

## Finest 566

### Chapter 566 Such a Foolish Man

The handwriting on the silk was awkward, even worse than that of a child in the Great Hua Empire. It must have been written by Lu Dongzan. He returned the golden blade and wrote these words—what could he possibly mean? That anything is possible? That phrase sounded oddly familiar. Was Lu Dongzan trying to advertise for someone?

The more he thought about it, the more confusing it became. Eventually, he decided not to dwell on it any longer. Tucking the golden blade and the letter into his robe, Lin Wanrong grinned at Hu Bugui, "Lu Dongzan's command of our Great Hua language is passable at best. It's a pity that his handwriting is worse than mine."

"It is indeed a pity," Hu Bugui chuckled. "But if we're talking about the Turkic people writing in the script of Great Hua, I think Miss Yueya'er is quite skilled. Not only is she beautiful, but she also understands our culture thoroughly. She is both wise and graceful, surpassing ordinary people. Lu Dongzan would rather release us than compromise her safety. She must be someone exceptional."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Every ethnicity has its remarkable individuals; that's not surprising. What matters is how these exceptional people apply their intelligence and talents. Those like Yujia, who think of bettering their tribe's life through plunder, only achieve the opposite effect."

Hu Bugui wholeheartedly agreed with Lin Wanrong's viewpoint, nodding thoughtfully.

The moon was shining amidst scattered stars, and the wind was picking up, driving the sand into the air. Under the night sky, the vast desert gleamed like snow, even the heavens above were a pale white. Shallow hoofprints etched into the silvery sand stretched far into the depths of the desert.

The wind and sand made it difficult to keep one's eyes open. Following the faint hoofprints in the desert, the two rode swiftly. After an hour, they finally caught sight of their large troop.

Gao Qiu was at the rear of the formation. Catching sight of them, he enthusiastically waved, "Brother Lin, Old Hu, we're here!"

Seeing Lin Wanrong and Hu Bugui return safely, the five thousand soldiers erupted in cheers and shouts, their jubilant spirits instantly overpowering the desolate desert winds.

The Sea of Death, the Lop Nur, stretched from the Qilian Mountains and extended northward from Dunhuang in Gansu, reaching the base of the Tianshan Mountains. Sand dunes in the shape of pyramids stood tall, some reaching hundreds of meters. The desert winds could blow these walls of sand even higher, giving the terrifying illusion of mountains collapsing.

The Lop Nur was arid all year round and received almost no rainfall. Under such harsh conditions, hardly any flora or fauna could survive, hence its name—the "Sea of Death."

They were already in the latter half of the Sea of Death since entering from Yiwu. But after three continuous days of travel in the boundless desert, all they could see was endless sand, obscuring the sun, moon, and stars. Not a trace of green was visible. Had it not been for Hu Bugui continuously adjusting their course using a compass, Lin Wanrong would have doubted they were on the right path.

"Damn, it really is the Sea of Death," the scorching sand emitted heat that soaked every soldier in sweat. Many had taken off their shirts and were marching bare-chested. Old Gao wiped the rolling sweat beads from his forehead, took a tentative lick from his water flask, and carefully hung the life-saving container back at his waist. Panting, he said, "We've walked for days and nights, and all we see is sand, sand, and more sand. Not even a rabbit dropping or a single feather. Is this even a road fit for humans?!"

Hu Bugui stowed his compass into his pouch and chuckled, "It's not surprising you feel this way on your first trek through the desert, Brother Gao. Don't think you're alone. I've been crisscrossing the desert for years, traveling thousands of miles, and I thought I had the measure of its wild terrain. But upon entering the Lop Nur, I've come to realize just how smooth the previous roads have been. Not a feather, not a long-legged insect or a thorn—nothing in sight. Truly, this 'Sea of Death' lives up to its name."

As he spoke, his mouth grew parched, and he followed Old Gao's example by licking the edge of his water skin. Since entering the desert, Lin Wanrong had given strict orders: two small meals a day and rationed water for the troops. No drinking outside specified times. Similar rationing applied to the supplies for the warhorses.

The importance of water and food in a desert march goes without saying. The five thousand disciplined soldiers obeyed this order without question. Remarkably, not one had violated it in the past three days.

It was time again for ration distribution, and the large procession came to a halt. Hu Bugui looked around but didn't see Lin Wanrong. Gao Qiu pointed towards the lone carriage among the troops and smiled, "Don't bother looking. He's there!"

"Miss Yujia, how is my brother?" Lin Wanrong stared at Li Wuling's pallid cheeks, his eyebrows furrowed in deep concern. Three days in the desert had strained their supplies, and Li Wuling's condition had shown no sign of improvement. It was indeed worrisome.

The Turkic young woman lifted Li Wuling's eyelids and felt his pulse before coldly saying, "Why should I tell you?"

Despite days of hurried marching and lack of water, her lips were only slightly dry, and her skin remained immaculate. Lin Wanrong was amazed, wondering if she had been bathed in milk since childhood. ~~He~~ ~~was~~ ~~not~~ ~~BE~~ ~~is~~

'Not tell me?' Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter. He reached into his garment and flashed a glittering small blade in front of her, quickly stowing it back.

Yujia was startled, then jubilant, "My golden blade?! Give it back!"

In her haste, she flung herself towards him, grabbing at his clothing.

'Has she gone mad? Stripping a man in broad daylight! Turkic women are indeed formidable.' Lin Wanrong was taken aback and hastily clutched his clothing, shouting, "What are you doing? This is daylight! A soldier can be killed but not humiliated!"

Both angry and embarrassed, Yujia firmly gripped his garment and pulled, "Give my golden blade back!"

With a sharp "ding," something fell from Lin Wanrong's chest and rolled away, clattering on the carriage floor.

"My hidden weapon!" Lin Wanrong cried out, about to leap after it. The object fell near Yujia's feet. She was quick to snatch it up and upon closer inspection, found it was a small copper coin. She paused, stunned.

Lin Wanrong snatched at the money in her hand, furious. "Dare to compete with a penny-pincher like me? Are you asking for trouble? Give me my money back—now!"

Yueya'er gritted her teeth, clutching the copper coins tightly in her hand. She wrapped both arms around her closed fist, refusing to let go.

'This woman is incredibly stubborn!' Lin Wanrong used every limb and appendage, sweating bullets as he strained to pry open her clenched hand. But despite exerting Herculean effort, he couldn't do it. The two locked eyes, faces inches apart, close enough to feel each other's hurried breathing.

Upon seeing the faces so close to them, both hesitated. Their movements slowed.

A tear shimmered in the corner of Yueya'er's defiantly upturned eyes. Lin Wanrong found it irritating. Releasing his grip, he sighed, "Fine, fine, just take it! Dammit, what rotten luck to lose a coin for no reason. This will haunt me for years!"

Yueya'er stifled a laugh, the copper coin now close to her lips. Realizing her lapse, she quickly regained her composure.

'I can't believe I couldn't beat you!' Wiping the sweat from his palms, Lin Wanrong took a golden blade from his belt and waved it menacingly. "Little sister, do you want this too?"

Panicked, Yueya'er exclaimed, "You—give me back my golden blade!"

"Give it back to you? It's not impossible," Lin Wanrong teased. "Once my brother wakes up, the blade is yours. It's up to you to decide what to do then."

Faced with Lin Wanrong's smug, thieving grin, Yueya'er gritted her teeth. "Despicable! I should have known you'd make such a shameless offer!"

"I've been called 'despicable' and 'shameless' for years; one more time won't hurt," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "So, what's it going to be? Yes or no?"

How could she refuse? He had her cornered! Frustrated but helpless, Yueya'er paused before finally saying, "Once the patient wakes up, you give me back the golden blade—you promise?"

"If I don't keep my promise, may my wife ride me like a horse for the rest of my life!" Lin Wanrong solemnly vowed, raising his right hand.

Shameless bandit! Yueya'er blushed, gritting her teeth. "Fine, within three days, you will return the golden blade."

"On what grounds?" Lin Wanrong snorted dismissively.

Annoyed, Yueya'er shot him a glance. "Are you asking me—you don't have a brain?"

Lin Wanrong shot up, nearly putting a hole through the carriage wall. "You're saying he'll wake up within three days? Miss Yueya'er, could you please repeat that? I didn't hear you clearly!"

"I don't want to talk to you anymore!" Yueya'er turned her head away, ignoring him.

Three days! In three days, he would wake up! Staring at his brother's pale face and listening to his slow, steady breaths, Lin Wanrong was overcome with emotion, his throat parched. Trembling, he reached for his water pouch, only to find it empty, collapsed and hollow, leaving only the very bottom.

Just as Lin Wanrong lifted the water pouch to his lips, preparing to take a few sips, he noticed that Yujia was staring at him with an unusual gleam in her eyes. Seeing her slightly chapped lips, he realized she must not have had water for two days. He grinned and handed the water pouch to her. "Little sister, you saved my brother. This fresh water is my way of thanking you. Go on, drink!"

A flush came over Yujia's face. She spat out a quick, "No!" and shoved the water pouch back at him. "I don't want your stuff. It's filthy."

Before entering the desert, everyone had filled their water pouches. Lin Wanrong had even filled hers for her. He laughed, "By the looks of it, you haven't had water in two days. Water may be worth its weight in gold out here, but you can't just go without. Your life is at stake."

"Who asked for your opinion?" Yujia dismissively shook her head, waving her delicate hand in front of him.

Her hand was like a radiant pearl—smooth, tender, and white. Lin Wanrong was captivated, but then a sudden realization hit him. His face turned dark. He jumped up and shouted, "You... you used the water to wash your hands?!"

"So what?" Yujia replied coldly, "Not just my hands, I washed my face too!"

"You, you—" Lin Wanrong was so infuriated that his face turned purple. "In a desert where water is more precious than gold, you actually used it to wash your hands and face? Is there no justice? Is there no law?"

Seeing Lin Wanrong trembling all over, too angry to speak, Yujia broke into a slight smile. "A woman's vanity is natural. If I want to use my own water pouch to wash up, even if it leads to my death in the desert, that's my business. What's it to you?"

"I've had enough of your nonsense! Irrational woman!" Lin Wanrong angrily flipped open the curtain and jumped out of the cart. His indignant cursing faded into the distance. Yujia's eyebrows drooped in silent thought, pondering something unknown.

In the midst of her silence, the curtain was suddenly thrown open again. Lin Wanrong, face dark as night, leaned into the cart. He held his nearly-empty water pouch and growled, "Open your mouth —"

"Why should I?" Yujia defiantly shook her head.

Annoyed, Lin Wanrong grabbed her by her delicate neck, forcing her to open her mouth. "Whether you live or die is your business, but my brother must survive. You need to keep going for at least three more days. Drink—"

The last few drops of water in the pouch slowly flowed into Yujia's mouth. It had been days since she'd had a drink, and the water felt incredibly sweet as it entered her mouth. She choked and coughed, tears suddenly falling from her eyes.

"What are you crying for?" Lin Wanrong released her and snorted. "I've never seen such a disobedient woman. Wasting money and now water—I've never encountered such a losing deal in my life!"

Ignoring her tears, he turned and walked away. The empty water pouch swung at his side. From a distance, it looked like a floating gourd.

Watching his receding figure, Yujia sobbed for a moment before bursting into a giggle. She covered her face and softly said, "Such a foolish man."

Her lips curved into a light smile, her eyes sparkling like tranquil autumn waters. She laughed for a moment, but then she broke into tears again.

## Chapter 567 White Hair and Silver Sand

Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui were deep in conversation and laughter when Lin Wanrong suddenly jumped down from Li Wuling's horse-drawn carriage. His eyes were wide open, and his face was as dark as coal. He headed straight toward them.

"What's going on?" Both Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui glanced at each other, filled with curiosity.

Hu Bugui reached for the water skin hanging from his waist and offered it to Lin Wanrong. "It's scorching hot! General Lin, have some water quickly!"

Lin Wanrong wiped away his sweat and waved the offer away. "You go ahead, Brother Hu. I've already had some."

Looking at Lin Wanrong's parched and pale lips, Hu Bugui frowned and said in a deep voice, "What do you mean, you've had some? Don't lie to me! You poured all the fresh water from your own flask into Little Li's yesterday. When have you had any water? You care for your brothers, but you should also take care of yourself."

Hu Bugui was considerate. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Don't worry, Brother Hu. When I really get thirsty, I'll come to you. You know how cunning I am; I won't stand on ceremony with you. Haha!"

Seeing Lin Wanrong's cheerful demeanor, Hu Bugui knew that further persuasion was pointless, so he reluctantly took back his water skin.

"Brother Lin, is this the so-called Silk Road?" Gao Qiu looked around and asked. The winds howled, yellow sand swirled, and although night was gradually falling, the heat emanating from the

sand still burned their feet as if they were on fire. Their drenched clothes clung tightly to their backs, making it extremely uncomfortable.

Desert marches were unlike those on flatlands. To avoid the scorching sun and unnecessary loss of energy and water, they would camp and rest during the day and march at dusk and through the night. Even so, the formidable power of the desert had far exceeded their expectations. They had barely traveled for more than two hours before they had to stop for a rest.

"There is neither silk nor a road to be seen. The name is quite misleading, isn't it?" Gao Qiu, his face flushed from the heat, asked in utter bewilderment.

"The name 'Silk Road' is not misleading, but it's not a path laid with silk as you might imagine," Lin Wanrong chuckled and shook his head. "To put it simply, the Silk Road is a major trade route from our great nation to another continent. Our silk is smooth and beautiful, loved by all. Merchants traveling between Europe and Asia enjoy loading it onto their camels and horses, trading it at the other end of the world. Hence, this route has earned itself a beautiful name—the Silk Road."

Both Gao Qiu and Hu Bugui looked bewildered. They had no idea what the other end of the world or the Europe-Asia continent was. But listening to Lin Wanrong tell the story of the Silk Road was indeed a joy during their journey. They nodded and laughed.

'Perhaps, the less you know, the happier you are.' Observing Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu's simple and hearty smiles, Lin Wanrong suddenly found himself envious—maybe simplicity was indeed a blessing!

Just as he was about to make a light-hearted comment, a puzzled voice sounded beside him, "The other end of the world, Europe and Asia—what are those places? And where are you going now?"

Lin Wanrong turned his head and was met with a face of pure beauty, silently gazing at him. It was Yueya'er, the Turkic girl. Unbeknownst to him, she had silently come to stand beside him, her steps as light as those of a civet.

In this vast desert, a sea of death where the fierce sun and yellow sands allowed not a single blade of grass to grow, fleeing into the wilderness alone was akin to digging one's own grave. Lin Wanrong knew that Yueya'er, being the clever girl she was, would never do something so foolish. He had not even bothered to tie her up, giving her full freedom to roam. If she dared to run, let her try!



Yueya'er looked at him with wide-open eyes, lightly biting her red lips. Her face was full of questions and longing, as she awaited his answer.

Lin Wanrong let out a casual "heh," ignoring her, and gestured to Hu Bugui and the other man. "Brothers, let's change the spot for our storytelling. This place is too clean for my liking."   
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Although Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu did not understand the subtleties in his words, they sensed he was showing displeasure toward Yueya'er.

Yueya'er clearly got his meaning and couldn't help but cast him an amused yet slightly annoyed glance. She turned her head away, huffing softly, "A petty man, an utterly foolish man!"

Both of them acted quite peculiar, causing Old Gao to blink in disbelief. Rather than leaving, he decided to sit on the ground, chuckling, "Since we're resting, let's have a thorough break. Everyone, sit down and let Brother Lin tell us some stories."

No sooner had Old Gao's behind touched the ground than he leapt up, grimacing in pain. Hu Bugui laughed, "Brave man, you dare to sit on such scalding sands."

"It's not about the sand; there's something underneath!" Old Gao cursed, kicking the spot where he had just sat. A soft thud echoed, and everyone's eyes widened in astonishment. True to his word, something was hidden beneath the sands.

Lin Wanrong squatted down, not caring that the sand was scorching, and eagerly brushed it aside. All eyes were fixed on his actions.

As he cleared away the fine sand, what appeared was a shriveled stump. Originally as thick as a sturdy man's waist, the stump had shriveled to the size of a few palms, looking like a withered radish!

"What kind of tree could survive in this sea of death?" Yueya'er was the first to speak, not sure whom she was asking. She slowly squatted down beside Lin Wanrong, reaching out to gently stroke the ancient tree stump.

Lin Wanrong let out a long sigh, "This is called a Euphrates poplar or desert poplar, one of the most resilient trees in the world. Our ancestors in Great Hua praised it as 'alive but not dead for a thousand years, dead but not fallen for a thousand years, fallen but not decayed for a thousand years.' Its vitality is unparalleled."

"The most resilient tree?" Yueya'er gently caressed the decaying trunk, shaking her head in a soft sigh. "Alive but not dead, dead but not fallen, fallen but not decayed. Three thousand years of life, yet it still couldn't withstand the sea of death that is this Rob Nur. How pitiful, how lamentable."

"She mentioned Rob Nur—where is that?" Old Gao quietly asked the Lin brothers.

"Rob Nur? Oh, it's probably a small Turkic village. Not very famous," Lin Wanrong nonchalantly explained, scratching his nose.

"Ignorant people," Yujia glared at him and snorted. "What you call Lop Nur is known as Rob Nur in our Turkic language. It means a beautiful lake where a thousand waters converge. Ah, so in your eyes, Rob Nur is nothing but a small village—hardly noteworthy. I've truly witnessed your profound knowledge today."

Lin Wanrong's face flushed. He chuckled and said, "Well, the Turkic language isn't easy to remember or pleasant to hear. It's understandable that I forgot."

Hu Bugui laughed, "A beautiful lake where a thousand waters converge? That's laughable. With all this yellow sand around, not even a rabbit would defecate here. Where is this supposed lake?"

Gao Qiu also laughed heartily in agreement. Yujia shook her head disdainfully, "You people of the Great Hua don't even understand your own history. How can you not be taken advantage of? Lop Nur was a vast lake thousands of years ago. In your classic geographical text, 'The Classic of Mountains and Seas,' Lop Nur was referred to as 'Young Lake.' It once had the reputation of being 'vast over three hundred li, its water neither increasing nor decreasing regardless of seasons.' It was also known by various other names like Peacock Sea and Lop Pool, all of which indicate a lake. It's a shame you know nothing of this; even I, a Turkic, feel embarrassed for you."

Old Hu and Old Gao had grown up playing with swords and arrows; they hardly ever read books, let alone 'The Classic of Mountains and Seas.' They hung their heads in shame after being scolded by the young Turkic woman.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "We all have our areas of expertise. Knowing history doesn't mean we should remember every little detail. If that were the case, we'd all be historians. To be blunt, even if you, Miss Yujia, pride yourself on your extensive knowledge of history, you may not be familiar with every aspect of your Turkic heritage—"

Yujia proudly smiled, "I am well aware of any factual event in Turkic history."

"Really?" Lin Wanrong's eyes twinkled. He grinned, "Then let me ask you a random question. How many wives did the first Khan of the Turks have?"

"In total, our Heavenly Khan had eighty-nine women bestowed upon him," Yujia disdainfully said. "Why do you ask? Even if I tell you, you might not understand."

"He had that many women? That's even more than my number of horses," Lin Wanrong laughed. "Do you know which part of these women the first Khan looked at when he saw them for the first time?"

‘Such a lowbrow question! But I love it!’ Both Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu exchanged glances; their eyes gleamed with a lascivious light, and they burst into raucous laughter.

Yujia's face turned beet red with anger. "You... you're indecent!"

"Indecent? You're the one who misunderstood," Lin Wanrong said playfully. "Let me give you a history lesson. The first thing your Heavenly Khan looked at when he saw a woman was, of course, her face. What else did you think it would be? If he looked at her legs or her backside, that would be indecent!"

Yujia paused, suddenly realizing that Lin Wanrong was playing with words, and even the Heavenly Khan was not spared from his mockery.

Gao Qiu slapped his thigh and chuckled, "Well said! Judge a person first by their face—this truly captures the essence of being a man. Brilliant, simply brilliant!"

Gazing at Lin Wanrong's smug expression, the Turkic girl felt a mixture of frustration and anger. She wanted nothing more than to give him a few punches. After a long moment, she gritted her teeth and exclaimed, "You deliberately misled me! You're nothing but a troublemaker!"

Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed, "Ah, when someone wants to find fault, they always find a reason. Little sister, you're just too formidable. No matter what you say, you're always right. What chance do others even have?"

The term 'when someone wants to find fault, they always find a reason' is a play on words the Turkic girl was intelligent enough to catch the nuanced mockery. She was puzzled. She had the upper hand in their argument, yet somehow, he'd managed to turn it around. What was his secret?

[The pinyin of 'when someone wants to find fault, they always find a reason' is yù jiāzhī zuì, hé huàn wú cí; There are characters homonym of Yujia in there, so the sentence doubles as a dig on her.]

"Alright, if you want to hear the origin story of the Lop Nur, let me tell you a beautiful tale," Lin Wanrong grinned and began slowly. "A long, long time ago, there was a royal-born young man named Lop Nor. He was as dashing and handsome as I am. Lop Nor had no interest in inheriting the throne; he wished to cross the desert and go to Kucha to learn music and dance. When he reached the Tarim Basin, he lost his way. Hunger and exhaustion overwhelmed him until he fainted. In the nick of time, he was saved by Mila, the daughter of the Wind God. Mila was innocent, beautiful, and kind-hearted. The moment they met, they fell deeply in love, a love so intense they couldn't bear to part. When the Wind God discovered his daughter's love for a mortal, he was furious. He blinded Lop Nor and crippled Mila's legs, then blew them to opposite sides of the barren desert, sentencing them to a life apart."

He paused for a moment at this point. Intrigued, the girl hastily asked, "What happened next?"

Girls invariably ask about the outcome when they hear love stories—it's an unshakeable law. Lin Wanrong chuckled inwardly, sighed, and continued, "Separated by insurmountable distances, their yearning aged them prematurely. Mila's luscious hair turned white overnight, and her tears formed rivers, eventually gathering into a crystal-clear lake. That lake was the legendary Lop Nur. Centuries ago, the Lop was filled with scenic beauty—a paradise of rivers and lakes, interconnected like a string of pearls. Legend has it, those pearls were Mila's tears."

"Eventually, consumed by her longing, Mila's soul ascended to the heavens. That night, the sky changed colors, and the lake dried up. The beautiful Lop Nur disappeared, leaving only silver sand spread across the land. Legend has it that this silver sand is the transformation of Mila's white hair. This tale is known as 'Tears like Mila, Hair like Silver Sand.'"

In the art of storytelling, if Lin Wanrong claimed second place, no one would dare claim the first. His eloquence made even the densest of tales accessible and resonant, appealing to young and old alike. Even the burly men like Old Gao and Hu Bugui were utterly captivated.

"Tears like Mila, Hair like Silver Sand!" The Turkic girl, touched, lowered her head and murmured, her eyes flickering with hope and longing. Lin Wanrong was like a professional storyteller; one moment he was tricking her with a word puzzle that infuriated her, the next he was telling a story that etched itself into her soul. The contrast was striking. Especially the lines "Tears like Mila, Hair like Silver Sand," even though she knew he had made them up on the spot, the words remained unforgettable.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "So, what do you think? Wasn't that story entertaining? How does it compare to your recitations from the 'Classic of Mountains and Seas'?"

"They're all fabricated tales. I don't believe them," Yujia replied, lowering her head and gently caressing the poplar tree beside her, her voice tinged with resignation.

Gao Qiu gave Lin Wanrong a thumbs-up, full of admiration. "Brother Lin, I find myself increasingly enjoying your storytelling. No wonder so many princesses and young ladies are fond of you! This march is dull and lonely; could you perhaps regale us with stories every hour?"

'This scoundrel, does he take me for a storytelling king?' Lin Wanrong snorted internally, wishing he could kick the old man flying.

After exchanging a few more words, Hu Bugui moved the stump of the poplar tree aside. Suddenly, a flash of white light appeared. Yujia let out a startled scream and tightly grasped Lin Wanrong's arm.

Looking down, they saw a section of eerie white bones revealed beneath the stump. Yujia's face paled, and she clung to Lin Wanrong's arm, unwilling to let go even for a moment.

Women are truly strange creatures. They can kill without batting an eye, yet can be terrified by mere insects. Lin Wanrong sighed as he and Old Gao fully excavated the stump. Beneath it, a jumble of bones lay entangled—both horse bones and human bones. A quick count suggested the remains of at least twenty to thirty individuals, their deaths occurring who knows how many years ago.

"Brother Lin, why... why would people die here?" Old Gao, who had killed plenty in his time, seemed genuinely frightened upon encountering this pile of ominous white bones in the vast desert.

Lin Wanrong sighed deeply. "The Silk Road is not just about beautiful silk, but also full of strewn bones. These are our pioneers."

It appeared that this was a merchant caravan on the Silk Road, as evidenced by the almost decayed rolls of silkwood. Likely, they had perished due to lack of food and water in the desert.

Beside the bones were some remaining scraps and shards, perhaps dried sheepskin. Yujia sorted them silently, saying nothing.

Hu Bugui looked closely, astonished. "It seems there are words here! Written in both Great Hua language and Turkic! Strange, how did our Great Hua people and the Turkic people get mixed together here in the Lop Nur?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "There's nothing strange about it. The Silk Road belongs not only to us but also to other ethnic groups. It is a channel of integration for all. On this road, merchants from both Great Hua and the Turkic tribes are brave pioneers, our forebears. Even if they belong to two different ethnicities, they can still mutually support and prosper together."

Yujia looked up at him, pondering the meaning behind his words. She seemed lost in thought, her eyes increasingly hazy, remaining silent...

## Chapter 568 A Poem of Love

"General, look at this!" Hu Bugui carefully cleared the debris beneath a tree stump after digging through the sand. Suddenly, he found something and shouted excitedly.

Lin Wanrong looked over and saw that beneath the layers of sand, two sets of complete skeletal remains were faintly visible. These skeletons were closely entwined, their fingers tightly interlocked, lying peacefully on the ground. Years of exposure to wind and rain had eroded their flesh, leaving behind only stark white bones.

Yujia stared at the tightly intertwined skeletons for a long time before softly saying, "Judging by their bone structure, they seem to be a man and a woman."

"Perhaps they were lovers. How did they end up dying in this desert?" Lin Wanrong shook his head in sorrow. The Turkic girl had already crouched down and slowly started brushing away the sand next to the remains, revealing fragments of sheepskin. Weathered and brittle, the sheepskin had disintegrated into small pieces. Yujia, ever patient, carefully wiped away the sand and started piecing the fragments back together.

The sheepskin contained text in both Great Hua and Turkic. Though some characters were missing, the overall meaning was still clear. The Turkic girl examined it closely; her expression gradually turned solemn. She let out a wistful sigh, shook her head, and a look of melancholy appeared on her face.

Seeing that Yujia had no intention of stopping him, Lin Wanrong leaned in and grinned, "What is this? A treasure map or a martial arts manual? Every adventure in stories always leads to some great discovery."

"Is money all you ever think about?" Yujia shot him an irritated glance. "Why do beautiful things always become so vulgar in your eyes?—See for yourself."

She had grown cold and unresponsive, fixing Lin Wanrong with a piercing gaze, saying nothing.

Lin Wanrong leaned closer and scrutinized the sheepskin. His expression turned odd; he wanted to laugh but felt it would be inappropriate.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's odd expression, Gao Qiu couldn't help but interrupt, "Brother Lin, what does it say?"

Lin Wanrong sighed and shook his head, "It's nothing really, just an ancient love letter."

"An ancient love letter?" Hu Bugui chuckled, "That's strange. Why would a love letter be written in two languages? Did they plan on translating their love letters into multiple languages even at the brink of death?" Gao Qiu nodded in agreement, apparently sharing Hu Bugui's sentiment.

Lin Wanrong stared at the entwined remains and said gravely, "The letter is written in two languages because this pair of lovers belonged to different ethnicities. The man was from our Great Hua nation, and the woman was a Turkic girl."

"A Great Hua man and a Turkic woman?" Hu Bugui and Gao Qiu exchanged puzzled looks. For centuries, the Great Hua and the Turkic people had been enemies. A love affair between youths of

these two nations would be highly taboo. Yet here, in this sea of death, lay the remains of such an ill-fated cross-cultural love.

"This young man from Great Hua was born into a family of scholars. Later, his family fell on hard times, and he turned to trading between Great Hua and the Turkic lands. It was during this period that he happened upon this Turkic girl. Over time, their feelings grew, and they secretly vowed to spend their lives together. However, due to the prolonged war and deep-seated resentment between the two nations, their love was opposed by all. This Turkic girl was eventually traded for fifty fine horses and was promised to a warrior from her own tribe."

When Lin Wanrong reached this point, he shook his head and sighed, "It's unfathomable that you don't understand the gravity of this—humans are not merchandise to be traded as if they were commodities. What exactly do you see your own kin as?"

His gaze was fixed on Yujia, and everyone knew his words were directed at her. The Turkic girl lifted her head and defiantly said, "What business is it of you people from Great Hua to meddle in the ways of my tribe?"

"So you don't want us to intervene, and that's how tragedies like this happen! Would they have died if not pushed to the brink by their own people?" Lin Wanrong pointed at the corpses on the ground, his voice rising, frustration apparent in his tone.

Yujia looked at him, clenching her fists and coldly retorted, "Why do you only mention the Turks? What about you people from Great Hua? You're also responsible for opposing this union! If we're talking about who pressured them to their deaths, you're no less guilty!"

Seeing the two engage in a heated debate, Old Gao and Old Hu exchanged glances, somewhat puzzled. The two of them often engaged in intellectual sparring, but today their every sentence was a battle, which was unusual. It seemed Yujia had truly struck a nerve with General Lin.

Old Gao chuckled awkwardly, "Brother Lin, you haven't finished explaining. If that woman was promised to another, how did she end up here with her lover in Lop Nur?"

"They eloped, what else could they do?" Lin Wanrong shook his head, resignedly stating, "They fled on the eve of her wedding but were discovered by the woman's tribe. With no alternative, they took a desperate gamble and ventured into this desolate desert, a veritable sea of death. They happened upon this caravan, dreaming of following them along the Silk Road to find a world of their own. Well, you know the rest; they entered the sea of death and never came out. They became a pile of bones in the desert, forever united—"



'Bright as day, the youthful pair, half worldly dust, half heavenly air.

I call upon the skies to see, how could fate sever such unity!"

Ah, what beautiful poetry! This deceased brother not only wrote exceptional love poetry but also embodied a romantic spirit much like mine in my younger days."

So that was the case. Old Hu and Old Gao listened intently and sighed. They had just heard Brother Lin narrate the story of white hair and silvery sands and had not expected a real-life version to unfold before their eyes.

Yujia paused for a moment upon hearing the poem, then slowly shook her head and sighed, "It is a good poem, and he was passionate. No wonder he could win the heart of a Turkic woman. He's a hundred times better than those ignorant, swindling bandits." ㄖㄚ́ㄢ̀òǾĖĖŜ

'Is she mocking me? When it comes to poetry and passion, I am far superior to that man.' Lin Wanrong laughed aloud, pretending not to have heard her comment. Leaning closer to Yujia, he said, "Little sister Yueya'er, what do the Turkic women write in their love letters? Would you mind sharing?"

"Do you even understand?" The Turkic girl gave him a sidelong glance, carefully holding the sheepskin in her hands.

When it came to the Turkic language, Lin Wanrong indeed found himself at a loss. He chuckled awkwardly and said, "Some languages are universal; you don't need to study them to understand. Miss Yujia, would you read the letter? I'm genuinely curious to know what a Turkic woman would write in a love letter."

Seeing his playful smile and curious demeanor, Yujia's cheeks flushed slightly. She stared at the sheepskin in her hands, lowered her head, and softly recited,

"I am a fish in the desert, and the tears I shed when I miss you will forever be the never-ending stream in my life."

Lin Wanrong was momentarily stunned. After a long pause, he sighed, "Little sister Yueya'er, is this really a love poem left by the Turkic woman?"

Without raising her head, Yujia softly hummed in affirmation, "It was indeed written by one of our Turkic women."

"Very good, very good," Lin Wanrong clapped his hands, "Even the Turkic people have talented women. Our fellow from the Great Hua really did well, abducting a Turkic beauty and refusing to surrender. His heroic demeanor is quite comparable to mine."

Seeing his sly smile, Yujia couldn't help but hum in a slightly irritated tone, "Heroic? You despicable men from the Great Hua know nothing but to seduce our Turkic daughters!"

"How can you blame us for that?" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, spreading his arms, "Little Sister Yueya'er, your theory is rather peculiar. By your logic, can I also say—these wretched Turkic women love to seduce us men from the Great Hua?"

"You—" Yujia couldn't ignore the implication in his words. Her face turned red in anger, and she turned her head away, refusing to engage with him further.

Lin Wanrong nodded thoughtfully, sighing, "Nevertheless, the love poem is beautifully crafted. At the very least, I really like it!"

"I'm not listening!" Yujia covered her ears, pouting. Perhaps because it was too hot, her cheeks became even redder.

Except for this man and woman seemingly in love, the bones of the others had already mingled together, impossible to tell apart.

Lin Wanrong spoke solemnly, "These are the pioneers of the Silk Road. Whether they are from the Great Hua or the Turkic lands, they all possessed incredible courage and a spirit of exploration. They are our ancestors worthy of respect. Brother Hu, please collect their remains and give them a proper burial."

As if empathizing with the loss, Hu Bugui nodded and called over a few soldiers. They dug a large pit and arranged the bleached bones for burial. The romantic couple, inseparable in life and death,

were given a separate tomb, filled with flowing sand. Even the sheepskin filled with love poems was buried along with them.

Watching the bones gradually covered by the dust and sand, it seemed unimportant who was from the Great Hua or who was Turkic. Their past glory and riches had all turned into mere dust.

Lin Wanrong was the first to kneel down, bowing his head in respect to the pioneering souls of the Silk Road. Seeing him do this, Yujia hesitated for a long moment before finally biting her lip and kneeling beside him.

Lin Wanrong glanced at her curiously and chuckled, "Whom are you paying respects to?"

"None of your business," Yujia hummed softly, "And who are you paying respects to?"

"To those who paved the Silk Road with their footsteps."

Yujia clenched her teeth and softly said, "Then, I'll pay my respects to them too!"

Lin Wanrong's face suddenly turned serious. "Miss Yujia, you should think carefully. These pioneers include not just your Turkic people, but also us from the Great Hua. Do you also pay respects to them?"

Yujia's face changed. She stammered, "I, I—"

"Forget it, we each have our own beliefs; I won't force you," Lin Wanrong said, lightly waving his hand, a quiet sigh escaping his lips. "Worship whoever you wish."

Yujia fell silent for a long moment, then broke into a small smile. Pointing at a couple's tomb, she spoke softly, "May I pay my respects to them, then? Their faithful devotion to each other moves me."

The girl was indeed clever. To get a proud Turkic young woman to behave like this was already quite an accomplishment. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I'm also moved. Let's pay our respects together; it's a custom in the Great Hua."

"What custom?" Yujia snorted. Her cheeks flushed, and she ignored him. Looking at the joint tomb of the couple, she respectfully knelt down, murmuring, "To live and die together with one's beloved, isn't that a kind of happiness? May the god of the grasslands bless me, so I never have to witness such a tragedy again! May all lovers in the world find their happiness."

She pressed her palms together and devoutly bowed her head.

Lin Wanrong didn't need to look to know what sort of wish she'd make; he stood aside, silently chuckling to himself.

By the time Yujia stood up, dusk had already begun to fall. She looked at Lin Wanrong and suddenly giggled, "Wo Lao Gong, I'm thirsty. Do you have any water left?"

'Ah, touching a sore spot! She used clean water to wash her face and still dares to ask me for a drink?' Lin Wanrong's face changed, he retorted angrily, "If you mention 'water' again, I'll fight you."

Seeing his cracked lips, Yujia shook her head gently, "Sometimes I think you're smart, but other times, you're as foolish as a monkey!"

"Excuse me, monkeys are smart, okay?" Lin Wanrong said, displeased.

Yujia smiled and nodded, giggling, "Fine, Mr. Smart Monkey, have you had any water?"

Lin Wanrong swallowed dryly, "Mind your own business—I just had over a hundred sips and am too full. There's no time for idle chatter, Brother Hu, it's getting late, let's move the troops!"

Hu Bugui responded and led the way; 5,000 soldiers quietly advanced. When Lin Wanrong turned his head, the Turkic young woman was nowhere to be seen.

Gao Qiu handed him a silk-wrapped bag, winking suggestively, "Brother Lin, Yujia asked me to give this to you."

'For me? Passed on by Old Gao?' Lin Wanrong looked around but couldn't find where Yujia had hidden amongst the horsemen.

The silk bag was soft to the touch, and something inside sloshed gently. He untied the bag, took one look inside, and was stunned.

What Yujia had given him was a water skin, filled to the brim. At the mouth of the skin, there was a faint, almost invisible lip mark that emitted a subtle fragrance.

## Chapter 569 Poison You to Death

As the large caravan pressed deeper into the boundless desert, the air became increasingly scorching, and the climate progressively drier. The sweeping wind and sand made it impossible for people to keep their eyes open.

But there was more to worry about. As they ventured closer to the heart of the Sea of Death, the wind, bringing the sands along with it, grew more and more violent. Day or night, the furious sand filled the sky, tainting it a vivid orange-yellow. Tall walls of sand, like spinning tops, roared and howled as they charged at the caravan, burying everyone in a sea of yellow sand. Even breathing became extraordinarily difficult. The further they ventured, the more terrifying the Sea of Death revealed itself to be.

In such conditions, not only did their pace slow considerably, but supplies became increasingly scarce. Each day, dozens of warhorses collapsed and died in the sand, and the soldiers were showing signs of dehydration.

"If this continues, I'll be dried up," Gao Qiu gasped, sticking out his tongue. The saliva he spat was yellow and full of sand. "This damned Sea of Death is no place for humans. When the hell are we getting out of here?"

Lin Wanrong's throat was dry as a desert. He swallowed hard, feeling his throat sore from dehydration. "Judging from our current direction, we should be about halfway through," he said, wiping his burning forehead with his sleeve, only to find it devoid of sweat. "Don't worry, Brother Gao. Considering the bleached bones we've discovered along the way, we're on the right path. Pioneers must have crossed the Lop Nur and reached the regions around Gaochang and the Tianshan Mountains."

At the mention of bleached bones, a chill ran down Gao Qiu's spine. Ever since they found the first bone, they had encountered countless remains over the past couple of days. The Silk Road was quite

literally built on a pile of bones. Compared to those who had come before them, their only advantage was having slightly more men and horses.

"Gaochang? Tianshan?" Hu Bugui furrowed his brows. "I've heard of these places but it seems we've rarely had anyone reach them."

Lin Wanrong nodded. "Then let's be the first to get there. Tianshan is a magnificent place, filled with birdsong and breathtaking scenery. There's a snowy pond at the peak, where, as legends have it, the daughters of the Jade Emperor bathe. Crossing over the Tianshan Mountains leads us to the Altai Mountains. From there, we can re-enter the Alxa grassland from the northwest, cross Khovd and Uvs Lake, and reach the Turkic royal court in Kyzil."

Everyone knew this route by heart before setting off. Once they crossed the Altai Mountains and entered the grasslands, they'd be in their element. The hardest part was crossing from the Sea of Death to the Tianshan Mountains.

"By the way, General, how is Li Wuling?" Hu Bugui asked worriedly. "Yujia said he would wake up within three days, but today is the third day!"

Lin Wanrong nodded, concerned. This had been troubling him as well. Ever since the water pouch was delivered, Yujia had ignored him. Over these past few days, she hadn't spoken a single word to him.

"I'll go take a look," Lin Wanrong said as he waved his hand and headed directly towards Li Wuling's carriage. The moment he lifted the curtain, a faint, soothing fragrance filled his nostrils. Looking closer, he saw a young Turkic girl holding a pestle, gently grinding herbs. The scent originated from the mortar.

Curious, Lin Wanrong leaned in and sniffed, asking, "What is this medicine? It smells wonderful!"

Yujia glanced at him and turned her head away, seemingly uninterested in conversing with him.

'What's gotten into her?' Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly. "Miss Yujia, you must be exhausted. Today is the last day of the three-day deadline. I wonder when my friend will wake up."

"No need to remind me," Yujia's tone turned icy as she thrust the pestle into his hand. "You're just in time. Crush these herbs!"

Her voice was chilly, issuing a command without a shred of courtesy. Since it was for Li Wuling's sake, Lin Wanrong was more than willing to oblige. He pounded away with gusto, making the wooden mortar resound with clattering. Soon, he had ground the herbs into a fine powder. He didn't know what herbs she was using, but they smelled wonderful, although the powder felt icy cold upon contact with the skin.

"Water!" Seeing the powder was ready, Yujia grabbed a wooden bowl and coldly ordered.

Lin Wanrong quickly fetched his water flask from his belt and poured water into the bowl. Yujia noticed the dried lipstick marks on the flask's mouth, and disdainfully hummed, "Why is there so much left? Haven't you been drinking?"

"I've been saving it," Lin Wanrong said as he carefully sealed the flask, smiling.

Yujia felt her cheeks grow warm. She lowered her head, pouring the herbal powder into the bowl and stirring it. "What are you saving? You Great Hua people are all liars!"

Lin Wanrong hastily waved his hand, "I mean that water is precious, so I've been saving it. Don't misunderstand!"

"You're the one who's misunderstanding!" Yujia snapped, handing him the wooden bowl, which Lin Wanrong carefully accepted.

From her bosom, Yujia took out a dried herb that carried a pungent scent. She broke it into two pieces, putting the remaining half back. Lin Wanrong sniffed and his face changed immediately. "Is this—Nose-piercing Grass?"

"You're not entirely ignorant," the Turkic girl snorted. She shredded the Nose-piercing Grass and dropped it into the bowl, immediately altering its previously delightful fragrance. A pungent odor now filled the air, horribly unpleasant.

Using tobacco in a medicinal brew was certainly not a Great Hua medical practice. What on earth was Yujia up to? Overwhelmed by the strong smell, Lin Wanrong whispered, "Yujia, the healer, what exactly is this medicine? Its smell is so—unique."

"Unique, is it?" Yujia gave a slight smile, holding the bowl up to his lips and softly saying, "Why don't you have a taste?"

"Me, taste?" Lin Wanrong stammered, "Maybe not, I'm perfectly healthy. Why would I need medicine?"

Yujia nodded. "You won't try it? Then let's give it to the injured man. After all, I'm not entirely confident it'll work."

"What do you mean by this?" Lin Wanrong widened his eyes, asking seriously.

Yujia glanced at him and said calmly, "This is a rather unique medicinal herb. I need someone with thick skin to test its effects. That's all."

'Test its effects on someone with thick skin? Is she insulting me again?' Lin Wanrong chuckled, "It's not poisonous, is it?"

"You can choose not to drink it," Yujia replied, her expression cold as she glanced at him.

If she wanted to poison him, she could've easily tampered with his water pouch. There was no need to add something to the medicine.

Lin Wanrong chuckled again. Staring at the murky medicinal soup, he steeled himself and took a small sip while holding his nose.

"Ptui—ptui—" The moment the medicine touched his mouth, a sharp taste surged from his throat to his lungs and back to his throat. It was numbing, spicy, sour, and bitter, worse than stale water.

Spitting out all the medicine, Lin Wanrong exhaled deeply, his face distorted with bitterness.

"Young lady, what on Earth is this medicine? I'm afraid you'll scare me to death if you don't poison me."

Yujia laughed heartily, doubling over with joy, "You drank it just because I told you to—you're so foolish! Oh dear, now you're going to be poisoned by me!"

Lin Wanrong's face changed dramatically. "Are you serious? How can you be so malicious?"



Yujia's face changed too, and she glared at him. "Yes, I am serious! What about it? I am malicious, and I want to poison you—why don't you kill me?"

‘Poison me, my foot! With her skills, if she had really poisoned me, could we still be arguing like this?’ Lin Wanrong raised his hands in a placating gesture as he saw Yujia seething with anger, resembling a fierce leopardess. "Alright, alright, let's stop fighting. I believe you wouldn't poison me."

"Don't flatter yourself," Yujia said coldly, "Maybe you're already poisoned by my latent poison and you don't even know it."

Lin Wanrong shook his head and smiled, "Although we belong to opposing tribes, you don't seem like someone so malevolent. By the way, why did you trick me the other day into believing you washed your face with clean water? I actually fell for it!"

Yujia's cheeks flushed. She retorted, "Did you believe it just because I said it? Are you that gullible? It's just that you have a dirty mind. I don't want to talk to you."

She turned her head away, her lips tightly clenched, her face icy. Lin Wanrong knew he had been somewhat credulous in this matter. This woman, though proud, was incredibly intelligent and not impulsive.

Both remained silent in the carriage. Lin Wanrong held the bowl of medicine, unsure whether to proceed or retreat, visibly awkward.

After a tense moment, he finally let out a sheepish laugh. "Well, Divine Healer Yujia, consider this my apology for the misunderstanding last time. Also, thank you for the clean water you gave me."

Yujia turned her head away, snorting softly, "That was just returning what's yours, no need to thank me."

Lin Wanrong couldn't read her expression, unsure of her thoughts. Treading carefully, he said, "Divine Healer, it's getting late. What about the condition of my injured brother—?"

"Where is the golden blade?" Yujia interrupted him rudely, turning her head with a cold expression.

Lin Wanrong reached into his robe and pulled out a dazzling, curved blade. Smiling, he said, "Right here! Rest assured, Miss Yujia. If there's one thing everyone can vouch for, it's my honesty. I keep my promises."

Yujia disregarded his boast. She looked at the golden blade with a mixture of delight and concern. After a long silence, she finally spoke softly, "Help the wounded man up."

Overjoyed, Lin Wanrong quickly lifted Li Wuling's limp body, cradling him in his arms. Yujia took the golden blade from him, aimed it at Li Wuling's chest, causing Lin Wanrong to startle. "What are you doing?!"

"This is none of your concern," Yujia replied coldly. "Hold the bowl of medicine and listen for my command. Once I say 'begin,' pour it all in one go. No stopping."

With no other option in such a critical moment, Lin Wanrong had no choice but to comply. Yujia gripped the golden blade, never drawing it from its sheath. She peeked under Li Wuling's eyelids and nodded slightly. Suddenly, she struck with the blade's hilt, imbuing it with a hidden force that hit Li Wuling's chest.

Li Wuling's body jolted in his unconscious state, and a pained moan seemed to escape his lips as his mouth opened. "Quick, begin!" Yujia urged anxiously.

Without hesitating, Lin Wanrong clutched Li Wuling's neck and poured the medicine down his throat. Li Wuling's stomach gurgled and, stimulated by the medicine, his face flushed red and he began to cough violently.

"Li Wuling, Li Wuling—" Seeing Li Wuling's response, Lin Wanrong joyously hugged him, calling out his name.

The potency of the medicine couldn't be underestimated. After a few coughs, Li Wuling began to retch. "Quick, get him out of the carriage—" Yujia ordered urgently.

Lin Wanrong carried him out of the carriage. Li Wuling hunched over and threw up onto the sand.

"Li Wuling—" Hu Bugui, Gao Qiu, and Xu Zhen immediately rushed over, attracting the attention of all the soldiers around.

Throughout Li Wuling's period of unconsciousness, he had consumed very little sustenance. Besides some sour-smelling clear water, he couldn't throw up anything else. Although his physical injuries had mostly healed, he was extremely weak. After that bout of vomiting, it seemed he'd expended all his energy. He lay back in Lin Wanrong's arms, his face as pale as paper, and his breath extremely faint. Only his slightly trembling eyelashes reminded everyone that he had indeed woken up.

"Water!" Lin Wanrong yelled, and Hu Bugui promptly handed him Li Wuling's water pouch. Even in his unconscious state in the desert, Li Wuling was consistently hydrated, and his water pouch was always kept full.

Lin Wanrong poured the clear water into Li Wuling's mouth. Thirstily, he sucked in a few mouthfuls, and his cracked lips slowly began to move.

Lin Wanrong was elated and hugged his shoulders tightly. "Li Wuling, Li Wuling, wake up quickly —"

"Brother Lin—" The call was weak to the point of frailty, tinged with panting breaths, as if it had come from the heavens. In the midst of the roaring winds and swirling sands of the vast desert, it was barely audible. Yet, somehow, it reached everyone's ears.

Li Wuling slowly opened his eyes. His gaze was dull and lifeless, but in the eyes of the five thousand soldiers, it shone like the morning star in the sky.

"Haha, Little Li is awake, Little Li is awake!" Lin Wanrong burst into loud sobs and laughter, tears streaming down his face.

## Chapter 570 The Storm

The shout seemed to grow wings, swiftly spreading from the rear to the front of the formation. The entire troop was instantly electrified, their enthusiasm blazing like wildfire. Soldiers hugged each other in excitement, their cheers interweaving into a cacophony that filled the air. Joy and exhilaration filled their hearts, and even the cruel Sea of Death they found themselves in seemed a little less intimidating.

"General, the porridge is ready!" Xu Zhen hurriedly jogged over, his face flushed with excitement. He held a wooden bowl in his hands, filled with steaming-hot porridge—a clear broth with a few grains of rice and mixed grains settled at the bottom.

The food had been carefully preserved, designated specifically for the injured Li Wuling. Cooking porridge in a desert where even a drop of water was worth its weight in gold was an extraordinary luxury. Yet, for Li Wuling's sake, the five thousand soldiers willingly offered the precious water from their canteens without a word of complaint.

A Turkic young woman sat atop a carriage, witnessing this scene. Her brows furrowed slightly, her expression perplexed. Such acts of mutual aid and love were unimaginable among the Turkic people, who revered the law of the jungle.

Lin Wanrong and Old Gao together propped up Li Wuling. Xu Zhen blew on the scalding porridge to cool it down before carefully spooning it into Li Wuling's mouth.

The warm porridge slid down his throat, infusing Li Wuling with a trace of strength. After chewing and swallowing a few mouthfuls, he took a long, deep breath and slowly opened his eyes.

"Little Li, how are you feeling?" Seeing Li Wuling awaken once more, Hu Bugui couldn't help but wipe a tear from his eye, asking with palpable relief.

Li Wuling's lips were pale, but his waxen face broke into a long-absent smile. "Brother Hu, Brother Gao, I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"Of course you are! How could you die? You haven't even gotten married yet! Nobody can claim your life, hahaha!" Old Gao broke into laughter, tears of joy shimmering in his eyes.

Li Wuling nodded softly, "I'm good. How are all of you—Brother Lin, Brother Gao, Brother Hu?"

"We're all fine," Lin Wanrong assured him, patting him on the head with a smile. "We're all eating and sleeping well. In a few days, when you're fully recovered, we'll take you horseback riding, explore the Lop Nur, and traverse the Tianshan Mountains to do something earth-shattering. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great," Li Wuling's face lit up with excitement. "I love being part of big ventures with Brother Lin. Whether or not we gain an advantage, I don't know. But I'm sure we won't be at a loss—that's what Aunt Xu told me!"

‘Aunt Xu said that? Why is she discussing these things with Li? Is she trying to ruin my reputation?’ Lin Wanrong broke into a cold sweat. Everyone exchanged glances, then burst into unrestrained laughter, the jubilant atmosphere spreading among them.

With Li Wuling awake, a massive weight was lifted from Lin Wanrong's heart. The melancholy that had gripped the soldiers due to their continuous marching and facing the Sea of Death was gone. Now everyone was uplifted, their morale soaring. Li Wuling's awakening at this crucial juncture was like a shot of adrenaline for them all, boosting their confidence to an unprecedented level. They were now filled with the belief that they would emerge from this Sea of Death unscathed.

Little Li had been in a deep sleep for several days, his body frail. After sipping a few mouthfuls of porridge and uttering a few words, his eyelids grew heavy and he soon fell back asleep. This deep slumber was a self-regulatory response of his body, a sign of gradual improvement. Though he had not yet fully recovered, it was now only a matter of time.

Lin Wanrong and Old Hu carefully lifted him onto the cart. Gao Qiu meticulously examined his wounds and listened to his heartbeat. Finally, his face lit up with a smile and he exclaimed, "As long as he is properly taken care of, Little Li should be able to walk on his own in three or four days. I may not like the Turks, but I must admit, this Yueya'er girl has some skills. First, she pulled Little Li back from the brink of death, which was already miraculous. And now she said he would wake up in three days, and he actually did. I can't help but be impressed!"

Old Gao, though not much of a physician, was still a martial arts expert. If he said that Li Wuling could walk in three or four days, he was likely right.

Hu Bugui nodded in agreement, "In terms of medical skills alone, this Turkic girl has quite the ability. Moreover, she saved Little Li's life, for which I hold great respect."

Hearing them mention the girl, Lin Wanrong suddenly realized that since Li Wuling had awakened, everyone's attention had focused on him, completely overlooking the Turkic girl. She had been in the cart just before the rescue, but now she was nowhere to be found. Luckily, they were in the vast desert of the Sea of Death, so no one worried she might escape.

After settling Li Wuling, they all disembarked from the cart. The setting sun dipped below the horizon, casting its golden rays over the Lop Nur. For once, the treacherous terrain showed a gentle face. The wind lightly caressed their cheeks, as if touched by the soft hands of a young girl.

Taking advantage of the momentary respite, Lin Wanrong checked their provisions. If nothing went wrong, they could manage for another four or five days.

As he walked from the front of the line to the rear and was about to return, he suddenly heard the distant, haunting melody of music. It seemed mournful and bitter, leaving a lasting impression on him.

Far away, on a sand dune, the sun sank slowly, forming a perfect red circle. A graceful figure stood still, her silhouette casting a faint shadow in the crimson sunset, like a watercolor painting come to life.

Her flowing dress flapped in the gusts of sandy wind as she gazed silently into the distance, as still as a speck of dust in the vast desert.

"A dead tree shrouded in crows, a small bridge over flowing water, an ancient road in the western wind with a gaunt horse. The setting sun in the west, leaving the broken-hearted at the end of the world—what a poem, what a poem indeed!"

A chattering voice came from behind her, accompanied by a few light claps. The Turkic girl set down her jade flute, a faint smile appearing on her lips as she softly hummed, "Indeed, 'shrouded in crows.' You certainly know yourself well." Ǫa N ǫǪ Ės

Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly, then climbed the sand dune to stand beside her. "You truly are in high spirits, Divine Physician. In this boundless desert, you still find the time to watch the sunset and play your jade flute. I must say, I, this rough guy, admire you greatly."

"Rough guy? Wo Lao Gong, you're quite modest for once," the Turkic girl sneered coldly.

"Being a rough guy equates to being modest?" Lin Wanrong looked genuinely shocked. "If so, you have terrible judgment. I've been a rough guy for quite some time; even if I wanted to be refined, I can't!"

The corner of his mouth twitched into a barely perceptible smile. Having observed him for some time, Yujia understood his disposition well enough. Whenever he wore that grin, he was hardly up to any good. The young lady gave a soft 'tch' and put away the small jade flute she'd been holding.

"Here, this is for you," Lin Wanrong said, handing a golden blade to Yujia.

It was unusual for a bandit like him to be so generous. Gazing at the glimmering blade, the Turkic girl hesitated for a moment.

"You're actually giving this back to me?" Doubt and suspicion filled her face.

"Of course. Do you think my reputation as an 'honest young man' is undeserved?" Lin Wanrong looked at her, a little displeased. "This little blade isn't of much use to me, apart from maybe clipping my nails. If I said I'd give it back, I meant it. Don't get too moved; it's your rightful possession."

"Moved? By what?" Yujia glared at him. The sincerity in his earlier words was completely negated by his insufferably smug attitude that followed.

She hesitated for a moment before finally extending her hand to grasp the golden blade firmly. She pulled lightly a couple of times but, inexplicably, the blade remained stuck. She tried again, and still, it didn't budge.

"Why are you holding so tight—let go!" Yujia exclaimed, her face flushing red.

"Oh, I thought you didn't want it anymore!" Lin Wanrong chuckled and naturally loosened his grip. "You seem to care a lot about this little blade. Does it hold some secret?"

Frustrated, Yujia thrust the blade back into his hands. "What secret? Just keep it!"

"So, are you giving me this blade?" Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, reaching for it once more. "I must say, I'm not a big fan of small blades."

"Who's giving it to you? Give it back!" Yujia snatched the blade back, her eyes tinged with a flush, her expression one of pure irritation.

Lin Wanrong watched her, smiling faintly, "Fair is fair; I've returned your blade. But I am very grateful for your kindness, Miss Yujia."

Yujia's expression chilled, her lovely face turning frosty. "Why are you thanking me? Don't forget, the people who wounded your comrade were also Turkic. You killed my people; we Turkic have also killed yours. Our two nations are naturally incompatible. If you hadn't offered something in exchange, do you think I would save an enemy of my people?"

"Enemy? Well said, Miss Yujia," Lin Wanrong chuckled, speaking calmly. "Given your extensive knowledge, I'd like to ask: What exactly is the grudge between my Great Hua and your Turkic people? Who turned us into irreconcilable enemies?"

The scornful sneer on his lips was a slap to Yujia's face; she couldn't answer his question. The truth was evident: her ancestors were the ones who first invaded Great Hua. Gritting her teeth, she avoided his gaze. "Don't ask me; I don't know."

Lin Wanrong sneered coldly, "Miss Yujia, one should always speak the truth. Don't you know what your people, what your ancestors have done? Seems to me you've selectively forgotten."

"And what business is it of yours?!" Yujia hissed through clenched teeth, like a provoked lioness.

Arguing with a woman was as challenging as reaching for the stars. Lin Wanrong sighed, "Human beings are insignificant, caught in the webs of history. All we see are life-or-death struggles and irreconcilable conflicts. But who knows? Centuries from now, two nations that once crossed swords might live in harmony and prosper together. Compared to the long river of history, we, who think ourselves so great, are but specks of dust. No matter how much you prance around, thinking you're important, history will eventually bury you. The same goes for me, Miss Yujia."

His tone was uncharacteristically solemn, every word heartfelt. Even Yujia could sense the sincerity and resignation in the bandit's heart.

It was a rare side of him. The Turkic maiden paused, whispering, "Harmony and mutual prosperity? Is that even possible?"

"Ethnic integration is the natural course of history. Take, for example, the countless skeletons and star-crossed lovers we see along the Silk Road. Does it matter who is from Great Hua and who is Turkic? Don't they all help one another through hardships?"

Yujia pondered his words and, surprisingly, offered no rebuttal.



"Centuries from now, there will be no boundaries like the Helan Mountains. Within the plains, all ethnic groups will live in peace; you'll find a bit of me in you and a bit of you in me. We won't even be able to differentiate between us."

Yujia blushed furiously and scoffed, "What do you mean 'a bit of me in you and a bit of you in me'? You bandit, how shameless!"

Lin Wanrong was dumbstruck. 'Shameless? Heaven have mercy; you're the one with the dirty mind! I'm an innocent man with no such intentions! This Turkic woman really dares to think anything.'

"Why are you staring at me? How would you know what happens centuries from now?" The girl snorted, her cheeks still flushed, seemingly a little embarrassed.

'You little temptress, if I'm not staring at you, who should I stare at?' Lin Wanrong winked and said with a smile, "Don't forget, I can read the stars and palms. I know what will happen five hundred years before and after—it's a great secret that I've only told you. Don't share it with anyone, okay?"

Seeing his mischievous expression, Yujia wanted to laugh but held back. "You've said so much about ethnic integration and peaceful coexistence. Don't forget, our nations are at war right now. If I ask you to cease attacks on my people, would you agree?"

Yujia was indeed a thoughtful woman; her question caught Lin Wanrong off guard. After pondering for a moment, he silently shook his head. Peaceful coexistence was a future tense; the present war still had to be fought. Only when both sides were sufficiently pained and scared would they quiet down and seriously consider the future.

Yujia could read Lin Wanrong's thoughts just by looking at his face. She couldn't help but snort, "You're all talk, but deep down, you're no different, are you? Despicable!"

"Being caught in the webs of history does make one feel trapped," Lin Wanrong sighed helplessly, untying the water pouch from his waist and handing it to Yujia. "Thinking about all this gives me a headache. Let's just forget it. Here's your water pouch back."

"What are you doing?" Yujia was furious, and she waved her hand dismissively. "I don't want anything you've tainted!"

Lin Wanrong responded earnestly, "I swear on my honor that I haven't touched a drop of this water!"

"Why didn't you?" Yujia clenched her teeth defiantly. "We, the Turkic people, never take back what we've given. This is me returning it to you; it belongs to you. If you don't like it, go ahead and pour it into the desert."

Only a fool would pour water into the desert. Seeing Yujia turn her head away in stubbornness, Lin Wanrong didn't know what to say. Despite being enemies, they were now oddly fussing over a water pouch. The thought made him feel strange.

They debated and argued, neither convincing the other, until both fell silent.

Amidst golden sands and under a sky tinged with the hues of a setting sun, the scenery was peculiarly beautiful. Yujia gazed into the distance, suddenly letting out a cry of astonishment, "What—what is that?"

Lin Wanrong hummed in acknowledgment and looked up. Far in the distance, above the horizon, misty clouds revealed the slow emergence of a green forest. High above the forest soared a majestic castle, its flags flapping in the wind. Countless pavilions, city walls, carriages, and officials were visible, all in vivid detail. Surrounding the city, a clear river flowed gently, with herds of horses, cattle, and sheep grazing at ease. Joyous young men and women ran freely, singing as they rode their horses.

The castle that had suddenly appeared on the horizon seemed like a market in the sky, so vivid that it felt within reach. The gurgling river was especially enticing for those stranded in the desert. Not only were Lin Wanrong and Yujia spellbound, but all the soldiers were also stunned.

"Where is this, Heaven?" Yujia murmured, utterly captivated.

"Heaven?" A lightbulb went off in Lin Wanrong's mind. He jumped up, exclaiming, "I know what it is—it's a mirage!"

"A mirage?" Yujia frowned slightly, looking at him with eager eyes. "What's a mirage?"

‘The girl who grew up on the grasslands has never seen a mirage? That's a pity,’ Lin Wanrong chuckled. "An ancient poem says, 'By the sea, vapors form into towers; across the fields, they take

the shape of palaces.' A mirage is caused by the refraction of sunlight, layering images upon the distant sky. That's why we see markets, castles, rivers, and people, all vivid and moving. In our ancient Great Hua myths, Mirage is a type of mythical sea creature capable of forming such illusions; hence the term 'mirage.'"

Mirages typically appear over the sea. It was rare to encounter one in the desert, so it was understandable that Yujia had never seen one.

Yujia let out a sigh and softly said, "Mirage. What an intriguing name, doesn't seem like something someone would just make up. Bandit, you've never been to the desert before, so how could you know the origin of Mirage?"

"Because I'm diligent and studious. Well-read, you see," Lin Wanrong replied, not blinking an eye as he spun his tale.

"I don't believe you!" Yujia chuckled, her eyes brightening as they gazed at the distant landscape. "Imagine a marketplace in the sky, called a Mirage! How wonderful it would be if I could see it!"

'See what? The actual Mirage is at least a thousand miles away. How would you find it?' Lin Wanrong said with a smile. "Who knows, maybe our situation here is being reflected in the sky as well, turning into a Mirage in the eyes of people far away."

"Really? Are we also a Mirage?" Yujia turned towards him, her eyes filled with joy and longing.

'Women are truly the easiest creatures to please in the world,' Lin Wanrong chuckled. "It's probably true. You look at the scenery from the bridge, and those looking at the scenery are viewing you from the tower. Isn't that the same idea?"

Yujia glanced at him and lowered her head. "Wo Lao Gong, you don't seem like someone who has read many books. How can you speak so eloquently?"

'Me, not read books? Which eye of yours saw that? I flip through the picture album given to me by Gao Qiu every day!' Lin Wanrong snorted with a forced smile. "'An educated rogue scares the women.' Be careful, Miss Yujia!"

Yujia paused for a moment, then burst into delicate laughter. "If all rogues were as enlightened as you, we women would have nothing to fear!"

‘This is contempt, naked contempt.’ Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth in annoyance. Yujia shook her head softly, "I never thought that in the Sea of Death, there would be such peculiar scenes. Others are our Mirage, and we are theirs. Wo Lao Gong, you've quite summed up the myriad phenomena of the human world."

‘Do I really have such profound insight?’ Lin Wanrong himself was surprised and laughed.

The spectacle of Mirage caught the eyes of the soldiers as well, who marveled and speculated about omens of good fortune for their military campaign.

After a short while, the sky market gradually dissipated. The Mirage turned into a wisp of ethereal smoke and was gone. Yujia stared, muttering, "Mirage, it was just a dream, all fake."

As the smoke cleared and the winds picked up, the sand felt like it was stinging their faces. The Sea of Death seemed to suddenly grow furious, and a wild wind began to howl. Where Mirage had vanished, a deep yellow cloud was approaching rapidly, and its angry roar was already audible.

"What is this?" Lin Wanrong wondered.

After a closer look, Yujia's face turned pale. "It's a desert storm!"

Before she could finish speaking, the once-calm Sea of Death changed its countenance in an instant. Sand and rocks flew in the air, and the winds raged. The fast-approaching yellow cloud, with its howling noise, charged towards them. The world turned a murky yellow, and faces were barely discernible from a few yards away.

"The storm is coming, the storm is coming! All men and horses, get down immediately, tighten your grip, lean on each other—" The desert-hardened Hu Bugui roared at the top of his lungs against the howling wind. Nearby, Gao Qiu and Xu Zhen had already helped Li Wuling off the cart and shielded him with their bodies.

They had weathered a few desert storms in the preceding days, but the scale and ferocity of this one were incomparable to the others.

The furious winds roared past their ears. A menacing yellow cloud approached rapidly, revealing a hideous face. An endless expanse of yellow sand filled the sky, swirling like a massive, fast-spinning top. It lunged forward with a fierce howl, spinning as it went, kicking up dust and gravel as if they were sharp blades.

The sand dunes beneath their feet seemed restless, as if wanting to take flight. It was impossible to stand; the windblown sand choked their mouths and noses, making breathing nearly impossible.

"Run!" Lin Wanrong yelled, grabbing Yujia and sprinting down a sand dune. The wind howled behind them, as if a great weight pressed against their backs. They ran as fast as they could. With each step, the ground beneath them felt lighter, as if they would be lifted off the ground any moment.

Before they had gone far, the dune behind them erupted, lifted entirely by the sandstorm. It joined the whirling sands in the air to form a larger, more ferocious storm that hurtled toward them.

"Get down, get down now!" Lin Wanrong screamed, but the wind was so loud that he couldn't even hear his own voice. Every time he opened his mouth, large amounts of sand poured in, causing him to cough and gasp for air. He held onto Yujia's hand as tightly as he could and yelled with all his might.

The Turkic girl seemed to hear him. She suddenly bent her knees, tightened her grip on his hand, and they both crouched down.

The windswept sand circled them, howling, pulling with a force that threatened to lift them off the ground. Lin Wanrong felt as if his body, weighing over a hundred and fifty pounds, was about to ascend into the sky like a grain of sand in the desert.

Biting his teeth together, Lin Wanrong knew that being swept into the sky would be like jumping into a blender—death by dismemberment awaited. He let out a furious roar and dug his feet into the sand, increasing the friction to prevent himself from being lifted into the air.

A muted groan came from the wind, soft but clear to Lin Wanrong's ears.

It was Yujia!

He tightened his grip on the girl's hand and struggled to open his eyes amidst the blinding sand. He saw the Turkic girl's body swaying in the wind, like a willow tree about to be uprooted. Her face was stubborn, and she seemed resolved not to cry out for help even at the brink of death.

‘Stubborn woman!’ Infuriated, Lin Wanrong roared as he lunged forward, scooping her up into his arms.

Yujia's body trembled. Unyielding even in the face of death, she struggled violently in his arms.

"What are you doing? Do you want to die?" Lin Wanrong shouted into her ear with all his strength. Amidst the harsh winds and flying sand, he seemed like a fearsome wolf.

Yujia's body tensed, her eyes straining to meet his gaze. The bandit's roaring expression resembled that of an enraged deity. A myriad of colors flickered in the Turkic girl's eyes, infinitely complex and ever-changing.

Seeing her struggle no more, Lin Wanrong finally let out a sigh of relief. ‘This Turkic woman is wilder than a leopard. I wouldn't be able to control her without getting a bit tough.’

A violent wind swept around them, the two clinging to each other amidst the howling. Their bodies swayed like a small boat tossed on ocean waves.

With a tearing sound, Lin Wanrong's robe was ripped apart by a sharp rock behind him. The wind blew the tattered cloth skyward.

"The water pouch!" Yujia screamed, arms outstretched. Curling within Lin Wanrong's arms, she had a clear view of the water pouch hanging from his waist. It twirled in the wind along with the torn robe, finally landing several feet away.

‘Water is life!’ Thought Lin Wanrong, his heart aching, but he couldn't dwell on it. Losing water was one thing; losing her would be losing everything.

Before he could finish the thought, he felt a sudden lightness in his arms. Yujia had darted out like a nimble leopardess, running straight for the water pouch.

The howling wind circled her, threatening to lift her off the ground. With a swift dive, she fell to the ground and reached out her hand. Her body faced the wind, and though her fingers were mere inches from the water pouch, she couldn't quite grasp it. Her lips bled from biting them, her legs propelling her body forward. Despite her efforts, the wind lifted her slowly, her fingers always a hair's breadth away from the pouch.

Just when it seemed the wind would carry her away, Yujia closed her eyes, two tears rolling down her cheeks. She was about to let go when she felt herself being pulled back.

A voice almost roaring in her ear exclaimed, "Foolish woman, do you have a death wish?"

Tears instantly flowed from the Turkic girl's eyes. In a swift move, she grasped the water pouch and held it tightly to her chest.

Lin Wanrong's face was covered in dust, his feet buried in the sand, crouching as he held onto Yujia. It was he who had risked his life to come to her aid, yet he couldn't suppress the anger within him. "What on Earth are you doing? If you don't want to live, I do! You're going to drive me mad!"

"I'm not doing anything," the girl retorted, her voice several times louder than his, like an angry young leopard. "The water I gave you mustn't be wasted, not a single drop! Do you understand? That's it!"

Having said that, she clung to the water pouch and darted back into Lin Wanrong's embrace, burying her head into his chest and refusing to move.