turkic cavalry, brimming with aggression, charged forward. Their sabers gleamed with a silvery glow, shaking the earth and heavens.

Lin Wanrong and Hu Bugui stood at the boundary between the grassland and desert, coldly watching the onslaught of Turkic warriors rushing toward them like a torrent. Their grotesque faces and wild eyes were crystal clear. The thunderous hoofbeats resonated with the ground, almost bursting their eardrums.

The over twenty-thousand Turkic men were uncomfortably crowded, divided into three segments by Ejina's tents. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and waved, "Burn their camp! Brother Hu, it's your turn!"

"At your command!" Hu Bugui roared, igniting the blazing arrowhead. With a slight bend in his posture, he aimed his massive bow skyward, and the burning arrow was nocked.

Witnessing the large flaming arrow in Hu Bugui's bow, Lu Dongzan blinked. He turned to see the vast sea of Ejina's tents and the Turkic cavalry filling them. His face suddenly changed color, and he yelled in Turkic, "Quickly leave the tents; they're going to set fire!"

"Too late!" Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, "Brother Lu, let me show you some fireworks!"

Before his words had fully settled, Hu Bugui grunted and drew his bow with all his might. The blazing arrow, guided as if it had eyes, shot out and landed precisely on one of Ejina's central tents.

With a "boom," a pillar of fire shot into the sky. Tents doused in oil were instantly engulfed in flames. The dry grass between the tents caught fire quickly, spreading the blaze from one area to another. The frightened Turkic warhorses neighed loudly, breaking free from their riders' control, and scattered in all directions.

Hu Bugui shot two more arrows, setting more tents ablaze. The whole Ejina camp was enveloped in flames, and the Turkic warhorses ran around in panic. Amidst the chaos, people and horses were trampled, and screams filled the air.

Having never expected such cunning tactics right under his nose, Lu Dongzan's face flushed red with anger. Brandishing his saber, he led his Turkic cavalry directly toward Lin Wanrong and Hu Bugui.

Arrows whistled past them, swift as the wind on the plains. Seeing the sea of flames engulfing Ejina and the countless Turkic people busy putting out the fires, Lin Wanrong turned his horse around. He looked at Lu Dongzan's flushed face and laughed loudly, "Brother Lu, we shall meet again! Brother Hu, let's go!"

Both of them simultaneously whipped their horses, urging them forward. With a skyward neigh, the steeds lifted their front hooves and leaped swiftly, crossing the grassland in a blink and plunging into the desert winds and sands. A whirlwind of sand and dust arose, swirling around them until they were hardly visible.

Exhaling deeply, the Turkic cavalry came to a halt at the edge of the desert. They looked at the wild sands dancing in the sky, fear evident on their faces. Not a single one dared to set foot into it. Arrows rained down, disappearing into the depths of the desert, unable to discern the figures of the people from Great Hua within.

No one had ever emerged alive from this Sea of Death, and no one knew where it led. Surprisingly, the people from Great Hua had the audacity to venture into it, indifferent to the risks.

Lu Dongzan lingered at the edge of the desert, pondering for a moment. Then, with a nod, he picked up a heavy arrow beside him and securely tied something to it. With a sharp whistle, the arrow spun into the air, shooting deep into the desert.

With a clang, the arrowhead landed heavily on the sandy ground, startling Lin Wanrong. Hu Bugui shifted his gaze away from the riders at the edge of the desert, looking at the arrow in surprise. "Huh, there's something on it?"

The winds had been strong, and a layer of dust had quickly accumulated on the arrow. Lin Wanrong dismounted and picked it up. It was a heavy arrow, specifically designed by the Turks to pierce armor, and it felt substantial in his hand. Wiping off the dust, he saw a small box bound to the arrow with golden thread.

Upon opening the box, a flash of gold light burst forth, momentarily stunning Lin Wanrong. Hu Bugui exclaimed, "Isn't this Yujia's golden blade? Why would the Turks return it to us?"

Lin Wanrong was equally baffled. This blade was a token of affection from Yujia to her lover. Countless Turks had risked their lives for it; why would Lu Dongzan send it back?

Old Hu chuckled, "General, perhaps Yujia is Lu Dongzan's daughter. Maybe the Turks National Tutor saw your character and wants Yujia to offer you the blade as a proposal, inviting you to become his son-in-law!"

After inspecting the blade and finding no tampering, Lin Wanrong pocketed it, laughing. "Yujia is Lu Dongzan's daughter? A rotten tree can bear good fruit? Old Hu, your guess is quite something! Why not say she's the Khan of the Turks, wanting me to become her prince consort? That would make me feel a bit better, haha!"

Hu Bugui grinned, saying that if he was being absurd, General Lin could surely outdo him in making wild guesses. His keen eyes then fell on the box, almost entirely covered by sand, but with a corner of silk peeking out. "General, it looks like there's a letter as well!"

They had been so preoccupied with the blade that they hadn't noticed the silk scroll in the box. Lin Wanrong dusted off the box, pulling out the scroll and quickly scanning it under the moonlight.

The silk was soft and delicate, and on it were scrawled six large characters: "Anything is possible!"