

Finest 516

Chapter 516 The Beautiful Spy

The silver needle technique was an unparalleled skill exclusive to Vixen An and Fairy Ning; others could hardly imitate it. At such a crucial moment, who else could intervene but Fairy Ning? Lin Wanrong's emotions were so stirred that words failed to describe them. It was as if a roaring fire blazed within his chest.

"Fairy Ning, Yuxi, where are you?" Lin Wanrong disregarded the hundreds of soldiers engaged in fierce combat with the nomads. He stood in the center of the long street and let out a heart-rending howl that pierced through the cacophony of clashing swords, neighing horses, and resonated through the heavens.

Following behind Lin Wanrong, Du Xiuyuan grabbed Gao Qiu's clothes and cautiously asked, "Brother Gao, who is the general calling for?"

Gao Qiu shook his head solemnly, "Brother Du, there are things better left unasked. It's not uncommon for a promising young man like Brother Lin to have several beautiful women by his side."

Du Xiuyuan chuckled, nodding as if he had just come to a sudden realization.

Lin Wanrong stood in the middle of the street, his voice carrying far and wide. Despite the howling desert winds, there was still no sign of Ning Yuxi.

Could it be that it wasn't her who intervened? A wave of questions filled his mind for a moment. He recalled the elusive song from Thousand-Forsake Peak and Fairy Ning's ethereal presence, which filled him with a mixture of joy and sorrow, a flood of emotions welling up in his heart.

"General!" A soldier rushed over, saluting with clenched fists. "All eighteen Turkic warriors have been dealt with; eight were shot dead, and ten have been captured. What are your orders?"

Du Xiuyuan leaned in and whispered, "General, should we interrogate them?"

A fierce glint appeared in Lin Wanrong's eyes. "What's there to ask? At this point, it's our blades that will do the talking! Pass on my orders. Behead all the prisoners. Hang their heads on the north

city wall as a demonstration to our troops. Also, lock down all the city gates—allow entry but no exit. Conduct house-to-house searches throughout the city, focusing on nomads who are doing business here. If you have any suspects, capture first and ask questions later. For those who resist, kill them on the spot!"

His fury was real this time; he radiated killing intent, disregarding anyone's advice. He was determined to make an example out of these hapless nomads. Although Du Xiuyuan's suggestions had been dismissed, he was secretly thrilled, having never seen the general so imposing. It was just the kind of dominance they needed as battle loomed.

Lin Wanrong paused for a moment. The flames in Li Tai's camp had already been extinguished, and the sounds of fighting had gradually ceased. Just then, Hu Bugui, who had been dispatched to seal off the city gates, galloped back, his face beaming as if he were a blooming flower. "General, we've been had!"

Was this old Hu still half-asleep? Happy about being deceived? Lin Wanrong rolled his eyes, "I've been overworking my brain lately, Brother Hu. Could you please elaborate? What do you mean by 'we've been had'?"

Hu Bugui nodded, "I followed your orders to seal off the city gates, only to find that Advisor Xu was personally guarding the north gate. All the gates have already been locked tight; not a single person is allowed to leave."

Xu Zhiqing guarding the North Gate? What was going on? Lin Wanrong glanced at Hu Bugui, who chuckled, "Initially, I was also confused. But later, Advisor Xu explained that it's customary to root out traitors within the city before a major battle. Please don't worry, General Lin, everything is under control."

Rooting out traitors before a major battle? Lin Wanrong began to understand and laughed, "So you mean, the surprise attack on the commander's camp was a loophole deliberately left by Miss Xu? Damn it, she really fooled me; Advisor Xu's acting skills are extraordinary!"

"I thought the same," Hu Bugui wiped the sweat from his forehead, still a little shaken, "The moment I saw the Marshal's tent on fire, my soul almost left my body. If something happened to the Marshal, how would we continue the war? But it turns out, everything was part of Advisor Xu's calculations."

‘Not just Hu Bugui, even I was played by that girl! When I was talking to her earlier, she was so charming and captivating; I almost offered myself to her right then and there. The moment I turned

my back, this little minx had truly tricked me.' Lin Wanrong grunted in frustration, the annoyance in his heart palpable.

"General, are we still going to the main camp?" Seeing General Lin's disgruntled expression, Hu Bugui cautiously said, "Actually, from my perspective, Miss Xu's actions are justifiable. Xingqing Prefecture is a crucial frontier, frequented by nomadic merchants, so there must be many spies hidden within the city. Our central tent being located here, it's foreseeable that the nomads would take covert action. Advisor Xu turned their plan against them, exposing and eliminating the spies. This action strengthens our rear, allowing us to confidently face the enemy. Moreover, to maintain the secrecy of the plan, it was appropriate for her not to inform us." R

Lin Wanrong just snorted, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Moments earlier, he had been flirting with Xu Zhiqing, a feeling difficult to describe. Little did he know that the moment he turned his back, she showed her strong, independent nature, tricking him in such a calculated manner. Her personality was truly forceful.

'Stubborn horses, stubborn horses! It seems I have to practice my riding skills,' Lin Wanrong thought, grinning lecherously. He made a mock saddle shape with his hands and shrugged slightly, his face showing a perverse delight.

"What's gotten into the general?" Seeing Lin Wanrong's alternately sly and delighted expression, Hu Bugui was puzzled and tugged at Gao Qiu's sleeve for an explanation.

After observing for a moment, Gao Qiu nodded solemnly, "Based on my experience, Brother Lin is practicing a mysterious martial art. Look at his firm stance, standing like a plum blossom pile, his hands shaped like claws, thrusting forward with hidden yet overwhelming power. This adheres to the three principles of martial arts: stability, accuracy, and ruthlessness. Brother Lin has truly mastered it; grabbing firmly and touching securely, any object in his hands would be as soft as floating clouds, ever-changing—truly a profound martial art!"

Soft as floating clouds, ever-changing? Hu Bugui paused, baffled for a moment, then finally nodded in realization, "Ah, so it's the 'Steamed Bun Technique.' I've learned something new!"

After completing his "mystical" training routine, General Lin realized that Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu were staring at him with wide eyes. Only then did he become aware that his movements might have seemed somewhat indecent. Given the lecherous gaze of these two men, who knows what they might be thinking. He chuckled awkwardly, "Tomorrow we will be in a do-or-die battle with the Turks. I was just practicing some horse-riding moves in my spare time. Brother Hu, do you think my form is standard?"

Hu Bugui gave him a thumbs-up and exclaimed, "Such profound skills! Always ready, both fist and song, truly you are a model for all of us."

Lin Wanrong nodded with satisfaction and pulled Hu Bugui aside. "Brother Hu, I have an important task for you. Do we keep a daily count of our army, which consists of tens of thousands of men?"

"Of course. Every day when we break camp and set up anew, we count the numbers. This is the military protocol. General, why do you ask?"

"That makes it easier," Lin Wanrong clapped his hands, his face glowing with excitement. "Brother Hu, I want you to instruct the various units to count the number of soldiers tonight. If you find any unfamiliar faces who are particularly good-looking, report them to me immediately. Remember, this must be done discreetly and without raising any alarm. I want to give her a big surprise, hehe."

As Lin Wanrong laughed lasciviously, Hu Bugui felt goosebumps all over his body and started to sweat. He thought, 'So the general has this kind of hobby; I really couldn't tell before!'

Subconsciously distancing himself a few steps from Lin Wanrong, he carefully said, "General, we are on the eve of a major battle. I fear this will cause gossip and affect our army's fighting spirit, tarnishing your reputation. Please reconsider. If you have such needs, I know a place. In the capital, there is a place where actors who perform in operas are incredibly beautiful. When they put on dresses, they transform into enchanting beauties. Many people who appreciate this art form—"

Hu Bugui laughed, though it sounded more like crying. Lin Wanrong felt dizzy and wished he could smack Hu Bugui right then and there. 'What kind of place do you think I am interested in? Do you think I am some sort of pervert?'

His facial muscles twitched violently, and gritting his teeth, he patted Hu Bugui on the shoulder. "Very well, Brother Hu, you certainly know a lot of places. After we win the battle and return, I'll buy a couple of these famed performers for you to enjoy. I hear they are quite something!"

Hu Bugui shrank back, his face turning pale, and his body began to tremble.

'Serves you right for having such filthy thoughts!' Lin Wanrong, feeling a sense of vindication, couldn't help but laugh. "Don't worry, I was just joking with you. Just make sure you complete the

task I assigned you. Remember, if someone is exceptionally good-looking, you must report it to me. Better to wrongfully identify three thousand than to let one escape."

Hu Bugui left, trembling. Lin Wanrong hummed a few times. From a distance, the sound of footsteps approached; it was the official army dispatched by Xu Zhiqing, combined with the soldiers led by Du Xiuyuan. They were conducting house-to-house searches. When he looked for Gao Qiu who had been beside him, he was nowhere to be found.

This kind of dragnet search was not actually very effective, but its purpose was to create a tense atmosphere so that any remaining Turkic spies would not dare to make a move.

Speaking of Turkic spies, Lin Wanrong suddenly thought of the girl with pale blue eyes he had seen earlier that day, "Yueya'er" [Crescent Moon]. Her eyes were like a deep lake, captivating enough to make one's soul leap out. If she hadn't left the city yet, she could likely be found tonight.

He hoped that Du Xiuyuan would not listen to Gao Qiu and come up with the ridiculous idea of kidnapping a civilian girl. But what if they did, ignoring his advice? What if they were intent on bringing her back to warm his bed? Did he really want that? Or did he just think he did? 'Ah, what's the point of thinking about this now? I should go home and make my bed,' he muttered to himself.

His mind wandered, and the signs of his arousal became increasingly apparent. Fortunately, news arrived from the Marshal's tent: Miss Xu had brilliantly lured the enemy, the Marshal was safe, and they had captured more than 80 Turkic warriors that night. Their army had won its first battle!

'Ah, a successful first battle!' The news was invigorating. Lin Wanrong returned to his tent, admiration filling his heart, but sleep eluded him. One moment he was thinking about Qingxuan and Qiaoqiao, and the next, about Vixen An and Fairy Ning. Finally, he sat up and turned up the lamp to study the warning note more closely.

The color of the ink resembled Ning Yuxi's, although he wasn't sure if she even wore makeup. The handwriting seemed to belong to Fairy Ning, but it also resembled Qingxuan's or perhaps even Eldest Miss's. He named all the women he knew in his mind and then scratched his head in frustration. 'If it was a matter of recognizing them by touch, I could do it with my eyes closed,' he thought. 'But this skill of identifying people through handwriting is really not my forte.'

"Brother Lin, are you asleep?" A sneaky voice came from outside the tent; it was Gao Qiu.

Looking at the sky, it was well past midnight. 'Why does old Gao like to knock on doors at this hour? Probably enjoys the thrill of midnight,' Lin Wanrong thought as he yawned and let Gao Qiu in. "Brother Gao, where have you been? I had a hard time looking for you when you came back to camp."

Gao Qiu was covered in dust but looked exhilarated. "I went to kidnap a girl—no, no, I mean, I was doing you a favor."

"Doing me a favor?" Lin Wanrong sized him up and sighed, "Brother Gao, next time you claim to be doing me a favor, at least look more decent. Lots of eyes are watching, and I don't want people to think I'm a sleazy man."

Gao Qiu chuckled. "Brother Lin, I really was doing you a favor. I went with Du Xiuyuan to search for Turkic spies."

Lin Wanrong nodded appreciatively but then noticed Gao Qiu gulping down some water, his eyes gleaming. "Do you remember the Turkic woman we saw when entering the city today? I found her—so beautiful, she must be a spy! We must capture her!"

"You mean Yueya'er? Oh no, the Turkic woman? A beautiful spy?!" Lin Wanrong's eyes widened as he jumped up. "Brother Gao, you didn't actually bring her back, did you?! That's a crime! Weren't we supposed to win people over with virtue?—Ah, darn it, I haven't even made my bed yet!"

Chapter 517 The Lip Print on the Jade Flute

"Brother Lin, of course I know you have lofty ambitions and are a man of integrity. If it were women of our Great Hua, I, Gao Qiu, would never do such a heinous act. But she's a Turkic woman! Do you know how many Great Hua women the Turkic people have ravaged? When will this blood feud be avenged? Taking a Turkic woman—can that even be considered theft? This is the duty of every righteous Great Hua man, to avenge our sisters and bring honor to our nation!" Gao Qiu was indignant, spittle flying as he spoke.

"Taking Turkic women isn't considered theft? That's great—oh, no, Brother Gao, you misunderstood. What I meant is that it's too soon!" Lord Lin quickly corrected himself, his expression becoming serious. "What I mean is, we should at least wait until we reach the Turkic royal court, overthrow the tyrannical rule of Khan Bilge, and then take action. Our ideals should be grander—Brother Gao, where have you hidden that Turkic woman? I'll go seek vengeance right now!"

"I originally intended to bring her back—we found the carriage she was riding in when we searched a civilian house," Gao Qiu sighed regretfully. "But that stubborn Du Xiuyuan insisted on the Marshal's regulations against looting civilian property, punishable by military law. We hadn't even entered the courtyard when he stopped me. Isn't that infuriating? Taking women and looting property are two completely different things! Brother Lin, you must teach Du Xiuyuan a lesson. If he could be even one percent as flexible as you, he'd surely defeat the nomads."

'So, Yueya'er hasn't been captured yet,' Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, feeling a slight sense of disappointment. He patted Gao Qiu on the shoulder and said, "Brother Gao, Du Xiuyuan has a point. Forcibly taking civilian women is not acceptable; we should condemn such atrocities. However, if the woman is a spy, that's a different matter. But without evidence, you can't accuse someone just because they're beautiful. That doesn't hold up; we must persuade through virtue."

"Prove that she's a spy?" Gao Qiu chuckled sinisterly. "Do we even need proof? In the chaos of war, would a decent family allow their daughter to show her face in such dangerous territory? Only a female spy would have the audacity and the need. Look at her charming appearance; one glance from her is as powerful as a thousand troops. If she's not a spy, then where's the justice in this world?"

"Ah, is that so?" Lin Wanrong nodded slightly. "That seems somewhat reasonable. However, our army is disciplined; without evidence, we can't make baseless accusations."

Seeing that Brother Lin seemed unmoved, Gao Qiu hurriedly grabbed him, making exaggerated gestures. "Brother Lin, wartime is different. So many things have happened tonight; even the Marshal almost met with an accident. And that female spy just happens to appear in the city at this time. How coincidental can it be? It's better to be safe than sorry! Even if she's not a spy, we can't let a pure and innocent young woman suffer in a war zone. To watch a beautiful flower wither—that would be a great sin! Brother Lin, you are so elegant and dashing, how could you bear to commit such cruelty? This is not your style!"

"Fine, being too soft-hearted has always been my greatest weakness," General Lin sighed deeply. "I'll go take a look with you. If she really is a spy, then we'll bring her back to my tent for a thorough interrogation! But if she's a virtuous woman from the nomadic tribes, then we should let her leave immediately. The cannon fire is indiscriminate; if it ruins her face, imagine how distraught her parents would be! If she can't find her family in the meantime, I'll have no choice but to temporarily take her in, based on humanitarian principles—Hey, Brother Gao, why are you glaring at me? You doubt my integrity? It's only a temporary arrangement, not taking her in as a concubine."

Gao Qiu winked and chuckled deviously as he cupped his hands in a fist, "If that's the case, then on behalf of that Turkic woman, I thank General Lin for your great kindness. Ah, I've never met someone as upright as you, General Lin, in my entire life. She must be very fortunate to have run into you."

Both men burst into disreputable laughter. Gao Qiu then led the way, with Lin Wanrong following closely, accompanied by his personal troops to capture the female spy.

The situation in Xingqing was fraught, the city was sparsely populated. After tonight's assassination attempt on Li Tai, the army was conducting searches everywhere, and the city was far from its usual peaceful state.

Near the northern city gate, Gao Qiu stopped by a small alley and looked around cautiously before whispering, "Brother Lin, we're here. The Turkic female spy is hiding in the civilian house up ahead."

Lin Wanrong looked forward into the dark, narrow street where it was difficult to even see the road. The walls on either side were broken or toppled, long fallen into decay. About fifty to sixty yards away, in a courtyard enclosed by mud walls, a faint light flickered. It was a spacious courtyard, with several wagons parked in the center and stacks of goods piled on the side. Horses were heard sneezing occasionally. This was the merchant convoy he had spotted when they entered the city earlier in the day, so "Yueya'er" must be hiding here.

Du Xiuyuan, who had been lurking nearby with his men, quickly approached upon seeing Lin Wanrong arrive, "General Lin, you're finally here."

Lin Wanrong nodded gravely, "Brother Du, you've worked hard. I was dealing with military affairs in camp when Brother Gao came to report. He said there's something suspicious here, possibly harboring important spies from the nomadic tribes that pose a serious threat to the Marshal. I came to check it out myself. What's the situation inside? How many nomads are there, any armed with powerful bows or crossbows? Don't worry, I've already mobilized a hundred archers and five cannons from our Divine Machine Unit, along with three thousand infantry to assist you. They're on their way and will arrive shortly."

Mentioning both archers and cannons, Lin Wanrong's account made the situation seem extremely dire. Du Xiuyuan listened in astonishment and shot a glance at Gao, who had exaggerated the military intelligence. Unable to defend himself, Gao Qiu could only chuckle awkwardly a couple of times as an apology.

"Reporting to the General, the people living in this courtyard are the merchant convoy we saw when we entered the city. There are ten camels and five wagons in total. Since we didn't want to tip them off, we're not sure about the total number of people inside. But based on my estimate, there shouldn't be more than thirty. Most of them appear to be from our Empire and don't seem to carry any weapons. We have yet to identify any obvious spy traits. Whether or not they are spies sent by the nomads still needs verification."

Du Xiuyuan briefly described the situation inside the compound. Lin Wanrong nodded approvingly, "Well done, Brother Du. If there really are only around thirty people inside, it seems there's no need to deploy the Divine Machine Unit."

"With a courtyard of this size, how many people could it possibly hide?" Du Xiuyuan made a fist and saluted, "Even if the courtyard is filled with spies, I have enough confidence to handle it. There's no need to call for additional forces, General. Rest assured."

"Very well, we won't deploy the Divine Machine Unit or the Infantry," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Let's proceed as originally planned. The assassination attempt on the Marshal tonight has had a significant impact on our army. Therefore, we must carefully interrogate every foreigner in the city, especially the good-looking ones."

Du Xiuyuan acknowledged the order and led his soldiers to surround the compound. Gao Qiu, leading the charge, pounded on the compound's large gate, yelling, "Open up! Open up! The official army is here to search the premises!"

The clattering of swords and spears from the soldiers startled the mules and horses inside the courtyard, causing a commotion. After a moment's wait, a trembling voice emanated from a crack in the door, "Sirs, we are a merchant caravan from Longxi, here to do business beyond the Great Wall —" ❖

"Enough talk!" Gao Qiu, growing impatient, kicked open the door before the voice could finish. Hundreds of soldiers flooded in like a torrential river. The flickering firelight glinted off their shiny steel blades, frightening the merchant who opened the door into sitting abruptly on the ground.

Hearing the noises in the courtyard, the merchants from Great Hua who were resting inside had already gotten dressed. The sight of Gao Qiu and Du Xiuyuan leading an imposing group of armed men made their faces turn pale, and their bodies tremble like sieves. Among these Great Hua merchants were a few Turks who, though disheveled, appeared much calmer. Seeing the panicked and trembling Great Hua merchants, a look of contempt flashed across their eyes.

With a swish, Gao Qiu unsheathed his sword and roared, "Official army inspection! Those with clothes, put them on; those without, put on a sack! Listen to my command: men on the left, women on the right, and mules in the middle—"

His face was dark and his eyes were like burning coals; he looked menacing. Not just the Great Hua merchants, but even the Turkic merchants dared not meet his gaze. "What great energy, Brother Gao!" Even Du Xiuyuan couldn't help but praise him.

Gao Qiu chuckled proudly but then seemed a bit perplexed. There were plenty of people standing to the left of the mules, but not a single soul on the right.

"Eh?" Gao Qiu was instantly annoyed, waving his steel blade, "Where are the people? Is this all? Where are the women, no, the spies? Where are the good-looking spies?"

The merchant who had opened the door appeared to be around forty years old and seemed to be the leader of the merchant caravan. Seeing this official wildly swinging a blade as if ready to kill, he swallowed his fear and said respectfully, "Sir, spies? That's a grave misunderstanding! We are all legitimate merchants from Longxi. Look, I even have the official documents from Longxi to prove it."

Du Xiuyuan took the document and skimmed through it, nodding, "You say you're merchants from Longxi, what about them—"

He glanced at the few Turkic men and snorted coldly. The lead merchant quickly said, "Sir, you misunderstand. These men are friendly traders from the steppes and also anti-war activists within the Turkic tribes. See, we even have approval from Longxi Prefecture!"

He took a letter stamped with an official seal from his robe to hand it over. Gao Qiu's eyes widened; he snatched the letter, threw it on the ground, and stomped on it a few times. "Approval? What use is approval? I don't even acknowledge imperial decrees. Tell me, are these the only Turkic friendly traders and anti-war activists you speak of?"

The leader nodded, "At the moment, yes, these are the only ones."

"No women?"

The leader hesitated for a moment before answering, "No."

Lin Wanrong stood behind Gao Qiu and Du Xiuyuan, observing with a cold gaze. He noticed that when Gao Qiu asked questions, the eyes of the Turkic men flickered and repeatedly shifted towards the curtain inside the room. The curtain swayed slightly, as if hiding something.

"No?!" Gao Qiu was about to lose his temper, his blade raised, when Lin Wanrong pulled him back, smiling, "Brother Gao, haven't you forgotten? We discussed winning people over with virtue!"

Virtue at this time? Gao Qiu was sweating profusely. Lin Wanrong pointed towards the curtain and cheerfully called out, "Hey, is anyone in there?"

The expressions on the faces of the Turkic merchants gradually turned serious, their fists tightly clenched.

Realizing what Lin Wanrong was indicating, Gao Qiu chuckled and whispered, "Brother, they are Turkic and won't understand our Great Hua language. We should speak in Turkic. Hey, old man, how do you say 'is anyone in there?' in Turkic?"

He was referring to the lead merchant. The merchant rambled off a translation, making Gao Qiu dizzy. His hopeful eyes looked at Lin Wanrong, "Brother Lin, you're so smart, this Turkic phrase should be a piece of cake for you."

"It's just Turkic, simple!" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, didn't even blink, and called out to the curtain in perfect Turkic, "Inside, anyone? Come out, do work!"

Gao Qiu was stunned for a moment, then broke into joy, "Brother Lin, you're so smart. This Turkic is so easy to understand; I got half of it."

After shouting in "Turkic," the curtain remained eerily silent, so silent you could hear a pin drop. Lin Wanrong grunted and switched back to Chinese, "I'll count to five. If you don't come out, I'll send men to storm in. Brother Gao, get ready—"

'Count to five? Brother Lin is too merciful,' Gao Qiu thought. Just as he was pondering this, Lin Wanrong shouted, "Five! Brothers, charge!"

'So that's how he counts,' Gao Qiu thought, sweating profusely. He was still in a daze when Du Xiuyuan had already rushed ahead of him. Dozens of soldiers stormed into the room; there was no clashing of swords or shouts, only deafening silence.

"What's going on?!" Lin Wanrong was somewhat surprised as he watched a disheartened Du Xiuyuan walk out.

Du Xiuyuan spoke softly, "General, there's no one inside."

No one? Lin Wanrong lifted the curtain and slowly stepped into the room. The space was an inner chamber enclosed by mud walls. The furnishings were simple—a clay platform sat in the center, upon which rested a small tea table. The room was neat and tidy, free of any trace of dust. Indeed, no one was here! But this was unmistakably the caravan where "Yueya'er" had been. How could this Turkic girl have simply vanished? Lin Wanrong's brow furrowed, unable to make sense of the situation.

A faint, elusive fragrance lingered in the air, as elusive as the mist of an early spring morning. He sniffed intently, and his face showed a look of astonishment. This scent was all too familiar—the renowned Lin family's perfume. Why would this jasmine scent appear here, beyond the Great Wall? Could it have been brought here by "Yueya'er"? If so, she must have spent some time in this room. Lin Wanrong shook his head, unsure whether to feel sad or delighted that the perfume of the Lin family had reached the Turks.

"General, what's this?" Du Xiuyuan led a search and suddenly found something next to the headrest on the clay platform. The object consisted of seven bamboo tubes, about the thickness of fingers, tightly bound together, differing in length and size. Each bamboo tube had a hole in it, and the locations of the holes differed from one another.

Lin Wanrong picked up the object, gently caressing it before bringing it to his lips. A soft blow produced a crisp, pleasing sound.

Du Xiuyuan marveled, "Ah, so it's a musical instrument. I've never seen something like this; I don't even know what it's called."

Lin Wanrong smiled, his hands navigating through a series of holes. He produced a few lingering flute notes—graceful, fluctuating, incredibly melodious.

"Eh, you know how to play the flute?" Gao Qiu walked in, surprised.

Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth and snorted, "Play the flute my ass. This thing is called a Yujia, a traditional musical instrument from the grasslands. Playing it is called 'Pingyu.' I can't handle something as difficult as playing the flute."

A subtle fragrance seemed to waft past his lips, along with a delicate sensation. He looked down and noticed faint remnants of rouge on the mouthpiece of the bamboo tubes, forming a shallow crescent moon.

'So, this Yujia had been used by "Yueya'er"! ' Lin Wanrong chuckled; their lips had met in the form of a tune, almost like a kiss. He wondered if this was her first.

Disheartened at not having caught the beautiful spy, Gao Qiu angrily pulled the lead merchant into the room. "Where did the Turkic woman who came into town with you today go?"

The merchant had a sudden realization. "Ah, sir, you're talking about her."

Lin Wanrong leisurely asked, "What is her name?"

Judging by the attitudes of Du Xiuyuan and Gao Qiu towards Lin Wanrong, the merchant realized he was someone important. Not daring to be careless, he hurriedly said, "I don't know her name, sir. She was introduced to us by a Turkic merchant along the way. She was accompanied by a few others, and other than the occasional smile, she seldom spoke. They stayed here until evening and then parted ways with us. From what I gathered, it seemed the young lady was homesick and wanted to head back to the grasslands right away."

So, Yueya'er had left before the city was sealed off? Lin Wanrong gave a low sound of acknowledgment, his eyes fixated on the lip mark on the Yujia, momentarily lost in thought.

Chapter 518 Disagreement

As the leader of the merchant caravan had said, the army searched the city all night and found no fewer than a hundred Turks, but not a single one was a woman. As for the beautiful Turkic girl "Yueya'er," it seemed she had indeed left the city.

Unable to avenge the sisters of the Great Hua, Gao Qiu was naturally discontent. He wandered around the city for a day, eventually returning disheartened. Lin Wanrong, on the other hand, seemed completely unbothered. To him, "Yueya'er" was just a beautiful episode on their journey beyond the frontier—a serendipity, like the spring beyond the Great Wall, both as elusive as they were wonderful.

However, there was another matter that left him rather disappointed. After returning to camp, Hu Bugui spent several hours discreetly counting the number of soldiers in each battalion, finding nothing out of the ordinary. There were indeed many good-looking soldiers, but none were the person Lin Wanrong was seeking.

If Fairy Ning was truly by his side, why didn't she reveal herself? Could it be that the one who took action last night was not her? Holding the cold silver needle in his hand, Lin Wanrong's doubts only multiplied, a subtle sense of loss lingering in his heart.

The army rested in Xingqing for a day, replenishing their supplies and rations. The unsettling elements within and around the city also significantly diminished. Early on the third day, aside from the fifty thousand soldiers left in Li Tai's central camp, the armies on the left, center, and right all departed, marching majestically beyond the frontier, crossing the Helan Mountains, and heading directly for Wuyuan.

At that time, it was early spring. While the willows in the south were sprouting new branches, beyond the Great Wall the wind and sand were ruthless. The dust in the sky blurred one's vision, making not just walking difficult for humans but also for the mules and horses.

"Look here. According to the scouts from the front, the vanguard of the Turks is now only about 300 miles away from Wuyuan. Given the speed of their horses, they will arrive by dusk tomorrow at the latest," Xu Zhiqing pointed out on her meticulously crafted map, marking the location of Wuyuan with a tiny red dot. The rivers, mountains, roads, and cities on the map were all drawn in different colors and labeled distinctly, quite simply and clearly. The young Miss Xu had clearly spent a lot of effort on this single map.

"So that means the first battle between Great Hua and the Turks will erupt around this time tomorrow?" Lin Wanrong hummed in agreement, subconsciously shaking his armor. The whistling wind outside the tent entered his ears, leaving him a little anxious yet excited. In the past, when fighting together with Xu Wei against the White Lotus Sect, they had the advantage of numbers. It was essentially the strong bullying the weak, and the outcome was predictable.

Now facing the Turks, the feeling was entirely different. It was a war with an uncertain outcome. In terms of individual combat strength and numbers, Great Hua was even at a disadvantage. What would happen in tomorrow's battle was anyone's guess. Holding the lives of sixty to seventy thousand soldiers in his hands, Lin Wanrong felt the weight of responsibility suddenly become much heavier, both emotionally and logically allowing no room for error.

The army arrived at Wuyuan [Modern Bayannur, Inner Mongolia] at sunset. Lin Wanrong's first impression of Wuyuan was indescribable. Calling it a fortress was far from accurate; it was more like an abandoned earthen fort rising out of the endless sands. Its four sides were surrounded by dilapidated walls only about a man's height. A horseman could easily leap over them. The sand inside the city was ankle-deep, littered with rusted swords, rotten uniforms, and withered bones. This decrepit fort was shrouded in an eerie atmosphere, offering no defensible advantage whatsoever.

Lin Wanrong took several deep, cold breaths. No wonder even the fierce Turkic warriors retreated disheartenedly to the plains after capturing Wuyuan. This was simply an uninhabited city of sand—how could anyone sustain life here?

"General, General, the advisor is speaking to you." Lost in thought, Lin Wanrong was gently nudged on his sleeve by Du Xiuyuan, who stood beside him and whispered.

"Oh, is that so?" Lin Wanrong snapped back to reality, seeing Xu Zhiqing glaring at him with gritted teeth, unsure what she had been saying.

From the other side, Hu Bugui spoke softly, "Miss Xu was asking if all the troops on our right wing are settled in place and whether we've suffered any casualties."

Lin Wanrong quickly composed himself, "All soldiers of my right-wing army are present and accounted for. We are currently resting outside the city of Wuyuan."

Xu Zhiqing gave a slight nod, "Very well. Among our three divisions, the morale of the troops on the right is the highest. They are also the most diligent and disciplined. General Lin, your guidance has been invaluable. Just one thing—please focus during our meetings and refrain from drifting into thought."

‘What is she talking about? Where else could I possibly be thinking of?’ Lin Wanrong shrugged helplessly. Yu Zongcai, the deputy vanguard of the Left Wing army standing beside Zuo Qiu, looked at him with a smile but said nothing.

Among the three divisions, Zuo Qiu's Left Wing army was the largest, with Deputy Vanguards and more than ten lieutenants, totaling over ninety thousand soldiers. In contrast, Lin Wanrong's right-wing army had only about sixty to seventy percent of that number. His key officers were only Du Xiuyuan, Hu Bugui, and Li Sheng. But most of his troops were veteran soldiers from Shandong, trained in strategies set by Lin Wanrong himself. They worked in harmony, their fighting strength not necessarily inferior. Xu Zhiqing personally led the central division with nearly one hundred thousand soldiers.

"Advisor Xu, how many of these invading nomads are we expecting?" Zuo Qiu looked intently at the map, his expression solemn.

Xu Zhiqing answered leisurely, "At least sixty thousand elite cavalry, led by one of the three top generals under Turkic Prince Batur—Nurzhan. It's said that he ate wolf meat as a child and has the strength to shatter a wild horse's skull with a single punch. He's so ferocious that even a dozen Turkic warriors can't get near him."

‘Nurzhan? Turkic names are really a mouthful. So what if he ate raw wolf meat [Similar sound]? I've eaten bloody steaks myself and am no worse for wear.’ Lin Wanrong laughed offhandedly, "Miss Xu, there's no need to exaggerate. These so-called fearsome Turkic warriors are made of flesh and blood just like us. I firmly believe that if they're meant to die, they will. There won't be any exceptions."

Zuo Qiu found his words amusing and burst into laughter, "Brother Lin truly has insightful views. I'm impressed."

Xu Zhiqing shook her head with a smile, "Such flattering words are unnecessary. Wuyuan is right in front of us and the enemy will arrive within a few hours. How should we fight this first battle? Do we hold the city or set up camp outside? I'd like to hear the generals' opinions."

This was the crux of today's meeting. The significance of the first battle against the nomads to both sides was self-evident. It would also greatly influence the trajectory of future military engagements, which was why Miss Xu was so cautious in her deliberations. 〰

Lin Wanrong glanced at Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan, both of whom were deep in thought, evidently considering strategies for the first battle. Yu Zongcai, the deputy general of the left wing, seemed quite confident. With a clenched fist, he exclaimed, "In my opinion, our army should station itself in Wuyuan."

"Oh?" Miss Xu raised an eyebrow and smiled, "Please elaborate, Brother Yu."

Yu Zongcai spoke confidently, "As we all know, the nomads excel at mounted archery, but their skills in fixed-position warfare are lacking. By stationing our army within the city, with the support of our artillery and expert archers, we can maximize our strengths. The invading vanguard of the Turkic forces numbers only around 60,000. We have full confidence in holding the city. Once the enemy cavalry approaches, we will release a volley of artillery and arrows, effectively keeping them outside the city gates."

Hold the city? Lin Wanrong looked at the crumbling walls surrounding Wuyuan. Weathered by years of wind, sand, and war, the walls were dilapidated. In most areas, they were less than a man's height. Considering the Turks rode tall horses, a flick of a whip would send them leaping into the city. How could this city be defended?

"Brother Hu, do you have any suggestions?" Seeing that Hu Bugui seemed to be muttering to himself, Lin Wanrong encouraged him.

Hu Bugui spoke urgently, "General, Military Advisor, I believe Deputy General Yu's strategy is impractical. Indeed, holding a city is our strength, but that applies to the tall walls of Xingqing. Wuyuan is a different matter altogether. These walls can easily be leaped over by horses, offering little defensive advantage. The nomads once attacked Xingqing and failed, falling back to Wuyuan, only to quickly withdraw. The easy-to-attack, hard-to-defend nature of Wuyuan is the reason. Being stationed in the city would limit us, making us sitting ducks for enemy attacks. It's truly a poor strategy."

Hu Bugui was straightforward, and not just in opposing Yu Zongcai's opinion. His last remark of it being "a poor strategy" evidently struck a nerve with General Yu. Coming from a family of military leaders, and holding a high position at a young age, Yu Zongcai was naturally arrogant. His face changed, and he huffed, "Tall walls have their merits, as do low ones. Even if the nomads can jump over the walls, how can they be faster than our artillery and arrows? General Hu, your comments suggest you've been scared witless by the Turks! I heard that you've fought against them for over a decade without a single victory. No wonder you—"

"What did you say? Say that again—" Hu Bugui's sore spot had been hit, making him react like a lion whose tail had been stepped on. He had been fighting the nomads for twenty years and indeed, victories had been rare. But back then, he was just a low-ranking officer; could he have changed anything?

Lin Wanrong stepped in, halting the incensed Hu Bugui and coldly snorted, "Brother Hu, there's no shame in not defeating the nomads over the last twenty years. The moment you stood here, you became a hero of our great nation. Every scar on your body, every drop of blood you've shed is a

badge of honor, worth a thousand times more than someone who only knows how to talk. What do you have to fear?"

The deputy general overseeing the left flank and the fierce commander of the right were in a heated disagreement. Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but slightly furrow her brows, "Brother Yu, General Hu, both of you are the left and right arms of our grand army. Although you have strategic differences, you are both working for the good of our Great Hua. Do not rashly speak and harm the harmony between brothers. This is the first time, so I will make a note of it. Should there be any further disrespectful remarks, I will report to the Marshal and you will be dealt with according to military law."

Her tone was calm, but her expression was incredibly serious. Hu Bugui and Yu Zongcai dared not say another word.

Miss Xu resolved the dispute and then turned to Lin Wanrong, asking, "General Lin, you've heard the suggestions of these two gentlemen. What do you think?"

Lin Wanrong replied with a solemn expression, "I agree with Brother Hu. This method of defending the city is simply tying our own hands, it's more harm than good—"

Yu Zongcai snorted softly, visibly discontented. However, Lin Wanrong was the commander of the right flank, a rank higher than him. Additionally, with Miss Xu's prior warning, Yu Zongcai did not dare to act rashly. He reluctantly clenched his fists and said, "General Lin, during the defense, our army's firearms and bows can be far more effective, causing greater casualties to the enemy. What do you mean by tying our own hands and it being more harm than good? I would like to hear the details."

Lin Wanrong indifferently said, "Brother Yu, while firearms and bows can indeed be powerful, they must be used correctly. If misused, they can become a burden. Our army has over twenty cannons and five thousand archers, but the first wave of attackers from the enemy numbers over sixty thousand. I don't need to describe the fierceness of the Turkic fighters to you. Moreover, Wuyuan City has no natural defenses, and the enemy can enter by merely leaping on their horses. Once a breach occurs, it will be like a dam bursting—everywhere will be broken. At that point, our artillery will lose all its effectiveness, and our archers will be exposed to the enemy cavalry. The heavy artillery and supplies would become burdens that we can neither abandon nor withdraw. Imagine what a horrific scene that would be!"

He sighed deeply, as if that tragic scene had already appeared before his eyes. Yu Zongcai felt his heart tremble and hurriedly wiped the sweat from his forehead. Zuo Qiu also found himself agreeing and nodded.

Miss Xu glanced at him and softly said, "You make a good point. But according to your view, what should we do? Should we leave Wuyuan City and face the enemy in the open desert? Wouldn't that be exactly what the enemy desires?"

"A decisive battle is inevitable, but it will not be according to the enemy's wishes," Lin Wanrong said, locking his eyes on Xu Zhiqing's charming cheeks and smiling mysteriously. Miss Xu found it difficult to meet his gaze and quickly lowered her head, annoyed, "What are you smirking at? Speak up! How exactly should we fight?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, a cold glint flashing in his eyes, "Leaving Wuyuan City is a must. But not forward. On the contrary, in my view, we should retreat and leave Wuyuan to the Turkic invaders!"

Chapter 519 Burial in the Sand

"Retreat from Wuyuan?" Not only Xu Zhiqing and Zuo Qiu were startled, but even Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan, who were standing beside them, couldn't help but gasp in surprise.

Xu Zhiqing looked at him with anticipation and hastily asked, "What do you mean by retreat? Do elaborate."

Lin Wanrong took out a brush, ink, and an inkstone from the table and arranged them. "Advisor Xu, Brother Zuo, please take a look. Let this inkstone represent Wuyuan City. We and the nomads are positioned on both sides. Since Wuyuan is indefensible, there is no need to insist on holding it. Retreating from Wuyuan is the best course of action."

Zuo Qiu nodded but still questioned, "Retreating from Wuyuan is indeed necessary, but there are only two paths before us. Either we continue to advance, striking the nomads with full force, or we retreat a few miles to face off with them. Why, Brother Lin, have you specifically chosen the latter?"

Everyone had the same question, all eyes turned to Lin Wanrong, awaiting his answer.

"While both options involve retreating from Wuyuan City, the two paths are entirely different. Brother Zuo, look—" Lin Wanrong moved the inkstone to the back, "If we move northward out of Wuyuan and deploy to battle the nomads in the desert, Wuyuan City will be behind us. This would effectively cut off our retreat, limiting our room to maneuver. If we advance, it's one thing, but if we have to retreat—with the fierceness of the nomadic forces, it's not unlikely that we might need to pull back. In that case, with our army carrying heavy artillery, Wuyuan City would immediately become an obstacle. Essentially, we would be blocking our own way out, and that is not advisable."

Xu Zhiqing nodded with a smile, "So you suggest our forces retreat slightly, making Wuyuan City a barrier between us and the nomads? Each side would then be facing off across the city?" Miss Xu moved the inkstone back to its original position between the two forces.

"Exactly," Lin Wanrong approved with a glance and continued, "If the Turkic people want to battle us, they will have to go through Wuyuan City. What's most terrifying about the nomadic cavalry is their overwhelming, tsunami-like charges. And Wuyuan City serves as a natural speed bump. No matter how agile their steeds are, they will have to slow down when they pass the city. This would weaken their momentum, allowing our artillery to be most effective. We could bombard Wuyuan City, severely weakening the Turkic vanguard."

Zuo Qiu and the others were seasoned warriors; they immediately understood his point. Wuyuan might be an abandoned fortress, but it could be used as an advantage to restrain the enemy, enhancing our strengths while exploiting their weaknesses.

Xu Zhiqing pondered for a moment, then shook her head, "It's a good strategy, but the nomads aren't fools. If they discover that Wuyuan is an empty city, they likely won't recklessly advance."

"That's even better," Lin Wanrong smiled, "Then we'll just engage in a staring contest with the nomads across the city, testing each other's endurance. We have Xingqing Prefecture as our backup, and we can replenish our supplies in a timely manner. As for the Turkic people, they have traveled long distances with heavy troops; they're undoubtedly fatigued. We can afford to wait, while they can't."

"But don't forget, these 60,000 men are merely the vanguard of the Turkic forces. Behind them, there's an additional 200,000 elite Turkic soldiers, only half a day's distance away. If they were to unite, we would be outnumbered and outmatched, and the situation could change in an instant. At that point, we would be the ones who can't afford to stall!" Xu Zhiqing warned, her brows slightly furrowed in deep consideration.

A flash of intensity crossed Lin Wanrong's eyes as he grinned, "Your counsel is wise, advisor. Half a day's journey is neither short nor long, enough time for us to stage a decisive battle. The success of our first engagement will make the strategic position of Wuyuan City all the more crucial."

Although Wuyuan City could serve as a barricade against enemy cavalry, to claim that it could deliver a major victory for Great Hua was rather exaggerated. Not only did Zuo Qiu and Yu Zongcai doubt this, but Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu were also skeptical. However, Miss Xu, having already witnessed Lin Wanrong's ingenuity, sensed confidence in his words and a faint smile appeared on her face. "What do you intend to do with Wuyuan City? Do tell."

All eyes turned towards him, even Yu Zongcai stared intently. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "It's just a minor strategy to lure the enemy; hardly anything groundbreaking."

"A lure? You're not thinking of using a small garrison to defend the city to provoke the Turks, are you?" Zuo Qiu shook his head in disappointment. "You've already dismissed that idea yourself. Wuyuan is indefensible. Even if the Turks were to attack, it would only slightly delay them. They could easily step over Wuyuan and engage our army directly. What kind of lure is that?"

Lin Wanrong grinned mysteriously, "Brother Zuo is correct. Wuyuan is indeed indefensible, and that's a well-known fact. But that doesn't mean it's completely useless. If it lacks natural defenses, why not create some 'obstacles' ourselves?"

Create "obstacles" within Wuyuan City? The proposition sounded increasingly mysterious. How could they turn this flat, earthen city into a fortified one? The group looked at each other in confusion, unable to grasp his intent.

Lin Wanrong sighed, "In war, you have to be ruthless. The Turkic cavalry might be formidable, but Great Hua has a unique asset that terrifies them—"

"Gunpowder? You're talking about gunpowder!" Xu Zhiqing, ever so astute, exclaimed as soon as Lin Wanrong gave the slightest hint. Her face immediately lit up with boundless joy. r

Indeed, she had struck a chord. Realization dawned on Zuo Qiu, Yu Zongcai, and the others. Wuyuan City was but a fortress on flat land. What other "obstacles" could there be, except buried explosives? The strategy was exposed by Xu Zhiqing, but in the complex milieu of war, how many could think of this? General Lin's thinking was truly unconventional and broad-minded.

"Exactly, explosives," Lin Wanrong sighed deeply. "I only hope that the Great Hua heroes buried in Wuyuan City will not blame me for desecrating their remains."

"They won't," Hu Bugui's veteran face turned flushed with excitement. "If you can really slaughter the nomads, those old brothers of ours would probably beg you to plant explosives. General Lin, what kind of brain do you have? Coming up with all kinds of ideas, I'm truly impressed."

The generals in the tent showed expressions of delight, nodding in unison. Clearly, they were quite in favor of Lin Wanrong's idea, and the atmosphere in the tent relaxed considerably for a moment.

Xu Zhiqing pondered and said, "We have plenty of gunpowder. If we can truly lure the Turks into Wuyuan City with a small troop, and then pretend to be defeated and retreat from Wuyuan, the Turkic forces will undoubtedly pursue us relentlessly. In this way, the enemy will be divided into three sections: those in the city, those to the south, and those to the north of the city. Once the gunpowder is ignited, blocking the enemy from the north from entering, the two groups of enemies inside and outside the city will be sitting ducks for us."

Upon hearing Xu Zhiqing's detailed analysis, everyone realized that there was indeed hidden wisdom in the plan. If executed smoothly, a decisive victory in the first battle was certain. What appeared to be the useless Wuyuan City was ingeniously revitalized by Lin Wanrong, becoming crucial in the upcoming battle. A sense of enlightenment washed over the generals as though they had suddenly seen the moon through the mist.

Xu Zhiqing's mood also lightened considerably. She looked at Lin Wanrong and smiled enchantingly, "General Lin, is my arrangement satisfactory? Do you have anything to add?"

Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "You've said it all. What more can I add? My only concern is that Turkic warrior, Nur—what's his name again?"

Hu Bugui spoke up, "General, his name is Nurzhan! The names of these Turkic people are as awkward as sheep droppings on the grasslands!"

Laughter erupted in the tent, enlivening the atmosphere. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Ah yes, Nurzhan! Good memory, Brother Hu. My only worry is that this Nurzhan, who grew up eating wolf meat, might not have the guts to lay siege, which would be disappointing."

Xu Zhiqing nodded, "Nurzhan is one of Batur's three great warriors, audacious and fierce. There's nothing he wouldn't dare to do! The defense of Wuyuan and luring the enemy deep into our territory is extremely risky. If not handled properly, we could be surrounded. So, the one to hold Wuyuan must be a general who is both wise and courageous. Who among you is willing to take on this great responsibility?"

The tent fell into a hushed silence. What Miss Xu said was true; the most critical part of the battle was the lure. With sixty thousand Turkic cavalry charging in and gunpowder underfoot, one wrong move could result in utter ruin. Who dared to take charge of Wuyuan?

Xu Zhiqing cast a fleeting glance, her eyes sweeping over the faces of those present, as if inquiring their opinions.

Lin Wanrong cleared his throat and affected an air of casualness, "Well—why don't I go? After all, I came up with this plan; no one is more suited than me."

"No way!" Hu Bugui quickly stepped forward, "General Lin is the commander of the right flank; the overall situation depends on you. How can you lightly take such a risk? Advisor, I, Hu Bugui, am willing to go!"

"I, Du Xiuyuan, am willing to go!"

Two men from the right flank stood up, sharing the burden, which made General Lin look quite good. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Why are you both competing with me? It doesn't matter who goes, right?"

Zuo Qiu felt a bit humiliated. He glared at his subordinates. Yu Zongcai glanced at the charming face of Miss Xu. A hint of infatuation flashed in his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he loudly proclaimed, "Advisor, I am willing to go!"

Three people suddenly stepped forward. Xu Zhiqing hesitated for a moment and then turned to Zuo Qiu and Lin Wanrong, asking, "In your opinion, who should be stationed at Wuyuan?"

Zuo Qiu replied, "These three brothers are all pillars of our army. Any of them could fulfill this mission honorably. The decision rests with the Advisor."

Xu Zhiqing nodded, then glanced at Lin Wanrong as if seeking his opinion. Lin Wanrong studied the faces of Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan and said seriously, "Brother Du excels in strategy, while Brother Hu is adept at fighting the enemy. This mission is not about defeating the enemy, but rather, tricking them. I recommend that Du Xiuyuan lead ten thousand elite cavalry to station at Wuyuan."

Miss Xu pondered for a while before finally raising an eyebrow. "Du Xiuyuan, heed my command!"

"Here I am!"

Xu Zhiqing pulled out a command arrow and said, "I order you to lead ten thousand cavalymen to defend Wuyuan. Execute flexible attacks and lure Nurzhan to lay siege to the city. When the city is breached, do not engage in prolonged combat; retreat immediately!"

"Understood!" Du Xiuyuan shouted, accepting the command token.

"Yu Zongcai, heed my command! You are to lead ten thousand cavalymen, solely responsible for aiding Du Xiuyuan's troop in their retreat. There must be no errors!"

Yu Zongcai saluted and took the command arrow. Miss Xu's face was stern as she loudly commanded, "Soldiers of the three armies, listen up! Tomorrow marks our first battle, a time for our Great Hua Empire to raise its brows and exhale. Our formations must be strict, commands must be obeyed. Lin San will lead the vanguard; Zuo Qiu will hold the left flank, and the main army will guard the right. Rewards for advancing, execution for retreating! All of you must be united in heart and courageously move forward, vowing to kill the enemy under our horses!"

"Vow to kill the enemy under our horses!" The generals all shouted in unison. They took their leave and busied themselves with their preparations.

As the setting sun slowly sank, the far reaches of the great desert were a hazy expanse of dust and sand that looked like snow, cloaking the bloody hues of the sunset with a touch of gloom. Countless white tents, like blooming flowers, were scattered amid the dust and sand. The neighing of war horses mixed with the howling winds, composing a melancholy frontier melody. Wisps of cooking smoke swayed and rose in the dusty air, looking like dancing veils in the sunset from a distance.

Lin Wanrong sat on the ground, slowly sketching faces in the thick sand with his finger. In no time, several lifelike faces appeared before him: Qingxuan, Eldest Miss, Fairy Ning, Vixen An, Ning'er, Qiaoqiao, Yushuang... Each woman appeared vivid, as if standing right before him, their expressions ranging from shy to smiling, angry to annoyed. The swirling sand soon covered the sketches, but he was not discouraged and started drawing again from scratch.

"What are you doing?" Xu Zhiqing's voice sounded close, as if she were right beside him. Lin Wanrong turned his head and saw that Miss Xu had at some point changed out of her armor into an elegant lotus-colored dress, her black hair casually wrapped in a silk scarf. A transparent scarf

shielded her face from the sand, revealing her exquisitely soft skin, which was as beautiful as the finest jade. Her eyebrows were slightly knitted, and her eyes moist as a spring rain in March. The windswept sand stirred her long, flowing hair, which added to her ethereal beauty.

Lin Wanrong looked her up and down and then smiled, "If it weren't for your attire, I'd have forgotten that there are women in the army. Very nice, indeed. A green shoot amidst ten thousand grains of sand—you're certainly more pleasing to the eye than I am, at the very least!"

"Who can compare with you?" Xu Zhiqing snorted irritably, her face tinged with a slight blush under the glow of the setting sun. "Slacking off here again—are all the matters in your camp settled?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Of all people in the army, you're the one who trusts me the least! Would I dare to come out and play without finishing my work? You'd have me court-martialed!"

Xu Zhiqing lightly bit her red lips and gave a soft hum as she slowly took a seat beside him, staying silent.

Only after Lin Wanrong had finished sketching portraits of several wives and prospective wives did he let out a long sigh. He lay back on the ground, allowing the dust and sand to whip against his cheeks, but his eyes were staring blankly at the sky.

"Missing home?" Xu Zhiqing carefully shook off the dust from her skirt and spoke softly. As she saw her brand-new dress marred by layers of yellow sand, a hint of distress filled her eyes.

"A bit," Lin Wanrong admitted casually, his hands pillowed behind his head. He looked at Xu Zhiqing's little hands rubbing the sand off her dress, her face filled with concern. He couldn't help but tease her again, "If you care so much about this dress, you shouldn't wear it. No one will see it here. In this windy and sandy place, you'll need to change in less than half an hour. There's no water to wash it—you're just making life difficult for yourself."

Xu Zhiqing's face turned frosty, "Why do you care so much? If I want to wear it, I will, and it has nothing to do with you!"

Was this the same woman who just moments ago had been issuing commands and remaining so composed? Lin Wanrong shook his head in wry amusement. He suddenly remembered the harsh words she had spoken when visiting him previously. Looking at her now, it seemed as if she had forgotten all about it.

A light fragrance wafted over as Xu Zhiqing sat beside him. She stared into the depths of the vast desert, her eyes slightly moist. She sighed softly, "The sunset is so beautiful. I wonder how many more like this I'll get to see?"

"Suns rise and set every day. What's there not to see?" Lin Wanrong waved his hand, laughing carelessly.

Xu Zhiqing glanced at him and hummed lightly. She cupped a handful of fine sand in her palms and gently released it, letting the grains fall onto her dress.

The tiny grains of sand permeated her skirt, staining the lotus-pink fabric a soft yellow. She continued, her hands unceasingly scattering one handful of sand after another over herself, her eyes gradually filling with tears.

Lin Wanrong watched, puzzled. "Miss Xu, what are you doing? Washing your clothes with sand? This is a first for me."

Eyes half-closed, Xu Zhiqing spoke with a quiver in her voice, "This is called 'burying in sand.' Legend has it that in the lands beyond the Great Wall, any woman deeply in love who buries herself in rolling sand while wearing her most beautiful clothes will receive a promise from the heavens—transforming her lifelong yearning into a grain of sand in the vast desert."

"Too profound; I don't understand," Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed.

Xu Zhiqing gently stroked her hair, speaking softly, "Do you know about the Taklamakan Desert?"

"Yes, yes, it's not too far from here," Lin Wanrong nodded vigorously.

"Every longing in a lifetime will cause the heavens to drop a grain of sand, and thus, the vast Taklamakan is formed," Xu Zhiqing's hands clenched in her lap, tears falling like rain.

Chapter 520 The Turkic Wolf Smoke

The wind and sand swirled around her, lifting the hem of her dress and tousling her fine hair. Through the mist of sand, her gaze was indistinct. A crystal tear rolled down her white, jade-like cheek, looking like a transparent drop of amber resin amid the golden sand and setting sun.

The setting sun, the golden sand, and the wan woman—all that met his eyes seemed like an exquisite ink painting of a frontier landscape—hazy yet unbearably real. Watching Xu Zhiqing's tears stain her clothes, her beautiful cheeks shimmering with tear-light, Lin Wanrong felt a complex emotion he couldn't articulate. He sighed deeply and said, "Miss Xu, that story of grains of sand building a tower was moving. I haven't been this touched in a long time. Is there more? Can you tell another?"

Xu Zhiqing's pretty face turned ashen with anger. Picking up her light green sleeve to wipe away the tears, she coldly snorted, "If you want to hear stories, go find your Miss Qingxuan to talk to. I don't have time for idle chatter. I'm leaving."

She stood up, picked up her long dress, and started walking toward the camp. After a few steps, she noticed an unusual stillness behind her. Lin Wanrong was as silent as the dust trailing her. She hesitated for a moment, her steps involuntarily slowing as she sneaked a glance back. He was looking up at the vast sky, lying on the ground as though nothing had happened.

A tear moistened her eyes instantaneously. "Damn you, damn you heartless beast!" she cried softly. With both hands, she scooped up a handful of dirt and sand and hurled it at him in anger.

A light cloud of dust rose, hovering between them. Lin Wanrong abruptly stood up, clenched his fists, and let out a cold hum.

As he took slow steps toward her, each footfall heavy as a drum, Xu Zhiqing stood frozen. Her heartbeat seemed to sync with the rhythmic steps, and the handful of sand she had clenched in her delicate hand became impossible to throw.

"What... what are you doing?" She stared into his wolf-like eyes and her heart skipped a beat. Her feet felt as if they had taken root, immovable. "I am the military advisor to the army. If you dare to —"

As his large hand moved toward her face, she let out a startled yelp, unable to move. Her cheeks flushed and she closed her eyes in desperation.

"What?" Lin Wanrong said with a bitter smile as he brushed a few grains of sand from her hair. "I'm an honorable man; what did you think I was going to do?"

Realizing she'd been tricked, Xu Zhiqing's face flushed with a mixture of shame and a trace of inexplicable disappointment.

As if endless grievances were about to burst forth, her eyes reddened. She cried out, "Do you find it fun to bully people? Since the first day I met you, you have been humiliating me—from the capital city to Shandong, all the way to Xingqing. Do I owe you something—ah—"

Her words were cut off as a warm hand grasped her trembling arm. Her scream choked in her throat, her breath stilled, and her cheeks flushed red, extending all the way to her slender, fair neck.

"What are you doing?" Her voice quivered uncontrollably, yet involuntarily softened. "I am the military advisor to the army. If you dare bully me, I'll report you to the Marshal for your crimes—"

"Is holding the hand of a military advisor a crime?" The insufferable man chuckled, tightening his grip on her small hand just a bit. "Then I'm willing to be a criminal for life!"

Hearing his detestable voice, Xu Zhiqing felt her nerves tremble and an irritating palpitation that she couldn't suppress.

"You, let go of me," she stammered, her small hand struggling fiercely, "I will call for help—"

"Help! Someone, help!" Before she could finish, the shameless man had already shouted out loud, "Brother Hu, Brother Gao, Brother Du—everyone come and see, I'm holding the military advisor's hand! I'm holding the military advisor's hand!"

A warm, trembling finger quickly pressed against Lin Wanrong's lips. Miss Xu was both furious and annoyed, tears falling like raindrops. "You, you utterly despicable person! Are you trying to infuriate me to death?!"

"Do you truly not want me to hold your hand?" Lin Wanrong shook his head, disappointment coloring his features. "Alright then, I won't."

As he spoke, he prepared to let go of Xu Zhiqing's small hand. Seeing his resolute action, Miss Xu couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment, sobbing softly, "You—I'm going to die of frustration because of you!"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, tightening his grip on her delicate hand. "Advisor Xu, do you want me to hold this hand or not? Give me a straightforward answer!"

There was a double meaning to his words. Xu Zhiqing blushed with a mix of irritation and joy, and snapped, "If you don't want to hold it, then don't! Who's going to force you—this is outside the military camp; if someone sees us, how am I supposed to live?!"

Her pretty face was flushed, and the shyness in her eyes outshone even the setting sun.

How wonderful it would be if they didn't have to go to war and could simply banter like this every day. Lin Wanrong sighed quietly, forcing a smile as he looked at Miss Xu, his expression turning somber.

Xu Zhiqing sensed the change in his mood, bit her red lips softly, and asked gently, "What's wrong? Weren't we just having a pleasant conversation?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head, plopped down on the sandy ground, and stared blankly at the distant tents illuminated by a smattering of stars.

‘This annoying man!’ Xu Zhiqing sighed softly, smoothed her long skirt, and slowly sat down beside him.

In the distance, columns of smoke rose, thousands of war horses galloped, and young soldiers chanted slogans during their drills. Their dark faces were covered in beads of sweat, shimmering in the setting sun.

Lin Wanrong stared for a long while before letting out a deep sigh, his expression weary. "So many vigorous brothers; who knows how many will be left by this time tomorrow?"

‘So, this was what weighed on his mind.’ Miss Xu glanced at him and said softly, "Haven't you fought against the White Lotus sect before? War is like this! Losses among officers and soldiers are inevitable. You have to steel your heart."

Fighting the White Lotus sect? By today's standards, that was child's play. Lin Wanrong shook his head and chuckled, "I don't know why, but fighting this war against the nomads, I feel an

inexplicable sense of unease. In the past, I was known as a fearless hero. I would charge into enemy lines alone, fighting against thousands, but alas, I've really regressed."

"Ugh, shameless," Miss Xu muttered, her cheeks flushed. "You may have the courage of a tiger, but it's all for nefarious deeds!"

Lin Wanrong felt a stirring in his heart and chuckled lasciviously, "My dear advisor, you misunderstand. What you consider nefarious, I see as nothing but wholesome activities. It's just a matter of perspective; the essence is the same."

Xu Zhiqing gave a light huff, her face glowing like the evening sky. She didn't dare say more. Clad in her light gauze and lotus-colored pleated skirt, she looked like an oasis in the desert. Her exquisite figure formed delightful curves, and her eyes radiated a tenderness that seemed as though it could be wrung out. Lin Wanrong clicked his tongue and said, "I just realized—Miss Xu, did you wear this outfit specifically for me to see?"

"Ridiculous, don't flatter yourself!" Xu Zhiqing bashfully huffed, her voice becoming as faint as a mosquito's. "I wore it for myself!"

"Not for me? Well, that's fine," Lin Wanrong said with a roguish grin. "In fact, I have a few pieces of clothing that I wore specifically for you to see."

'For me to see?' Xu Zhiqing looked him up and down. He was dressed in thick armor, layer upon layer of clothing beneath, resembling a bloated panda. She laughed, her face red, "Nonsense, did you wear this armor just for me?"

"What are you talking about? How could I possibly do something so tasteless?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, glanced around mysteriously, and slowly lifted his armor to reveal his garments beneath. "See, all these were meant for you to see: this shirt, these green trousers, even these socks—ah, Miss Xu, don't leave; I haven't finished—"

"Scoundrel!" Miss Xu blushed and quickly scattered a handful of dust into his clothes before sprinting away. Her swaying form was entrancing.

"Advisor, you look beautiful in that outfit, really! I never lie, everyone knows that—" General Lin cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted towards the retreating figure of Miss Xu.

Xu Zhiqing paused slightly, stomped her feet in embarrassment, picked up a handful of yellow sand, and without caring about the distance, hurled it back at him before running into the camp.

Lin Wanrong let out a few howls, grabbed handfuls of dust, and hurled them into the depths of the desert. Dust filled the air, mingling with the swirling sands. After a few deep breaths, he gazed into the distant desert, his frustration seemingly dispersed.

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The speed of the Turkic advance far exceeded Lin Wanrong's expectations, giving him a newfound understanding of what a Turkic wolf pack meant. Just as he was finishing his first yawn of the morning, a scout hurriedly burst into his tent. "General, the Turkic cavalry vanguard led by Nurzhan is approaching rapidly and is now about 200 li away. We have spotted enemy scouts about 50 li outside of Wuyuan City. The advisor orders us to prepare for battle immediately."

'Damn it, I haven't even washed my face or brushed my teeth, let alone had breakfast, and the enemy is already here!' Lin Wanrong grumbled. He glanced at the map and said, "General, judging by the current speed of the enemy, they should arrive at Wuyuan by noon."

"Explore further!" Lin Wanrong nodded and waved his hand, about to dismiss the scout when a sudden thought struck him. "Wait, what did you just say? Fifty li in front of Wuyuan City, you discovered the scouts of the Turks?"

The scout nodded, "Yes, they were the first wave of scouts sent by Nurzhan, numbering around twenty. Currently, we have three scouting units keeping an eye on their movements."

In front of the two armies, it was inevitable for scouts to cross paths. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "If we're going to put on a show, let's do it convincingly! Wuyuan is an integral part of our great nation, sacred and inviolable. Relay my orders to my generals, tell Du Xiuyuan to dispatch a thousand men to annihilate these nomad scouts."

"At your command!" The scout turned to convey the orders. Hu Bugui shook his head, "The Turkic scouts ride the finest horses from the Turks. Even if they choose to flee, I fear Brother Du will find it hard to catch them."

"Even if we can't catch them, we must give chase," Lin Wanrong said with a smile. "Otherwise, how would the Turks believe that we are determined to hold Wuyuan?"

Understanding dawned on Hu Bugui, who laughed heartily and nodded. Lin Wanrong took a deep breath and turned serious, "Brother Hu, has all the gunpowder been buried within Wuyuan City?"

"It has. Li Sheng and I took care of it last night. We've buried the gunpowder beneath the main roads within the city. If the Turks dare to come, they'll get more than they bargained for," Hu Bugui said with full confidence.

"Excellent." Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, took up his riding crop, and began to leave. "Brother Hu, stay here to command the troops on the right wing. I'm going into the city."

"What?!" Hu Bugui was startled and hurriedly blocked his way, "General, you must not! You command the entire right wing. Your safety is crucial to the whole operation. The city is filled with gunpowder. One wrong move could result in catastrophe. If you have concerns, let me do the reconnaissance for you."

"That won't do," Lin Wanrong looked at him with piercing eyes. "If we are to make it look like we're defending the city, it wouldn't make sense for only a deputy to stay behind. The Turks are not fools. To bait the fish, one has to be willing to use the bait. As the commander of the right wing, my presence on the city walls alone will mislead Nurzhan. As for the risks, the gunpowder is buried deep underground without fuses on the surface. The only way to ignite it is with our artillery. What danger is there for me?"

Seeing his determination, Hu Bugui became anxious, "This still needs further discussion; I'll go inform the Advisor."

"Come back," Lin Wanrong shouted, his face darkening. "In the field, a general has discretionary powers. Besides, Miss Xu clearly stated in yesterday's military order that our right wing army is the vanguard against the Turks. Any changes in arrangement under my command are my responsibility. Are you planning to defy orders?"

His face was stern, carrying an air of authority. Even Hu Bugui, a seasoned veteran, felt a twinge of fear. He quickly clasped his fists, "I wouldn't dare."

Lin Wanrong patted him on the shoulder, "Brother Hu, I entrust this area to you. Wait for my signal arrow. Once it's launched, command Li Sheng to bombard Wuyuan City without delay."

Hu Bugui clenched his teeth and nodded. Lin Wanrong gave a faint smile, waved his hand, and led Gao Qiu out of the camp.

In the vast desert, yellow sand danced wildly, obscuring the morning light. Dust swirled around them with eerie wails, making it hard to keep one's eyes open. The wind was even stronger than the day before.

Beneath the sandstorm, Wuyuan City appeared desolate except for its outer walls. Only a few barren mounds of earth were left. All the warhorses had been fitted with bits, and the soldiers guarding the city had covered their faces with cloth, taking shelter behind the city walls to avoid the sandstorm.

Lin Wanrong and Gao Qiu had traveled through this inhospitable environment. Their hair, eyebrows, and armor were already covered with dust, making them look like figures made of gray clay.

"General Lin, what brings you here?!" Du Xiuyuan saw Lin Wanrong arriving alone and was even more astonished than Hu Bugui. He yelled out to make himself heard over the howling sandstorm.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Here I am. Surprised, aren't you? That's exactly the reaction I was going for."

Moved, Du Xiuyuan watched as Lin Wanrong patted him on the shoulder. Noticing a mound of earth nearby, Lin Wanrong leaped onto it in three strides and bellowed, "Brothers—"

He gathered all his strength for this call. His voice carried far, mingling with the swirling sands and leaving an echoing howl that was clearly audible.

The soldiers hiding behind the city wall to avoid the sandstorm looked towards the mound. Rubbing their eyes, someone among them was the first to shout, "Look, it's General Lin—"

"It's General Lin, what's he doing here—"

"General Lin is with us—"

The news spread like wildfire. Soldiers who had been taking shelter behind the walls rushed out, their young faces resilient against the sandstorm, their attention entirely fixed on Lin Wanrong. His figure, standing tall on the mound, seemed like a majestic sand sculpture. A shared sense of joy and excitement suddenly filled every heart.

Standing on the mound, Lin Wanrong surveyed the scene. Amidst the flying sand, spirited horses neighed, countless banners fluttered in the wind, and the glinting edges of blades and spearheads gleamed icily, reflecting the excited, hopeful faces of the soldiers.

"Brothers—" Lin Wanrong roared, his voice steady and powerful, "The place where we stand is called Wuyuan. It's a remote land covered in sand, deserted all year round. If not for this war, perhaps we'd never know of its existence in our lifetimes."

The stinging sand hit his face, but Lin Wanrong seemed oblivious. His voice resonated through the sandstorm, reaching every ear.

"There are no green mountains or clear rivers here, no gold or silver treasures. But to me, it's the most beautiful place in the world. Because it marks the border of our great nation!—This is the land that we vow to defend with our lives and blood!"

With a sweeping gesture, his furious roar mixed with the sound of the storm, pounding like a drum against the soldiers' chests, "Let us swear on our lives and dignity—that anyone who dares to violate our land, no matter how far, shall be annihilated!"

"Anyone who dares to violate our land, no matter how far, shall be annihilated!" Countless soldiers yelled in unison. Their fervent passion seemed to extinguish even the raging sandstorm around them.

"Rumble, rumble," from afar, billowing sandstorms roiled the northern horizon, and several columns of warning smoke (wolf smoke) rose to the sky. Countless black specks moved like lightning, reminiscent of an endless swarm of locusts, bringing with them a face-full of sand from the vast desert. The earth trembled, resonating like thunder in spring, and even the silent city walls started to shake.

"It's the Turkic warning signals! The nomadic tribes are approaching!" Du Xiuyuan shouted with fiery eyes, drawing his battle sword. A surge of passion welled up in Lin Wanrong's chest instantly.