

Mythical 111

Chapter 111: Can You Guarantee Liu Bei Will Remain Unchanged?

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On the main road between Qingzhou and Yanzhou, a long dragon-like column was slowly making its way towards Qingzhou. This was Liu Bei's army sent to suppress the Yellow Turbans.

With Chen Xi as the main commander and Fa Zheng as the strategist, the army boasted deputy generals Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, and Tai Shi Ci, forming a luxurious force of thirty thousand mixed infantry and cavalry. However, at present, only deputy general Sun Guan and the five thousand infantry prepared for Tai Shi Ci were marching on this road.

"Why do you insist on riding in a carriage if you don't want to ride a horse? Why push it onto me?" Fa Zheng complained from inside the carriage.

"Falling off a horse and dying isn't uncommon, and don't you find sitting in a carriage much safer?" Chen Xi argued with a smile, though he couldn't say he actually remembered how to ride a horse since he had never truly ridden one before.

"Hmph!" Fa Zheng turned his head in annoyance. "And soldiers should move quickly. Is it really alright for us to march so slowly?" Fa Zheng pointed outside the carriage at the long column of troops, expressing his dissatisfaction.

"I'm afraid of dying, so even if we're walking on the main road, I've sent out scouts ahead. Besides, moving quickly only makes sense if it changes the situation. Otherwise, it's better to maintain the soldiers' stamina to handle unexpected events." Chen Xi replied nonchalantly.

"No wonder you positioned the sword and shield soldiers on the flanks, with the spearmen in the middle among the archers and sword and shield soldiers. Still, the formation seems a bit too long." Fa Zheng nodded in agreement.

"I've placed the most mobile cavalry at the front and back. If anyone tries to cut through the middle, I don't mind encircling and annihilating them." Chen Xi said indifferently, "I'm not good at commanding

troops, but I know how to respond. So my role as the commander, apart from providing authority, is similar to yours."

Fa Zheng felt helpless. During his half-year stay in Taishan, he witnessed Chen Xi's capabilities. Although Chen Xi didn't seem particularly diligent, always delegating tasks to others, Taishan was well-governed under his administration. The population was increasing, agriculture and commerce were flourishing, and the treasury showed no signs of depletion. Even a rebellious Fa Zheng had to admit Chen Xi was quite capable.

Now that Chen Xi claimed their roles were similar, Fa Zheng felt immense pressure. Before leaving Fenggao, he thought he had escaped the clutches of a manipulator, only to find himself in another's grasp, with a different person directing him.

Though Fa Zheng didn't want to admit it, he sensed the gap between himself and Guo Jia. It might take him three to five years to catch up. As for the man beside him, Fa Zheng suspected Chen Xi might be eating something extraordinary since their age difference was merely a year, yet the disparity felt significant.

Seeing Fa Zheng's changing expressions, Chen Xi inwardly sighed, realizing Guo Jia must have harassed Fa Zheng a lot, leaving him with psychological scars.

"Alright, I'll give you a chance this time. Unlike Guo Jia's mischievous nature, I won't interfere unless you make a grave mistake. I'll follow your plans. My role is to back you up and ensure this group's cohesion. You have this one chance. The Yellow Turbans are manageable, but remember, our value lies in achieving the greatest gain with the least loss." Chen Xi placed a hand on Fa Zheng's shoulder, emanating an aura of righteousness and grandeur.

Fa Zheng, taken aback, looked up at Chen Xi, the happiness almost too sudden to believe.

"Since last year, I've been planning the world's situation from the Battle of Hulao Pass. Lord Xuande believes you can manage it, so here's your opportunity." Chen Xi patted Fa Zheng's shoulder. "Do your best. We all have high expectations for you. Perhaps the battlefield will help you mature."

"I will do my best!" Fa Zheng said excitedly.

"Hu~" Chen Xi exhaled deeply. "Kids are so easy to fool. Now I have another laborer. Although I might not excel at strategizing myself, I can still make modifications. My judgment is solid. Even if Lord Xuande finds out, it's all part of nurturing the next generation."

Fa Zheng had no idea Chen Xi used so many methods just to secure a laborer. Of course, given Chen Xi's previous impressive performance, no one would doubt his strategic prowess.

In Li Ru's residence in Chang'an.

Li Ru, with a pale face and occasionally flashing abnormal redness, lay on the couch, listening to reports from his household servants.

"Did you say the abdication is tomorrow?" Li Ru asked with closed eyes.

"Yes," the servant replied, bowing.

"Fetch pen and ink. I have little interest in living further, but I can't let the Western Liang forces I built crumble with Dong Zhuo's fall." A trace of loneliness appeared on Li Ru's face. Even if he warned Dong Zhuo again, it wouldn't change anything. He realized his efforts were in vain; even the Western Liang cavalry he created was now experiencing desertions, showing there was no hope left.

"Deliver this letter to Generals Guo and Li. Tell them not to worry about me and inform them that as long as they don't create internal chaos, they can enjoy lifelong wealth. Now, take the servants and leave." Li Ru handed the letter to his old servant and gestured for him to go.

Seeing his old servant bow three times, Li Ru was moved to tears but still urged him to leave quickly. By tomorrow, he would face certain death.

After the servant left, Li Ru changed into white mourning clothes and knelt by the table, waiting for dawn. Having poured so much effort into building a formidable army from the harsh lands of Western Liang, creating a force capable of contending with the world, he felt a deep sense of loss.

"What a pity. I was once so proud, thinking I could single-handedly control the world. I had the talent to govern a nation but lacked the ability to judge people. Laughable, laughable!" Li Ru drank a cup of wine. He rarely drank because he believed it clouded his thinking, but now, only inebriation could numb his pain.

"Crash!" A cold wind blew, instantly sobering Li Ru from his drunken state. He stared at the burly man suddenly appearing before him and then lowered his head to continue drinking, showing neither panic nor fear. With his heart nearly dead, he cared little about life or death.

"Strategist!" Hua Xiong knelt on one knee before Li Ru.

"Leave. Lord Xuande is a good master." Li Ru waved dismissively. "I have no desire to join any warlord. Dong Zhuo was once so brave and heroic but was still overwhelmed by this splendor. Can you guarantee Liu Bei will remain unchanged?"

Chapter 112: Li Ru and Jia Xu

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"Strategist, if you stay here, you'll definitely die. I must take you away. No matter what, both you and Chancellor Dong picked us from among the common folk and bandits. We've repaid Chancellor Dong with our blood over these ten years, and we owe him nothing. But I owe you. When I surrendered to Lord Xuande, I asked him to allow me to recall my old comrades. Luckily, he agreed to my request. If you come with me, I'll treat you as the head of my family. Chen Zichuan's orders don't have much constraint over me," Hua Xiong said solemnly, half-kneeling on the ground.

"Leave," Li Ru waved dismissively. "My heart is dead. I don't want to meddle in the affairs of the warlords anymore. Assist Liu Xuande well; he has the potential to become a new king. Warn him to be wary of Cao Mengde. This man will achieve great things in the future. It's a pity Zhongying couldn't subdue him. A real pity!"

"Strategist!" Hua Xiong called out urgently.

"Leave!" Li Ru raised his head, eyes filled with killing intent. "In the end, this world will still belong to the aristocratic families. Where is the path for the common people? Where is it? Tell Liu Xuande that the

aristocratic families cannot be wiped out by the efforts of one generation. Unless a great sage arises to enlighten the people and gradually dismantle the aristocracy, they will never be eradicated!"

Hua Xiong was directly intimidated by the overwhelming mental force emanating from Li Ru. At such a close distance, this level of mental power was enough to obliterate Hua Xiong's thoughts, rendering him a fool. After experiencing Dong Zhuo's tyranny and the shattering of his ideals, Li Ru's mental force had undergone a second transformation.

"Strategist!" Hua Xiong cried out hoarsely. This level of mental force was life-threatening, but he still had to give it a try.

"Ah!" Hua Xiong's brain felt like it was exploding, though it was just a momentary pain. However, that brief instant of agony drenched the inner energy expert in sweat.

"At my level, even Lu Bu couldn't force me to leave if I didn't want to. Go on, Liu Xuande is a good man. I hope you haven't misjudged him." Li Ru waved Hua Xiong away. He had lost the will to live. Otherwise, no one could have stopped him from leaving. Wang Yun and Lu Bu were not even obstacles.

Hua Xiong smiled bitterly, bowed to Li Ru, and left without looking back. Since Li Ru had reached this level and had a death wish, there was no point in trying to convince him.

If Li Ru wanted to die, it was a matter of course. Hua Xiong didn't want to die yet. If Li Ru unleashed his full mental force, even if Li Ru died, Hua Xiong would either die or go insane.

"Sigh, I wonder what kind of person Liu Xuande truly is. The talent recruitment order... I wish I could visit Taishan," Li Ru murmured to himself. He then coughed violently, quickly covering his mouth with a white cloth. When he removed it, the cloth was stained with dark blood. "My time is short..."

Hua Xiong rushed out of Li Ru's house, bounding across the night sky towards Jia Xu's residence.

"Boom!" He kicked open the door, only to find the house empty. His frustration grew.

"This must be the tunnel!" Hua Xiong soon found the hidden passage in the courtyard and jumped in. Failing to bring back Li Ru was understandable, but Jia Xu had no reason to escape.

"Damn, why are there pursuers at this time?" Jia Xu, advancing along the tunnel, was taken aback upon hearing the chaotic footsteps behind him. He gritted his teeth and turned around. He preferred to negotiate rather than continue running. Negotiation was a viable strategy.

"Hua Zijian?" Seeing Hua Xiong charging towards him, Jia Xu was momentarily stunned. Then, his mind quickly processed the situation.

"Hua Xiong, don't knock me out. I have a way to bring Li Wenyou back!" Seeing Hua Xiong rush at him, Jia Xu quickly spoke.

As expected, Hua Xiong halted his attack, his hand stopping inches from Jia Xu's neck.

"Whew, you must know that Li Wenyou already harbors a death wish. With his abilities, if he's resigned to die, not even Lu Bu could stop him," Jia Xu said without preamble, directly addressing the issue. There was no need for embellishment with Hua Xiong.

"What's your plan?" Hua Xiong asked impatiently.

"First, promise me you won't knock me out after it's done. You probably think I'm disloyal to Chancellor Dong. In truth, Wenyou and I share the same mindset. Since Chancellor Dong is beyond saving, it's better not to incur the wrath of heaven and earth. The sooner Yongzhou stabilizes, the better. As for the lives of the Western Liang generals, if I can't escape, I'll personally speak to them. If I manage to flee, my old servant holds the key to their safety," Jia Xu explained swiftly before Hua Xiong could react.

"...", Hua Xiong was speechless. Couldn't Li Ru see this? He could. Since Li Ru could see it, why didn't he act on it? This realization only added to Hua Xiong's frustration. He wanted to vent his anger on Jia Xu, but Jia Xu's clear and logical explanation defused his anger, leaving him with no outlet.

"In that case, please escort me back to the Jia residence. I'll bid farewell to Wenyou, but don't let him see you until I give the signal," Jia Xu said, tidying his clothes and straightening his cap, exuding a calm scholarly demeanor.

"Fine, I trust you. But if you try to escape, believe me, you can't outrun me," Hua Xiong said, making a quick decision. To him, Li Ru was far more important than Jia Xu. Even though Jia Xu provided a logical explanation, his previous impressions of Jia Xu hadn't entirely dissipated.

At the first watch of the night, Jia Xu arrived at Li Ru's residence.

"Surprised you still had the interest to visit me," Li Ru, dressed in mourning clothes, sat before a table with a sword on it.

"We've known each other for years. I'm here to see you off. After this, I'll leave. We've both made arrangements for the Western Liang army. Either of us could secure Li Jue and Guo Si a lifetime of wealth. But without someone to restrain them, they might eventually forget their old loyalties and fall victim to others' schemes," Jia Xu poured a cup of wine for Li Ru, bowed, and casually discussed the future.

"I'm dying soon. If they follow my arrangements, they'll have wealth. If not, what can I do? Since you're so leisurely, why not join me in dying for Chancellor Dong?" Li Ru drank his wine in one gulp and laughed heartily.

"I want to see those people's faith shattered. I'll also collect your corpses. Did you prepare coffins?" Jia Xu's words stung Li Ru, causing him to jump back. He pointed at Li Ru and rebuked him. After a pause, Jia Xu continued, "Wenyou, I'm leaving. Don't worry, I'll arrange a coffin made of golden nanmu for you." He bowed and slowly retreated, sighing as he left the main hall.

Chapter 113: Corrupted from Top to Bottom

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"Hmm, it seems about time," Jia Xu stood at the entrance of Li Ru's residence, glancing at the moon. He looked around to ensure no one was nearby and then called out softly, "Zi Jian!"

As soon as Jia Xu's voice fell, Hua Xiong descended from the sky, "Is it done?"

"Now go in and carry Wenyou out. I assume taking both of us out of here won't be a problem for you," Jia Xu pointed at the main door of Li Ru's house, signaling Hua Xiong to proceed.

Li Ru's house was brightly lit but devoid of servants, so Hua Xiong walked in boldly. Sure enough, Li Ru had passed out at the table. Hua Xiong's heart leaped with joy.

"Strategist, strategist, strategist?" Hua Xiong called a few times, but there was no response. Without hesitation, he hoisted Li Ru onto his back, ready to leave Chang'an and head north, taking care of the Emperor's safe passage.

"Let's go," Hua Xiong, carrying Li Ru, motioned to Jia Xu and headed towards Jia Xu's home. Tonight, the city walls were heavily guarded. Hua Xiong alone might barely manage to sneak out, but with two others, it would be much more difficult.

The next day, Hua Xiong had gathered his troops and was quickly heading north with Li Ru and Jia Xu. As they passed the outskirts of Chang'an, Hua Xiong's keen ears picked up the sounds of fighting from within the city. After a while, the sounds turned into cheers.

"Mr. Jia, has Chancellor Dong fallen so far out of favor?" Hua Xiong asked bitterly, kneeling before Jia Xu.

"Not just out of favor, many wish to devour his flesh and drink his blood. He is no longer the Dong Zhongying of Western Liang," Jia Xu sighed. "Although I never admired Dong Zhongying, I must admit he was a hero in Western Liang. But after entering Luoyang, he fell into decline, wasting Wenyou's efforts."

Hua Xiong remained silent, listening to the cheers from Chang'an. He remembered Dong Zhuo's former heroism and grandeur. People change, and heroes fall.

"Where are you heading now? Your soldiers are quite impressive," Jia Xu commented, watching the disciplined troops outside, displaying qualities of elite soldiers.

"These are new recruits I trained in Taishan. As for our current mission," Hua Xiong grinned menacingly, "we're going to strike back at those traitorous Xiliang soldiers who dared to disgrace our pride!"

"New recruits?" Jia Xu was astonished. The soldiers' silence and resolve reminded him of Gao Shun's invincible camp, something not easily trained.

"Yes, new recruits. They are strong enough to challenge the invincible camp. Formation change, four armies in arrow formation, shields at the front, spears next, followed by archers!" Hua Xiong shouted.

An astonishing scene unfolded. The marching troops seamlessly shifted formation. A fiery cloud in the sky dissipated towards the edges, forming a red halo around the outer soldiers, while the arrow formation solidified into a sharp, illusory arrowhead.

Hua Xiong was also taken aback. This rare occurrence meant the soldiers' internal energy and the world's energy harmonized and were effectively distributed where needed. This was a commander's dream, as it greatly enhanced the army's power.

Such synchronization was the pinnacle of military strategy, and Hua Xiong had only heard of a few commanders who could achieve this.

"Impressive," Jia Xu remarked, watching the display. "I underestimated you, Hua Zijian. You're quite the expert in training soldiers."

"..." Hua Xiong remained silent, knowing this was mostly luck. Achieving such cohesion on the first attempt was almost miraculous.

"March at double speed, maintain formation, full speed ahead!" Hua Xiong ordered, intending to take advantage of the momentum and crush the traitors. Though the distance was considerable, the formation's power made it manageable.

Hua Xiong's four thousand infantry charged forward, a massive red blade nearly a hundred meters long slashing towards the Xiliang soldiers' camp. The ensuing barrage reduced the area to a crater, obliterating the enemy.

After the assault, Hua Xiong was pale, and his soldiers' red blades faded. They could manage one more such attack before being exhausted. Thirty seconds had wiped out the enemy with no casualties.

Riding to the devastated camp, Hua Xiong saw bodies buried in the dirt, some still trembling in fear. Spitting disdainfully, he muttered, "Scum, garbage!"

As Hua Xiong rode through, none of the buried Xiliang soldiers dared to rise. They could only watch helplessly as Hua Xiong's men took their horses and left. Afterward, they crawled out, sobbing.

Hua Xiong was furious. The Xiliang cavalry's vigilance, training, and pride were gone. They had lost their fighting spirit, hiding in the dirt. These weren't his former comrades.

Riding away, Hua Xiong's face was grim. The Xiliang army was corrupted from top to bottom, beyond redemption, no longer the invincible force it once was.

"Your performance wasn't great either, Zijian," Li Ru, now awake, said as Hua Xiong returned. "I didn't expect to be tricked by Jia Wenhe, cough cough..."

"Just a surprise attack," Jia Xu smiled.

"Strategist, you're awake!" Hua Xiong exclaimed joyfully.

"Yes, take me to see Taishan. Let me meet Liu Xuande, who dared to issue a recruitment order. I know everything that happened, so no need to explain. My body may be weak, but my mind is clear," Li Ru waved off Hua Xiong's concerns.

"Chancellor Dong has likely fallen," Hua Xiong said sadly.

"A self-inflicted demise," Li Ru, having accepted his fate, regained his scholarly demeanor. Leaving Chang'an, away from its oppressive atmosphere, he no longer sought death.

Chapter 114: Low Intelligence, Can't Learn

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"Please point out the mistakes I made earlier, strategist," Hua Xiong requested respectfully, noticing that Li Ru no longer harbored suicidal thoughts. Like most Western Liang generals, he had risen from common folk and banditry, and had little chance to learn military strategy, relying mostly on battlefield experience and Li Ru's guidance.

Jia Xu felt a twinge of envy. Both he and Li Ru were strategists, and he believed himself to be Li Ru's equal in talent, but the difference in their treatment was stark.

Even after Dong Zhuo's downfall, Li Ru remained revered by the Western Liang generals (this respect is evident from historical records showing that when Li Jue and Guo Si took Chang'an, their first action was to seek an official position for Li Ru. Later, the Emperor rejected their request, leading them to nearly dethrone the Emperor in anger. This shows the strong influence Li Ru held over them).

Hua Xiong still treated Li Ru as his strategist with utmost respect, showing not a hint of disrespect—an admirable trait for a rough Western Liang warrior.

"Let's not discuss how you trained your soldiers, but I can see they truly support you. However, your command methods have issues," Li Ru praised Hua Xiong's soldiers before addressing Hua Xiong's own faults.

"The techniques you use place too much strain on you. Though I'm not entirely familiar with the physical conditions of experts with inner energy projection, using moves that require you to exert the full strength of four thousand men in a single strike is too taxing on your body! Your value shouldn't be demonstrated through such attacks," Li Ru said each word carefully, teaching Hua Xiong as he once did with Li Jue, Guo Si, and Fan Chou, transforming them from bandits into generals.

"Exerting your energy for a single wave of attacks is not worth it. You should distribute the power across the entire formation. Though the direct strike might be less potent, the broader coverage makes each soldier equivalent to an early-stage Refining Qi into Gang martial artist," Li Ru continued his teaching, clearly recognizing that these soldiers were modeled after the Invincible Camp.

"A whole row of soldiers equivalent to early-stage Refining Qi into Gang martial artists..." Hua Xiong's jaw dropped.

"Indeed. Gao Shun, though not eloquent, is known for his integrity. Unfortunately, he's under Lu Bu," Li Ru lamented. "And with your current attack method, even if you faced Fan Chou's Western Liang cavalry, you'd be torn apart!"

"Loose but organized, chaotic but formed..." Hua Xiong recalled what Li Ru had taught him about Western Liang cavalry. Their formations were loose and scattered, with three to five soldiers forming attack groups. Even if struck by Hua Xiong's earlier moves, they'd lose only a few hundred men due to their dispersed formation.

"Your attack serves more as intimidation, similar to when we used ballistae against Beigong Boyu. It cannot determine victory, and over-relying on it diminishes your combat effectiveness," Li Ru explained, nodding at Hua Xiong's recollection of past teachings.

"Some commanders are formidable with troops, while others, like you and Lu Bu, are strong individually. Your full-strength attacks can ignore the protection from ordinary soldiers' gathered energy. Thus, avoid dense formations like the early Western Liang cavalry; the energy protection is insufficient," Li Ru gave examples to illustrate his point.

"So the Western Liang cavalry relied on attrition?" Hua Xiong asked, shocked. He had never known this.

"Initially, yes. Later, it wasn't necessary, but our cavalry was used to that formation, so I didn't change it. Armies naturally adopt the tactics they frequently use, as veterans train new recruits to be like them," Li Ru explained.

"What a relief. I always thought the Western Liang cavalry was invincible," Hua Xiong felt reassured.

"They are elite, but not without weaknesses," Li Ru shook his head, not agreeing entirely with Hua Xiong.

Jia Xu turned to look out the window. Other warlords' elites were counted in hundreds, maybe thousands. The Western Liang cavalry's scale was tens of thousands. Numbers inherently bring quality—consider how the Flying Bear Army was formed.

"Now you command infantry, and many of them. They're elite, so forget dispersal tactics. You need your own specialized strategies," Li Ru said firmly. "The Flying Bear Army's strategy is ruthlessness, the Invincible Camp's is stability, the White Horse Volunteers' is speed. After addressing internal issues, choose a development path."

"Strategist, I also have three thousand Western Liang cavalry from my old troops in Taishan, and a deputy who commands a thousand infantry. The lord has said these are my personal troops," Hua Xiong admitted, embarrassed.

Jia Xu glanced at Li Ru, and both shared a knowing look.

"An eight-thousand mixed force. Liu Xuande must value you greatly. Managing such a force requires complex strategies, but the benefit is versatility and resistance to being countered. For instance, the Invincible Camp can annihilate the White Horse Volunteers in suitable terrain. Speed is their strength, but also their weakness," Li Ru disdainfully remarked. He looked down on the White Horse Volunteers—high attack, high speed, but glaring weaknesses.

"Please teach me how to command them," Hua Xiong asked sincerely.

"You won't learn that easily. I'll teach you a military formation that uses multiple troop types. I'll guide you step by step. Just knowing how to use it will suffice, as long as you don't face overly strong opponents," Li Ru shook his head, implying Hua Xiong's intellect was too low to understand. He decided to teach a formation that integrated all troop types, focusing on a few common variations.

Jia Xu was surprised. He knew Li Ru's expertise in formations, but if Hua Xiong's troops struggled with complexity, it could only be one formation—the ultimate variation of Xuanxiang Formation, Li Ru's enhanced Eight Gates Golden Lock Formation.

Chapter 115: When Strategy and Tactics Conflict

Chen Xi was completely unaware that Hua Xiong had hit the jackpot. Li Ru, originally planning to take this formation to his grave, decided to teach his best technique to Hua Xiong after seeing the quality of his elite soldiers. Of course, Li Ru wouldn't tell Hua Xiong what the formation was; he would just guide him step by step, knowing Hua Xiong's intelligence was too low to fully grasp it. If Hua Xiong could master a few of the sixty-four variations and one or two killer moves, that would be sufficient.

Li Ru had no hope that Hua Xiong could learn all sixty-four variations. Unless Jia Xu's brain was transplanted into Hua Xiong's body, that would be a pipe dream.

During their daily marches, Li Ru constantly explained how to use and change formations. Jia Xu, believing Li Ru was nearing the end of his life and had no need to keep these secrets, listened with great interest. Over ten days, Hua Xiong was thoroughly confused, while Jia Xu nearly reverse-engineered the formation from Li Ru's explanations.

Cao Cao, in Yanzhou, was angrily sweeping through the Yellow Turbans. The Yellow Turbans had devastated Yanzhou while foraging for food, leaving Cao Cao with a mess when he assumed his post as Governor. Every region needed food, but he had none.

Cao Cao had hoped for assistance from Yuan Shao, who was engaged in battle with Gongsun Zan. His advisors assured him that Gongsun Zan would eventually be defeated, but that was in the future. Yuan Shao couldn't help now. Yuan Shao's family was wealthy enough to ignore spring planting, but Cao Cao couldn't afford that luxury.

This left Cao Cao with two choices: steal or borrow. After becoming Governor and realizing how prosperous Taishan was, he saw that Chen Xi was extraordinarily capable and Zhao Yun was a nearly unrivaled warrior who could also manage agriculture and lead cavalry. On learning about Taishan's grain production, Cao Cao's eyes turned red with envy. Taishan's grain production was immense, far more than they could consume. Without further ado, Cao Cao requested grain from Taishan, only to have the promissory note stopped by Lu Su before it even reached Liu Bei.

If Liu Bei hadn't received the note, it didn't matter. Once he did, Cao Cao would have a just cause. Meanwhile, Liu Ye and Lu Su were organizing relief efforts for Yanzhou's people.

Upon learning of this, Cao Cao was furious and prepared to attack Taishan. However, Lu Su and Yu Jin were also ready to defend, creating a tense standoff. The Yellow Turbans took advantage of this, attacking Yanzhou and seizing every grain they could find.

"Xiaozhi, how is the plan going?" Chen Xi checked the time, feeling that time was running short. If Fa Zheng didn't come up with a solution soon, he would take matters into his own hands.

"Zichuan," Fa Zheng sighed bitterly. He had devised many strategies, but none met Chen Xi's requirement of minimal losses and maximum gains without some flaws.

"Tell me your plan," Chen Xi said, disappointed.

Fa Zheng bowed and began explaining his strategy.

"That works. Why overthink it?" Chen Xi's frown deepened as he listened. "Whether it's breaking their army, driving their soldiers, or demoralizing them later, it's all fine. Overall, there's no problem!"

"What if they see through it?" Fa Zheng asked, bowing.

"All strategies have the potential to be seen through. What matters is using the right strategy against the right enemy. The Yellow Turbans are commoners turned bandits with no knowledge of military tactics. This strategy is enough! A strategist's plan doesn't need to be flawless; it just needs to defeat the enemy. We can't waste more time. I'll take charge. You watch and learn!" Chen Xi sighed, disappointed in Fa Zheng.

"Drum the assembly!" Chen Xi ordered, walking to the central tent and taking his seat.

Within the time it took for an incense stick to burn, all the generals assembled in the central tent. Chen Xi's stern gaze swept over them.

"Since we left Taishan and entered Qingzhou, you all have wanted to battle the Yellow Turbans. However, with a million Yellow Turbans pouring out of Qingzhou, I was cautious. Now the situation is clear. Will you help me defeat the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou?" Chen Xi said boldly, raising his sword.

"Leave it to me! I'll skewer one with my spear! Two with one thrust!" Zhang Fei thumped his chest.

"Does the strategist have a plan to defeat the Yellow Turbans?" Guan Yu ignored Zhang Fei and gestured to Zhao Yun, who stood and asked.

"The Yellow Turbans are nothing. If I didn't want to incorporate their able-bodied men, I would have already crushed them!" Chen Xi boasted. During this time, although he left the planning to Fa Zheng, he had not been idle. He had embedded spies among the Yellow Turbans, some of whom had risen to the rank of centurion.

"Generals, hear my command. Yun Chang will stay with the central army, following my lead to defeat the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou. Yide, Zilong, and Ziyi, each take one thousand cavalry to drive the fleeing Yellow Turbans. Do not kill them; just drive them to collide with the main Yellow Turban force. Zhongtai will lead the infantry as the rear guard, re-establishing settlements and incorporating refugees into the army. Food will be distributed as needed!" Chen Xi commanded with a calm expression. He wanted to say that internal conflicts over food were severe among the Yellow Turbans. Once a major defeat occurred, they might all scatter.

"Yes!" the generals responded loudly.

"Zichuan, are you sure about this? I haven't devised the best plan yet," Fa Zheng asked worriedly after the generals left.

"There's no more time. We must eliminate the Yellow Turbans by mid-May, or even if we win, it'll be a burden dragging us down! Remember, all tactics ultimately serve the final strategy. Sometimes, sacrifices are necessary for the strategic goal. Tell me, what is our objective?" Chen Xi, still calculating the days, explained, understanding the urgency.

"To bring peace to the world and restore the Han dynasty!" Fa Zheng replied without hesitation.

"Restoring the Han dynasty requires people. Therefore, our ultimate goal can be rephrased as minimizing casualties. If we don't resolve the Yellow Turbans by mid-May, even with my abilities, it will be too late for agricultural production. We won't be able to plant summer crops, meaning we'll have to feed nearly two million people without food until June next year!" Chen Xi said grimly. Even if Tao Qian was generous, asking him to provide food for two million people for a year was impossible!

Chapter 116: Eating Well Is Benevolence

Fa Zheng was no fool. Previously, he had been solely focused on finding the best way to defeat the Yellow Turbans, without considering other issues. With Chen Xi's prompt, he instantly understood the most pressing problem.

The Yellow Turbans had over a million soldiers coming out of Qingzhou. Once they entered Qingzhou, their numbers would swell even more. Including women, children, and the elderly, it could easily exceed two million. Qingzhou, one of the former major grain-producing areas, had seen a decline, but its population could still be massive.

Fa Zheng's face turned grim. He now realized the downside of seeking the best plan: time was running out. If they passed mid-May without resolving the issue, even Chen Xi's extraordinary abilities wouldn't suffice to initiate the farming activities needed by late June. Without timely farming, the captured Yellow Turbans would become a burden. When the people ran out of food, rebellion would be a mere step away. Killing them all to reduce the burden would destroy Liu Bei's reputation for benevolence and derail Chen Xi's strategic plans centered around Liu Bei's benevolence and population growth.

It didn't matter if Liu Bei's benevolence was genuine or just for show. Pretending to be righteous for a lifetime was essentially the same as truly being righteous.

"So, we'll use your earlier plan. Even if there are more casualties, so be it. This time, if we take control of around twenty percent of Qingzhou, we can make a concerted effort next year and likely take over the entire province. My grand strategy will then be on track. Implementing it sooner means saving more lives." Chen Xi patted Fa Zheng on the shoulder. "As a strategist, don't just focus on the battlefield. The situation outside is equally important."

As expected, the three minor Yellow Turban leaders—Chen Bai, Fuyun, and Hou Qian—couldn't unite. With scarce food and many followers, their cohesion was weak even before Liu Dai's cross-state assault forced them out of Qingzhou.

The Yellow Turbans were more like a disorganized group of refugees than an army, frequently clashing internally, with soldiers unable to find their commanders and vice versa. Calling them bandits was generous; they were essentially a roving horde of beggars. But they were a massive horde.

After Chen Bai, Fuyun, and Hou Qian each led tens of thousands to plunder the land, they quickly found Yanzhou devoid of food. Turning their eyes to Taishan, they began their advance, albeit in scattered waves due to the sheer size of their groups.

Apart from the few tens of thousands of so-called elite soldiers with some weapons or armor, the rest were unarmed refugees following in hopes of finding food.

Against such unorganized, undisciplined, and poorly equipped foes, Guan Yu led the central army in a sweeping advance, crushing any Yellow Turbans they encountered. Many surrendered, seeking mercy.

Chen Xi didn't care if these surrendering Yellow Turbans were spies. He handed them all to the rear guard under Sun Guan's command, where they were subjected to military governance. Any troublemakers were executed without trial. In Qingzhou, Zhao Yun and Taishi Ci had brought along 30,000 militia. These militias weren't combat-ready but could enforce military discipline. Chen Xi didn't mind if some of them died; his priority was stability. He wouldn't hesitate to use extreme measures, even executing one in ten if necessary.

"Yun Chang, how many refugees have we gathered?" Chen Xi felt they were collecting more captives than fighting battles.

"Around 200,000 refugees, mostly able-bodied men and women!" Guan Yu reported, excited. Although the battles were small, it was an excellent opportunity to earn merit.

"Set up camp, rest, and have meat soup and steamed buns tonight. Summon Yide, Zilong, Ziyi, and Zhongtai for a meeting!" Chen Xi ordered.

"Yes, sir! Set up camp, prepare meals, and serve meat broth. Guards, patrol the camp!" Guan Yu relayed the orders to the messengers.

Meat broth, as mentioned, didn't include beef or mutton, which were too expensive and scarce. Pork was also limited, but chicken and duck were more plentiful. Eggs hatched into chicks raised by Chen Xi's servants outside the city, eventually becoming meat for the soldiers. For troops unaccustomed to meat, even a little was a luxury.

Lu Su and Liu Ye had previously complained about the expense of improving the soldiers' diet. In this era, being able to feed the troops was already good enough; adding regular meat seemed wasteful.

After Chen Xi did the math, Lu Su and Liu Ye conceded that providing meat wasn't overly costly. It improved the soldiers' morale and reduced desertion. Soldiers accustomed to a regular diet including meat would be less likely to defect, and might even entice other soldiers to join them. Training new recruits was more expensive than keeping veterans healthy and happy.

Lu Su and Liu Ye ultimately accepted Chen Xi's strategy, marveling at his unconventional thinking. It was an unorthodox approach but effective. Soldiers fought for food and pay; providing better rations made them loyal and less likely to desert.

When meat was served, the camp buzzed with excitement. The aroma of cooking meat spread throughout, attracting refugees outside the camp. Though a large crowd gathered, none dared charge the camp after seeing those who tried crushed to death. Each day, officers recruited willing refugees, promising land and seeds if they followed.

Though most refugees were skeptical, hunger drove many to surrender, preferring a chance at food over starvation. Some knew of Taishan's prosperity and Liu Bei's benevolence, while others were persuaded by undercover agents spreading Liu Bei's virtues.

Chapter 117: The Necessity of Literacy

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"Xiaozhi, distribute the buns to the refugees. Anyone willing to accept Taishan's management gets a bowl of meat soup. Give each soldier three pieces of dried chicken and inform them that if there's no chance to cook tomorrow, they will all eat dry rations. Prepare enough cool boiled water. Tell them they must carry enough dry rations and water, whether in gourds or bamboo tubes. Within three days, I want to see the heads of the Yellow Turban leaders!" Chen Xi instructed Fa Zheng as he looked at the refugees gathered outside the camp.

Zang Ba had sent word that he had become one of Chen Bai's five major generals and knew the positions of Fuyun and Hou Qian. With this information, Chen Xi was ready to abandon any complex strategies. He planned to crush Chen Bai directly, let Zang Ba lead the defeated troops to attack Fuyun and Hou Qian, and then follow up to annihilate the rest.

Chen Xi couldn't believe that Fuyun and Hou Qian could control their troops in such a chaotic situation. If they could, they weren't Yellow Turbans; they were legendary generals commanding elite forces. In this scenario, straightforward brute force was the best strategy. Defeating Chen Bai would start a domino effect, with the fleeing soldiers overwhelming anyone in their path. When humans panic, they become more unpredictable and dangerous than a herd of pigs.

Fa Zheng didn't expect Chen Xi to be this straightforward, planning to herd over a million Yellow Turbans like sheep. Chen Xi didn't bother explaining; the first time something like this happens, it's hard to believe, but he was confident it would work. With Zang Ba leading the defeated, there would be no issues with direction. It was all about chasing and killing.

At the third quarter of the Shen hour (5:45-7:45 PM), the cavalry driving the Yellow Turbans like sheep finally returned under the summons of the messengers.

"Zilong, Yide, Ziyi, you did well. Zhongtai, your military governance was a bit lenient," Chen Xi acknowledged the three while pointing out Sun Guan's slight lapse, though without intending to punish him. "Sometimes, it's necessary to establish authority," he added with a hint of menace.

"Yes, Grand Commander!" Sun Guan stood and replied.

"The reason I've called you all here today is that the Yellow Turban leader, leading about 100,000 troops, plans to defeat us and then seize food from the rear. I want you to crush them with overwhelming force tomorrow. Use the most terrifying moves you have. I want results within a quarter of an hour! Xiaozhi and I will coordinate the army to support you!" Chen Xi declared with a stern expression.

"Understood!" the generals responded loudly.

"Leave 1,000 infantry as a reserve. Tomorrow morning, we'll break camp and defeat the Yellow Turbans!" Chen Xi ordered.

"Yes!" the generals echoed.

After assigning military duties, Chen Xi asked Fa Zheng to come over. "Xiaozhi, are the dry rations ready?"

"I distributed the meat jerky to each unit and instructed them to give it to their soldiers. Zichuan, are you sure this battle will last a whole day?" Fa Zheng asked, puzzled by the sudden distribution of dry rations. "Even if it does, shouldn't we provide hot food? Dry rations aren't suitable."

"Yes, it will last a long time, and there won't be any opportunity to cook. So, dry rations are more convenient," Chen Xi smiled.

"Oh, so we are going to retreat? Have you decided on the ambush location? Such a retreat will hurt morale and exhaust the soldiers. Pure dry rations might not be enough. Oh, that's why you distributed the meat jerky. This should sustain them during the retreat, enough for three to five days," Fa Zheng rattled off, confident in his deductions.

"More or less..." Chen Xi's face twitched. There was no need to explain further; Fa Zheng had already filled in the blanks on his own.

"By the way, did you add salt and sugar to the boiled water as I asked?" Chen Xi changed the topic.

"We have plenty of salt, but not enough sugar. I added all the sugar we had. The amount should be close to what you specified," Fa Zheng replied.

"Good. Make sure all the soldiers' bamboo tubes are filled with this. Tell them to drink it when they're thirsty during the march and not to stop," Chen Xi instructed.

Meanwhile, Chen Bai was gnawing on a pig's foot, planning for the next day's battle. Zang Ba had written the challenge letter since no one else in the camp could write. Zang Ba had also written out the battle plans for Chen Bai's, Fuyun's, and Hou Qian's forces in the letter, which was then sent to Chen Xi. This was how Chen Xi had such detailed intelligence.

Chen Xi's orders were openly written in the challenge letter, boldly transmitting information. Unfortunately, none of the Yellow Turbans could read. If they could, they wouldn't be Yellow Turbans. In this era, literacy was a rare talent, and anyone who could read wouldn't need to join the Yellow Turbans.

"Grand Commander, once we defeat them, with Taishan's grain, we can expand massively and become lords. After all, didn't the founders of the Han Dynasty start as mere ruffians? You could build an empire!" Zang Ba flattered Chen Bai.

Zang Ba, a literate former bandit, had no trouble manipulating the ignorant Yellow Turban leaders. Chen Bai was now blinded by visions of a bright future, entirely unaware of his reality, arrogantly planning to defeat the enemy, absorb their troops, and establish an empire.

Chen Bai's four capable subordinates were equally enthralled by Zang Ba's words. One of them, already somewhat influenced, looked at Chen Bai with strange eyes. This was the effect of "Wang Hou Jiang Xiang Ning You Zhong Hu" (Why can't a king or general be you?).

Despite the promising situation, Zang Ba was still uneasy. The Yellow Turbans were too numerous. After witnessing their destructive power, he doubted Chen Xi's plan. Leading defeated troops to attack Fuyun, then Hou Qian, and finally scattering on the plains? Could Chen Xi really defeat over a million Yellow Turbans? Even capturing so many prisoners would be a challenge.

Chapter 118: The Enemy General Is One of Us

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"Yunchang, tell Yide not to say anything when he sees what happens in a moment," Chen Xi said, turning to Guan Yu while standing on the carriage.

"Understood!" Guan Yu, as always, was sparing with words.

"Yunchang, go to the front lines. Xiaozhi and I will be enough here. With you and the main army at the front, if it's not safe, then nowhere on the battlefield is safe." Chen Xi indicated to Guan Yu that he could lead the charge and didn't need to stay behind to guard the central command.

"Zhongtai, make sure the command flag is well-guarded. Although we don't rely solely on it for command, it is a matter of morale." Chen Xi ordered Sun Guan.

"Yes!" Sun Guan responded loudly and personally led a group to protect the command flag, as Chen Xi's plan included driving it into the enemy lines.

"It feels like something isn't quite right," Fa Zheng murmured, frowning as he pondered Chen Xi's arrangements. He felt there was something off about them.

"Never mind whether it's right or not. Use your spiritual power to coordinate the formation. The fewer casualties, the better. We have too few medics and not enough clean bandages. We can't make medical alcohol, and even when we get it up to sixty percent, it keeps getting stolen to be drunk!" Chen Xi glared in the direction of Zhang Fei. It had been hard enough to make some spirits for disinfection, only to have Zhang Fei drink a significant portion of it.

"Uh, Zichuan, watch your demeanor. That strong liquor of yours is indeed good, but it consumes too much grain. It shouldn't have been made in the first place," Fa Zheng glanced at Chen Xi, then righteously stated.

"Grain isn't as valuable as veteran soldiers. You'll understand when I show you my cost analysis table back at camp," Chen Xi said, ignoring Fa Zheng's comment. After all, Ru Su wasn't blind; he needed a reasonable explanation to get approval from him.

"Cost analysis table?" Fa Zheng asked, puzzled.

"Idiot, it's the cost and strategic gain analysis per individual and item. For example, if the price of defeating the Yellow Turbans is my death, then it's a massive loss, and the battle isn't worth fighting," Chen Xi sneered at Fa Zheng, then thought for a moment and gave an example, since Fa Zheng still needed some training.

Fa Zheng's eyes gleamed with understanding. Chen Xi continued, "Let's say the cost of defeating the Yellow Turbans is your death. In that case, we'd evaluate the value of Qingzhou and your worth. Although the gain might exceed the loss, long-term, it's not worth it. So, no battle victory in Qingzhou is worth sacrificing you."

"You bastard!" Fa Zheng fumed, though he was secretly pleased with how Chen Xi weighed Qingzhou against himself and found it wanting.

"That's what cost comparison is. The example I just gave is more intuitive. For practical items, I have a detailed cost analysis table. For example, ensuring low casualties in each battle but consuming a thousand stone of grain. Compare this to the value of veteran soldiers, morale, and immediate effects, and you'll see the thousand stone of grain is worth the investment."

Chen Xi explained while helping Zhao Yun and others control the flow of qi in the formation. Fa Zheng, awestruck by Chen Xi's examples, could only listen. He was impressed by Chen Xi's effortless mental control.

"That's enough," Chen Xi clapped his hands, stabilizing the qi flow with his spiritual power. In the heat of battle, the qi would solidify with the rising bloodlust and wouldn't scatter easily.

Chen Xi looked at Fa Zheng, pale from overexertion, and marveled, "Your spiritual power is too low. Just adjusting the qi flow for ten thousand men has you like this. So weak!"

"..." Fa Zheng had no strength left to retort, glaring at Chen Xi.

"Young man, practice more!" Chen Xi squatted and patted Fa Zheng's shoulder, spreading his spiritual power to smooth the qi flow. His own spiritual power was considerable.

"Are you even human?" Fa Zheng stared at Chen Xi for a long time before blurting out.

Chen Xi looked skyward with a lonely expression, saying blandly, "You wouldn't understand my loneliness."

"..." Fa Zheng was nearly choked by his words.

Just then, the Yellow Turbans finally appeared, their formation ragged and their weapons shabby, marching with a muddy yellow cloud of qi overhead. Seeing this, Chen Xi felt the urge to charge. However, he knew his strategy was better served by a direct confrontation rather than a surprise attack.

Before Chen Xi could speak, a rider emerged from the Yellow Turban ranks, clearly here to challenge them. Zhang Fei and the others immediately recognized him and stifled their urge to charge—they realized it was their own spy, here to earn merit. No wonder Chen Xi had told them to keep quiet.

"Zhongtai, this is your chance. Xuangao will go easy on you. Go for it!" Chen Xi called to Sun Guan, who was guarding the command flag.

"Uh, alright. As you command!" Sun Guan, initially startled by the enemy general's appearance, now wore a broad grin as he mounted his horse and charged, spear in hand.

"Isn't that Zang Xuangao?" Fa Zheng felt his face twitch. He had seen Zang Ba drilling with three thousand cavalry outside Fenggao several times. Now he was a Yellow Turban leader? This was too much.

"What do you think of my spy?" Chen Xi asked with a grin.

"If the Yellow Turbans win now, I'll give you my head," Fa Zheng said, excited. With Zang Ba infiltrating the enemy ranks, how could his plans fail?

"What use is your head to me?" Chen Xi retorted, leaving Fa Zheng fuming.

"I am Sun Zhongtai of Taishan! Enemy general, prepare to die!" Sun Guan's voice rang out as he charged, spear aimed at Zang Ba.

"Good timing!" Zang Ba shouted back. He had expected someone like Guan Yu or Zhang Fei to engage him, and was relieved it was a familiar face. This way, he could maintain his heroic facade among the Yellow Turbans, which he needed to rally them later.

The two clashed fiercely on horseback, evenly matched and unable to gain the upper hand. Their intense duel fired up the troops on both sides, boosting their morale. Meanwhile, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, and Tai Shici watched quietly, ready to unleash their might as soon as Sun Guan retreated.

Chapter 119: The Fleeing Yellow Turbans

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Sure enough, after nearly a hundred moves between Sun Guan and Zang Ba, Zang Ba's spear grazed Sun Guan's ribs, and Sun Guan turned his horse to flee.

"Attack!" Guan Yu roared, and instantly, the entire army's qi surged. A massive blade of light slashed out from Guan Yu's position, leading the entire army forward in a fierce charge!

A colossal green blade, almost three hundred meters long and shaped like Guan Yu's Green Dragon Crescent Blade, sliced through the yellowish qi of the Yellow Turban army, bolstered by the formations of thirty thousand soldiers behind it. The blade, sharp and vibrant, wreathed with the auras of Zhao Yun, Zhang Fei, and Tai Shici, emitted a seven-colored glow as it cleaved through the Yellow Turban army's central formation.

After Guan Yu's initial strike, Zhao Yun followed with a delicate thrust of his spear, scattering countless petals over a vast area. Zhang Fei unleashed a black shockwave, and Tai Shici hurled a giant, two-hundred-meter-long halberd-shaped blade of light towards the Yellow Turbans. Then, drawing his precious eagle bow, Tai Shici fired a barrage of golden arrows that exploded in front of the enemy, covering an area of over a hundred meters!

Within five breaths, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, and Tai Shici had expended all their accumulated inner qi and the qi they could draw from the formation, clearing a massive swath of the Yellow Turban ranks. As the roaring subsided, Chen Xi flicked open his wooden folding fan with a snap of his right hand and waved it towards the dust. The wind swept away the lingering dust, revealing a thousand-meter-wide pit in the midst of the Yellow Turban army.

Both sides halted, too stunned to move. At this moment, Sun Guan let out a thunderous roar, "Kill the enemy!" Spurring his horse, he charged forward, his call electrifying the Taishan soldiers, who surged after him, sending the Yellow Turban army into full retreat, turning and fleeing in disarray.

"Full pursuit!" Chen Xi bellowed, his voice hoarse. The situation was even better than he had anticipated, thanks mainly to Zang Ba's men fleeing first. Seeing their comrades deserting, the Yellow Turbans' morale collapsed entirely, and they followed suit.

"Hold your ground! Hold your ground!" Chen Bai shouted, cutting down a few Yellow Turban soldiers to stem the tide. However, he couldn't stop the rout; even his personal guards fled, and he was swept away in the chaos.

"Order Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Tai Shici, and Sun Guan to pursue the fleeing Yellow Turban army relentlessly until they completely collapse. Instruct Wu Dun and the rear guard to gather prisoners along the way. Any who resist should be executed without mercy. Implement military control in all captured areas. Any who surrender and cause trouble afterward will be executed. If necessary, carry out an elimination order to remove the weakest," Chen Xi commanded the messenger beside him. Within five days, the results would be evident.

Run, run, run! Zang Ba was running blindly now, leading the fleeing Yellow Turbans to another Yellow Turban stronghold. Chen Bai was dead, killed by a Yellow Turban commander who had been swayed by Zang Ba. That commander overestimated his capabilities, thinking he could stabilize the situation after killing Chen Bai and taking over, but he was thrown off his horse and trampled to death by tens of thousands of panicked Yellow Turbans.

Two days had passed, and Zang Ba could see the encampment of the Yellow Turban leader, Fu Yun. He was gaunt, his cheekbones protruding sharply, looking like he had crawled out of the earth. These had been the most grueling days he had ever experienced, leading thirty thousand Yellow Turbans in flight.

They started with horses, but the horses soon died from exhaustion. Along the way, many fell behind, while others joined, swelling the group but also making it cumbersome. This constant flux kept them from being entirely wiped out by the five pursuing maniacs.

Guan Yu and his comrades gave the Yellow Turbans no respite, pressing them relentlessly. Whenever the Yellow Turbans tried to rest, the five generals would attack again, forcing them to flee once more. Wu Dun followed behind, capturing those who fell behind; they had already seized over a hundred thousand lagging Yellow Turbans. The ones still running were almost all able-bodied young men.

Seeing Fu Yun's camp, the Yellow Turbans regained some vigor, their steps quickening. Simultaneously, Guan Yu's attacks grew fiercer, carving out significant chunks of the Yellow Turban force.

Noticing the large group approaching, Fu Yun immediately began reorganizing his forces, ordering his trusted lieutenant Li Fang to lead three thousand of his best troops to intercept them. No matter who they were, stopping them was the right move. Even if they couldn't hold them off, a temporary delay was enough.

"Stop right there! Ah~" The dispatched Yellow Turban leader suffered the same fate as the previous one, thrown off his horse and trampled to death. The three thousand lightly armed Yellow Turban troops were swept back into Fu Yun's forces.

Thirty thousand strong, the fleeing soldiers crashed into Fu Yun's ranks, unable to stop the momentum. The initial clash scattered Fu Yun's vanguard, and the chaos quickly engulfed his entire force. It wasn't long before his whole army was swept up and fled.

Guan Yu and his comrades shivered at the sight. The Yellow Turbans were finished. If Fu Yun's thirty thousand men couldn't hold, then when they reached Hou Qian, even with many falling behind, the remaining Yellow Turbans would number over sixty thousand. Hou Qian's preparations would be overwhelmed in less than a quarter of an hour. The Yellow Turbans were doomed.

Zang Ba, leading the flight, had been running for four days now, barely eating. He was so exhausted that he would have collapsed if not for the mob carrying him along. The Yellow Turbans had become skittish, bolting at the slightest provocation. Anyone who started running would set off the whole crowd, though many didn't know why they were running.

By the afternoon of the fourth day, Zang Ba reached Hou Qian's camp. They could have arrived sooner, but Hou Qian had moved to find food, causing a detour. When they finally reached the camp, Zang Ba had no doubts about breaking through Hou Qian's lines. His concern now was how to stop.

Hou Qian's fate mirrored Fu Yun's. Within a quarter of an hour, his thirty thousand Yellow Turbans were swept away, Hou Qian trampled underfoot and turned to dust.

Run, keep running. Zang Ba led the panicked mob in circles around Qingzhou. The Yellow Turbans were entirely leaderless, running mindlessly wherever Zang Ba led, while Wu Dun followed, capturing stragglers.

After enveloping Hou Qian's forces, the mob grew to nearly a million. As they ran ceaselessly from Zhangqiu to Zibo, back to Panyang, and then back to Zhangqiu, the Yellow Turbans dwindled. By the end, they were completely finished.

Chapter 120: The Wise and Mighty Leader

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Chen Xi sat in his command tent, waiting for Guan Yu's return. Upon learning that Fu Yun's forces had been scattered, he felt at ease. While such long pursuits might lead to the trampling deaths of thousands or even tens of thousands, the fact that the war could be concluded swiftly with minimal casualties on both sides was a stroke of luck.

As for Fa Zheng, who was staring at the military reports in wide-eyed disbelief, Chen Xi didn't bother to explain. Even if Guo Jia were present, he would be equally stunned by the scale of this rout. This was the so-called "defeat like a landslide."

As the battle raged on, Taishan soldiers, emboldened by their leaders, chased after the fleeing Yellow Turbans without fear. Even groups of dozens of Taishan soldiers could drive thousands of Yellow Turbans, confident that they wouldn't dare to turn and fight.

In the end, the Taishan soldiers were venting their frustration through relentless pursuit and slaughter. They didn't even see the Yellow Turbans as human anymore—just sheep waiting to be butchered. With a mouthful of dried chicken and a sip of salty, sweet cool water, Taishan soldiers would grab their weapons and continue the chase.

Despite the harsh conditions, the Taishan soldiers at least had something to eat and no enemies pursuing them. The Yellow Turbans, on the other hand, were being driven to exhaustion by Zang Ba and his agents, with Guan Yu and his companions close on their heels. In the face of death, they had no choice but to keep running without food or water, knowing that falling behind meant being captured by the pursuing army.

Each time the Yellow Turbans paused for a brief rest, thousands who were utterly exhausted could not keep up when the order to move came again. The end of April brought a scorching sun, and the heat further sapped the Yellow Turbans' strength, making their collapse inevitable.

As the days passed, more and more Yellow Turbans fell by the roadside, many dragging down those behind them when they stumbled. Those who fell never stood up again until Wu Dun's forces came to give them a sip of salt water and whipped them back into the march.

In the long trek from Zhangqiu to Zibo and back again to Panyang, a million Yellow Turbans dwindled. Under the wise and mighty leadership of their new leader, Xuangao, sixty thousand managed to break free, while the forty thousand who fell behind were captured by Wu Dun and Sun Guan's troops and herded south of Zhangqiu Licheng. These utterly exhausted Yellow Turbans had no strength left to resist.

During the march from Zibo to Panyang, even more fell behind due to hunger and fatigue. However, the wise and mighty Xuangao successfully led the strongest ten thousand across the tributary of the Zishui River.

By this time, Zang Ba had successfully established himself as a wise and mighty leader. His followers had adapted to this nomadic life, seeing a glimmer of hope in their blind flight, believing that their leader Xuangao was leading them to salvation.

"What on earth is Chen Zichuan trying to do?" Zang Ba, now emaciated and sun-darkened, sat on a rock to rest, cursing Chen Xi. "There are only ten thousand Yellow Turbans left. You've played with over a million Yellow Turbans like they were monkeys. Can't you just surround and annihilate these last ten thousand? Have some mercy!"

Despite his complaints, Zang Ba had to admit he admired Chen Xi's capability. However, due to Chen Xi's youth, it was impossible for Zang Ba to elevate his feelings to reverence or awe; he could only feel intense envy.

Lately, Chen Xi's messages had grown increasingly bizarre. The orders directed Zang Ba to attack newly established farming settlements and a few older ones built the previous year. The grain from these settlements barely sustained the ten thousand Yellow Turbans, though there was still a significant shortfall. If this continued, their collapse was just a matter of time.

Zang Ba had a gut feeling that Chen Xi was planning something, or he wouldn't have ordered him to attack these settlements. The settlements housed many farmers, and in such conditions, Zang Ba couldn't control his men, leading to the complete massacre of these settlements.

"General," a spy handed Zang Ba a bun with a clear paper message inside.

Finally, new instructions! Zang Ba's joy was boundless. Without new instructions, he feared he might inadvertently ruin Chen Xi's plans by moving around randomly. Even though he had no idea what Chen Xi was planning.

After reading the message, Zang Ba's face turned as dark as the bottom of a pot. He admitted that the plan had a one hundred percent success rate. Even if it was seen through, they were already at their wit's end and had to follow Chen Xi's script. The path ahead was fixed, but did Chen Zichuan have to go so far as to set up a tombstone for his fake Yellow Turban leader? Wasn't that over the top?

In the end, Zang Ba accepted Chen Xi's proposal with a bitter smile. It provided the Yellow Turbans with a somewhat dignified conclusion and secured the hearts and minds of the Yellow Turbans and the

populace, ensuring long-term stability for Taishan. The credit for this achievement would be enough for him to be honored significantly in the annals of history.

The next morning, Chen Xi, basking in the sunlight, stretched lazily and turned to Fa Zheng with a playful smile. "Xiao Zhi, don't you think I look dashing?"

Fa Zheng remained silent. Since the day Fu Yun's army had been swept away, he had expected this outcome. After Hou Qian's army was scattered, he felt completely deflated. Chen Xi's actions had dealt a heavy blow to his confidence; his own strategies now seemed laughable in comparison.

Chen Xi had virtually taken over a third of Qingzhou and captured over a million Yellow Turbans with minimal bloodshed, while also eradicating potential internal threats within the farming regions of Qingzhou. The farming areas had been stabilized, with all the hidden dangers eliminated through the Yellow Turbans' actions.

The new farming areas, mostly controlled by various Yellow Turban leaders, had all been exterminated by Zang Ba's Yellow Turbans. In the end, Zang Ba, who had led the Yellow Turbans in a desperate bid for survival, would die heroically. Taishan would accept the Yellow Turbans' surrender and lift the oppressive military control. This would win over the hearts and minds of the Yellow Turbans and the populace of Qingzhou.

As for the ten thousand elite Yellow Turbans who had followed Zang Ba, they were the true elite of this uprising. With a little selection and training under Yu Jin, they could be reorganized into a formidable army, bypassing the need for a lengthy recruitment process. Chen Xi had accomplished everything in one sweeping motion. Once the Yellow Turbans were defeated, they could all return home to farm.