

Mythical 171

Chapter 171: Each Harboring Their Own Resentments

When Chen Xi goes into a rage, it's no small matter. During the battle for Fan County, it wasn't too intense; after all, with seventy thousand troops surrounding a small town defended by an unknown general, they managed to take it down in one swift assault. After that, the entire Ru County was sealed off, leaving the question of whether to retake it for later.

After dividing the forces, Chen Xi's troops significantly decreased, leaving him with only Hua Xiong's seven thousand soldiers, Yu Jin's four thousand veterans, Chen Xi's own five thousand troops, and Xu Yi and Wu Dun's four thousand men—a total of only twenty thousand. Fortunately, all of them were seasoned veterans; otherwise, with such a small number, Chen Xi would have little confidence in attacking Runan across provinces.

The advantage of this time of year is that there was no need to bring food or supplies. Chen Xi marched almost in a straight line, relying on the fertile lands of Yuzhou for sustenance. Yuzhou, a land rich in grain, provided well for the troops as they advanced, borrowing food along the way. Chen Xi's goal was to reach the gates of Pingyu in Runan County within a month.

Maintaining a forced march, Chen Xi's army swiftly captured several towns along the way. Luckily, the defensive forces left behind by Yuan Shu in Yuzhou were insufficient, and after Liu Bei's forces split off, Zhang Xun focused intently on Liu Bei, the sovereign.

By now, Zhang Xun and Liu Bei had fought several battles in Pei County, the Liu clan's ancestral home, but none resulted in a victory for Zhang Xun. On the first day, Liu Bei failed to launch a sneak attack, falling into Jia Xu's trap, losing his camp, and being chased by Zhang Fei's forces through the night.

Later, Liu Bei fortified Pei County but was lured out by Jia Xu's schemes and narrowly escaped death at Zhang Fei's hands. Chased relentlessly by Zhang Fei for three days, Zhang Xun had only just entered Linju when Zhang Fei stormed in after him. Now, Zhang Xun found himself pinned in Qiao County by Jia Xu's weaker forces, unable to break free and forced to send desperate pleas for reinforcements. Yuan Shu would likely receive urgent reports from Qiao County any day now.

Chen Xi was extremely relieved that Yuan Shu had not yet moved his base to Jiujiang County in Yangzhou, the future capital of his self-proclaimed empire in Shouchun City. If Yuan Shu had already moved, Chen Xi would have had to admit defeat, as it would have been too far to reach. Even though

Pingyu was still somewhat distant, the obstacles along the way weren't too severe. Chen Xi dismissed Hua Xiong's suggestion to detour through Chen County and instead chose a direct route. Since Jia Wenhe was engaging Zhang Xun effectively, only Yin Zheng and Qiao Rui stood between them and their goal.

Within ten days, Chen Xi, Hua Xiong, and Yu Jin cut a direct path, capturing two cities. While Miuqiu fell through a surprise attack, the subsequent city, Xiayi, was taken by Yu Jin after Hua Xiong lured out Yuan Shu's troops with a forged order from Miuqiu. The city fell within half an hour.

By the fifteenth day, Chen Xi's forces were pressing towards Ku County. However, this time, all his troops wore Yuan Shu's uniforms. Passing through Jianping, Jia Xu had sent over legitimate orders under Zhang Xun's authority, which successfully deceived Yin Zheng, leading to the fall of Ku County.

With Yin Zheng's defense orders in disarray, Chen Xi used the forged orders to capture Ningping and Xiang County.

Finally, on the twenty-fifth day, Chen Xi's army arrived at Runan, with Pingyu now in sight. However, the small tricks that had worked before were now meaningless. Qiao Rui had already been warned by Yin Zheng about Chen Xi's tactics and had sealed off the city gates. The thirty thousand troops in Yuzhou refused to engage in open battle, opting instead to defend Pingyu, knowing that the fall of the city would cut off the vital connection between Yuzhou and Jingzhou—a loss that no number of Qiao Rui's could compensate for.

"Strategist, how should we approach this?" Hua Xiong asked, glaring at the formidable city before them. He had nothing but disdain for Qiao Rui, who had so many soldiers but didn't dare to fight outside the city, choosing instead to hide like a turtle.

"We'll wait and see. If within five days, Yuan Shu shows signs of returning, we'll hold off. But if there's no sign of Yuan Shu's return within five days," Chen Xi sighed as he looked up at the towering city walls, "then we'll have no choice but to take the city. As for how we'll take it..."

Siege warfare is an art. In ancient times, some managed to conquer cities through clever schemes, while others relied purely on numbers. Clearly, with the limited number of troops Chen Xi had, attempting to take the city by sheer force would be suicidal.

Hua Xiong remained silent. The city of Pingyu was well-stocked with food and troops. If Qiao Rui decided to hide within, it would take at least a year, and an army of ten thousand or more, to slowly wear the city down.

It was just like Yuan Shu's current situation in attacking Jiangling. Unless he could take the city in one decisive blow, the prolonged siege might give Liu Biao the chance to turn the tide. It was reminiscent of when Cao Cao laid siege to Ye City, which took over a year and was only conquered after resorting to flooding the city.

The more Chen Xi thought about it, the more his head hurt. If they could take Pingyu, they would hold Yuan Shu's entire family hostage, which would likely throw Yuan Shu into disarray. However, with Yuan Shu having only one son, the city was heavily fortified to protect Yuan Yao, the Yuan clan's heir. The idea of capturing Yuan Shu's family was a fantasy; the focus had to be on how to take Pingyu with minimal casualties.

The news of Liu Bei and Cao Cao attacking Yuzhou had long since reached Yuan Shu's desk. Initially dismissing it as a minor issue, Yuan Shu was shocked when reports arrived detailing how Zhang Xun, Yin Zheng, Li Feng, and Liang Gang were unable to resist Cao Cao and Liu Bei.

Especially Cao Mengde—his rapid advances left Yuan Shu in disbelief. On the first day, Yuan Shu had received intelligence that Cao Mengde had moved out from Yingchuan, prompting Yuan Shu to curse him for courting death and vow to punish Cao Cao upon his return. However, by the following day, Cao Mengde had already captured the three most important county seats in Yingchuan: Yangzhai, Yingyin, and Yingyang!

Subsequent reports from Xiangcheng, Dingling, Kunyang, and Wuyang described them all as being in a state of crisis. Before Yuan Shu's emergency orders could even reach these places, news of their fall was already on his desk.

The situation on Liu Bei's front wasn't much better. However, unlike the mysterious siege techniques employed by Cao Mengde, Liu Xuande's attacks were more predictable. Despite winning all three of his initial engagements, each of his divisions had since been pinned down at the county seats they were trying to capture.

"Summon Fengxian," Yuan Shu ordered the messenger at his side. Recently, Yuan Shu felt that Lu Bu wasn't giving his all. Every day during the siege, Lu Bu would dutifully engage Huang Zhong in battle, but neither of them seemed to sustain any serious injuries. In fact, after each duel, the morale of the

Jiangling defenders only seemed to rise. Originally low, their spirits had been lifted to a new height by Lu Bu and Huang Zhong's daily, punctual duels.

"General, Yuan Gonglu requests your presence again," Zhang Liao said with a bow.

"Ignore him. Tell the messenger I'm practicing my martial arts. Apart from calling me to fight Huang Zhong, does Yuan Gonglu ever have anything else to say? I fight diligently every day, and since I arrived here, I've conquered vast territories for him. Yet, instead of rewarding me, he reprimands me for not killing Huang Zhong! How could Yuan Gonglu treat me so unjustly?" Lu Bu raged.

As Yuan Shu's army's morale continued to decline, his resentment towards Lu Bu grew. He completely overlooked the fact that Lu Bu was the hero who had won him vast territories. Moreover, Lu Bu wasn't even his subordinate, so it was no surprise that Lu Bu began to harbor deep resentment toward Yuan Shu as well.

Chapter 172: So It Was My Recruitment Method That Was Wrong...

"How are things recently, Han Sheng?" Liu Pan asked as he noticed Huang Zhong standing on the city wall, overlooking the enemy camp below.

"He's still alive!" Huang Zhong knew that Liu Pan wasn't asking about the enemy's situation but rather about his son. Huang Zhong, who had basically given up hope, answered grumpily. His son, Huang Xu, was hanging on by a thread, but Zhang Zhongjing had assured him that his son's life wasn't in immediate danger.

Though Huang Zhong had often felt like killing his local doctor, Zhang Zhongjing, out of frustration, he ultimately trusted the physician. Since Zhang Zhongjing said his son wouldn't die, Huang Zhong believed it.

"Oh..." Liu Pan nodded and didn't press further. In his view, it was already a miracle that Huang Xu had survived this long. He also knew that Huang Zhong had some personal issues; otherwise, he wouldn't be so obsessed with his one son and daughter. Seeing how Huang Zhong could still stand against the world's top martial artist in combat, Liu Pan couldn't help but wonder why he didn't have more wives and concubines to carry on the family name.

It was precisely because Huang Xu was half-dead and the Huang family was on the verge of extinction that Huang Zhong had lost all motivation. What was the point of striving for a title or high office? People might talk about bringing glory to their ancestors, but ultimately, wasn't it all for the sake of their children and grandchildren? Without heirs, no matter how high your rank, it all amounts to nothing. Huang Zhong felt he would have no face to meet his ancestors in the afterlife, knowing that his family line had ended.

Without a goal to strive for, Huang Zhong had no more drive. Whether Jiangling fell or Liu Biao died didn't matter much to him. High rank and great rewards meant nothing if his only son was on the brink of death without leaving a single grandchild. Who would inherit those things?

To be honest, if Yuan Shu were to offer a way to heal Huang Xu, Huang Zhong wouldn't hesitate to join him, even if it didn't mean immediately turning on Liu Biao. After all, Liu Biao wasn't really Huang Zhong's superior or lord.

Because of this, Huang Zhong had little interest in his duels with Lu Bu. He simply engaged him each day to prevent Lu Bu from leading assaults that could crush Jingzhou's morale. But even though Huang Zhong wasn't giving his all, just the fact that he could hold back Lu Bu made the soldiers of Jingzhou revere him like a god. After all, if no one could stop Lu Bu, the damage to morale would be catastrophic.

Lu Bu was like a living siege weapon on ancient battlefields. Though such machines didn't kill many people in stable battles, their terrifying presence greatly diminished enemy morale. This was why siege weapons like catapults and ballistae were so popular—they could drastically reduce the enemy's fighting spirit.

Lu Bu's presence was even more insidious than those machines. As some games would put it, just having Lu Bu on the field automatically lowers the enemy's morale each turn, while his own forces' morale increases without limit.

With one side's morale sky-high and the other's plummeting, it wouldn't be long before the demoralized troops began deserting or even tying up their own commander. Having a fierce general like Lu Bu on the field was an outright disaster.

However, what was initially a disaster was forcibly curbed by Huang Zhong's presence. This time, Lu Bu, the world's strongest general, was stuck outside Jiangling. Whether or not Huang Zhong won the duels, neither he nor Lu Bu had sustained more than minor injuries that healed overnight. Under the

leadership of such mighty generals, the morale of the Jingzhou defenders gradually surpassed that of Yuan Shu's troops, who were growing frustrated with the stalled siege.

Liu Biao saw hope in the situation as it developed day by day. Yuan Shu's morale continued to drop while Jingzhou's morale kept rising. The turning point came when Huang Zhong nearly killed the emissary Ji Ling with a single arrow, causing Jingzhou's morale to completely overshadow that of Yuan Shu's forces. After all, Ji Ling, the enemy commander, had been knocked off his horse by that arrow. If not for Lu Bu's intervention, Ji Ling might have been killed instantly by Huang Zhong's shot.

Ji Ling had been wise. The moment he saw Huang Zhong appear on the city wall during the parley, he knew things were going south. He immediately dismounted, but his trusted steed was not so lucky—Huang Zhong's arrow pinned it to the ground. The arrow, nearly the size of a spear, created a hole the size of a large bowl in the horse's body. If it had hit Ji Ling directly, he would have been doomed.

That bloody scene caused Yuan Shu's frontlines to collectively take a step back. The method of death was too horrifying. Huang Zhong's energy arrows usually disintegrated people into dust, leaving no gruesome scene. But now, seeing such a brutal death, the already low morale of Yuan Shu's troops plummeted further.

Because of Huang Zhong's immense deterrent power, Liu Biao had been trying to recruit him, offering high positions, wealth, and beautiful women to entice the unaffiliated warrior. But Huang Zhong remained unmoved, much to Liu Biao's frustration. Was he really that unattractive as a ruler?

"Lord, we've thoroughly investigated. Huang Hansheng is indeed a native of Jingzhou, but he has a hidden ailment. He has one son and one daughter, but his son has been gravely ill for years. Huang Hansheng has not cared much for military affairs during this time, leaving everything in the hands of your nephew. According to Zhang Zhongjing, Huang Hansheng's son won't survive another two years, and Huang Zhong has already given up," Kuai Yue reported, sharing all the information he had recently gathered with Liu Biao.

Liu Biao suddenly understood. It wasn't that he lacked charm, virtue, or generosity; it was Huang Zhong's personal problem.

"Yidu, it seems our recruitment approach was wrong all along," Liu Biao said as he stroked his beard. With the situation improving daily, Liu Biao saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Jiangling had ample supplies, and even if Yuan Shu besieged them for a year or two, they wouldn't run out of provisions. Liu Biao had all the time in the world to wait out Yuan Shu.

“Lord, you are wise. Our approach indeed had a flaw. To a man who faces the prospect of his family line ending, no amount of rank or title matters. As the saying goes, 'Of the three forms of unfilial behavior, having no heirs is the worst.' I believe we should approach this from that angle. Moreover, from what I've learned, Huang Hansheng is a loyal and courageous general. Once he pledges allegiance, he won't betray you,” Kuai Yue said solemnly. The battles in Jingzhou had taught him a lot, and he now understood the importance of recruiting powerful generals who could sway the outcome of a war.

“In that case...” Liu Biao whispered a long series of instructions into Kuai Yue's ear. As a man in his fifties who could still father a son with Madam Cai, Liu Biao had no doubt that Huang Zhong's hidden ailment was no obstacle—he was practically an expert in such matters!

After finishing, Liu Biao fumbled in his sleeve, eventually pulling out a small porcelain bottle, which he handed to Kuai Yue with a knowing smile.

As he handed the bottle over, Liu Biao noticed that Kuai Yue kept glancing at his sleeve, making him a bit embarrassed. Blushing slightly, he barked, “What are you waiting for? Go! Yidu, if you don't win over Huang Hansheng, don't blame me for being merciless!”

Kuai Yue, caught between laughter and tears, simply bowed, said nothing, and accepted the porcelain bottle before withdrawing. But as he left, he couldn't shake a nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Chapter 173: Let's Annoy the Enemy

Five days passed in the blink of an eye, and Chen Xi received the latest report from Jingzhou. He sighed, realizing that Yuan Shu could sometimes be overly confident to the point of absurdity. Even with his rear being attacked and forced into a defensive posture, Yuan Shu remained calm, continuing his southern campaign as if nothing was wrong. Such psychological resilience wasn't something an ordinary person could possess.

However, from a purely objective standpoint, Chen Xi had to admit that Yuan Shu's decision wasn't entirely without merit. Whether it was Chen Xi besieging Pingyu, Liu Bei laying siege to Qiaojun, or Guan Yu attacking Chengdu, none of these strongholds could be taken down quickly. On the other hand, if Yuan Shu could capture Jiangling, he could return victorious and crush Liu Bei's forces like bugs.

Of course, Chen Xi knew that Yuan Shu's thought process was likely far less strategic. He was simply too tempted by the prospect of taking Jiangling and had chosen to ignore the threats posed by Liu Bei and Cao Cao. But sometimes, a gut instinct can be more effective at undermining an enemy's plans than any calculated strategy.

"Strategist, what should we do now?" Hua Xiong asked, bowing. In fact, Hua Xiong was still technically Chen Xi's personal guard, even though Chen Xi had never really given him any orders.

"We attack. Let's give them some pressure," Chen Xi said with resignation. "Since Yuan Shu is being so reckless, it's time to show him some consequences. Have Yu Jin and the others build a mound and scout the situation. Also, bring in those craftsmen we brought along. Let's set up a few trebuchets to apply some pressure."

Yu Jin, accompanied by Xu Yi and Wu Dun, set to work on the mound. Fortunately, Chen Xi's troops had arrived quickly, so Qiao Rui hadn't had the chance to chop down all the trees in the vicinity of Pingyu. This made constructing the mound a relatively simple task.

In just two days, 7,000 men using giant logs, dirt, stones, and even debris, managed to create a mound over 100 meters tall. It turns out that when it comes to manual labor, having a lot of people really makes a difference.

More importantly, Qiao Rui had just stood there watching Chen Xi build the mound, doing nothing to stop him. Seeing this, Chen Xi could only lament, "Where's the intelligence? War is about preventing the enemy from doing what they want. Yet here they are, just watching us play around without doing anything. This is asking for trouble."

In two days, the craftsmen managed to cobble together six trebuchets. But these were just for show; they were never meant to actually breach the city walls. Attacking a city like Pingyu, with its six-zhang-thick stone walls, using these hastily made trebuchets was laughable. Even a sophisticated siege weapon like the Huihui cannon wouldn't make a dent.

It's worth noting that history records very few instances of trebuchets actually bringing down city walls, and when it did happen, it took years of sustained effort with siege engines far more advanced than anything available in 1417 AD.

“Are these things even usable?” Chen Xi asked skeptically, eyeing the roughly assembled trebuchets, each with components of varying sizes and no wheels in sight.

“Don’t worry, Strategist. We’ve tested these before, and they work. A 500-pound boulder can be thrown 150 meters with these,” Wu Dun assured him, pounding his chest in confidence.

Chen Xi scrutinized the devices with a doubtful gaze, thinking, Do I need to set up precision standards and an assembly line to whip these guys into shape?

“Fine, I’ll leave it at that. Fire a shot and let’s see if it works. If these don’t live up to their promise, you’ll have to answer for wasting these centuries-old logs,” Chen Xi said, waving his hand dismissively.

“Men, load the stones!” Wu Dun shouted.

A group of soldiers painstakingly adjusted the trebuchet’s arm, and then Wu Dun heaved a small millstone into the sling.

“Strategist, you might want to stand back a bit. This thing’s a little dangerous!” Wu Dun said, stretching his arms.

A dozen or so soldiers with internal energy released the arm simultaneously. With a loud “thwack,” the trebuchet flung the stone into the air, launching it over the wall, where it crashed into a house, collapsing it entirely. Debris from the shattered house even knocked down the back wall.

“Uh... that wasn’t quite right. Let’s try again,” Wu Dun said, embarrassed. The stone had overshot the target, likely because the mound was too high.

After five more tries, they finally hit a person. The sight was gruesome—a soldier was turned into a bloody pulp, his remains splattering across the ground and the walls.

Chen Xi turned away, unable to bear the sight. His enhanced senses made it impossible to ignore the horrifying details of a man being smashed into a gruesome mess.

“Strategist, this thing’s accuracy is a bit off...” Wu Dun started to explain, seeing Chen Xi’s reaction and fearing repercussions.

“Build a few more. Don’t worry about accuracy; just keep bombarding them. I never expected these things to take the city; we’re just using them to harass the enemy. You and Meng Kang (Xu Ding) will station troops at the base of the mound. In a few days, build another mound in front of this one to suppress the enemy archers on the walls,” Chen Xi instructed, signaling Wu Dun to stop fretting.

“Yes, sir!” Wu Dun replied, bowing. As long as Chen Xi was willing to continue with the plan, there was nothing to worry about. If Chen Xi had walked away without a word, that would have been a different story.

After leaving the mound, Chen Xi went to find Hua Xiong. Assaulting Pingyu head-on was out of the question. Even with the trebuchets and elevated archers lowering the enemy’s morale, as long as Qiao Rui refused to come out, there was little they could do.

“Zijian, how many grave robbers have you found?” Chen Xi asked Hua Xiong. With other methods proving too slow, their best bet was to dig tunnels. After all, in three years, the first recorded use of tunnel warfare in history would occur during Yuan Shao’s siege of Gongsun Zan at Yijing.

Right now, no one was guarding against underground attacks. Chen Xi estimated that with a hundred or so specialists, they could dig a tunnel of about 150 to 200 meters in a month. They needed to act fast before anyone else caught on. If they used this tactic, Yuan Shao wouldn’t be able to use it to trap Gongsun Zan later, giving Gongsun a bit more time.

Chapter 174: Switching to Experts!

Hua Xiong was quite a peculiar character. During his time with Dong Zhuo, he had committed many misdeeds, but he also had moments of kindness, like helping elderly women cross the street or escorting children home. After joining Liu Bei, Hua Xiong assumed Liu Bei would uphold virtues of benevolence and righteousness. So, when Chen Xi ordered him to find tomb robbers, Hua Xiong didn’t follow through.

“Strategist, desecrating someone’s ancestors’ graves brings bad karma. With your capabilities, why resort to such methods?” Hua Xiong knelt on one knee, trying to dissuade Chen Xi. He couldn’t bear the thought of Chen Xi tarnishing his reputation by doing something as dishonorable as defiling tombs just to capture Pingyu.

“What? What are you talking about, Zijian?” Chen Xi asked, scratching his head in confusion.

“Digging up the Yuan family’s ancestral graves!” Hua Xiong said in a somber tone.

“...” Chen Xi facepalmed. “Zijian, that’s an awfully malicious thought! But actually, it’s not a bad idea. If you were to dig up the Yuan family’s graves and display them outside Pingyu’s walls, even if Qiao Rui knew defeat was inevitable, he’d have no choice but to come out and fight. Heck, you might not even need to dig them up—just the threat alone would force Qiao Rui to make a move. Hm, yes, that’s quite a good plan.”

“... Strategist, please don’t joke about that!” Hua Xiong said, more seriously this time.

“Relax. Respecting the dead is important—I’m not that desperate yet. What I wanted was for you to find some professionals, not to desecrate graves. Haven’t you noticed that even when Yu Jin was asked to build a mound, he ended up digging and hitting water?” Chen Xi shrugged.

Hua Xiong was still puzzled, not quite understanding what Chen Xi was getting at. He stood there, hoping for an explanation. At least he now understood that Chen Xi wasn’t planning on digging up the Yuan family graves.

“Don’t you think digging a tunnel and sending a few hundred men through to open the gates would be easier than a full-on assault? And who better to handle such a job than professionals who do this sort of thing for a living? I had them build a mound to get a good view of the inside. From there, the tomb robbers can eyeball the distance and dig a tunnel. It should be a lot easier than grave robbing—just digging a tunnel, really. It should take about a month, and if Yuan Shu doesn’t send reinforcements by then, we’ll have plenty of time to take the city,” Chen Xi explained. “If it weren’t for giving Liu Biao some face, we could have just built a ramp straight up to Pingyu’s walls. That would’ve taken only three to five months...”

“Huh?” Hua Xiong was stunned for a moment before he quickly realized that this was a strategic blind spot. A plan that no one expects is the best kind of plan. It reminded him of how the Xiongnu were utterly defeated by Li Mu because they never imagined that Li Mu would lay an ambush beneath the grassy plains, resulting in tens of thousands of them being slaughtered.

Now, Chen Xi's tunnel-digging plan was another unexpected and brilliant strategy. In an instant, Hua Xiong understood what he needed to do.

As for the idea of building a dirt ramp to push straight up to the city walls, Hua Xiong found it quite ingenious. With enough manpower, even the most well-fortified city could be taken in three to five months. You could even pile the dirt higher than the walls, creating an unassailable advantage. It was slow and labor-intensive, but it was an unbeatable tactic. He made a mental note of it, thinking it might come in handy one day.

"Please forgive me, Strategist. I'll go and round up all the tomb robbers in Runan," Hua Xiong said, bowing. Realizing that he had delayed this crucial military task by two days, he quickly added, "Work will commence by dusk today!"

"Dusk?" Chen Xi gave Hua Xiong a sidelong glance. "You even know about that?"

"Just a bit... just a bit..." Hua Xiong replied awkwardly. After all, during his time with Dong Zhuo, he had picked up a thing or two about tomb raiding and its associated taboos.

"Once you've got the men, take them to the site and supervise the digging. Don't be like Wen Ze, who started digging and immediately hit water. As for how to cover it up, I'll leave that to you. If we weren't in such a hurry, we could've just used the simpler method of building a ramp and pushing forward," Chen Xi said, assigning the task to Hua Xiong and once again referencing Yu Jin's botched excavation.

It was indeed amusing how Yu Jin had tried to build a mound by chopping down trees and digging soil, only to hit water on the second day, turning the excavation site into a small pond. This was the unfortunate result of not having specialists on hand.

That's why Chen Xi figured that instead of letting Yu Jin dig and end up with more unintended ponds, they should bring in the professionals. If the tomb robbers couldn't even manage a simple tunnel, they might as well be buried themselves.

The efficiency of the military's operations was something Chen Xi had learned back in Qingzhou. When Hua Xiong said he would round up all the tomb robbers in Runan by dusk, he wasn't kidding. Sure enough, by dusk, Hua Xiong's men had brought in over two hundred tomb robbers. It seemed that every

major family's ancestral graves were never without these professionals lurking nearby, making their living off such work.

Looking at the group before him—youths, young men, and middle-aged men, all with thin, slightly hunched frames and dull, cloudy eyes—Chen Xi could tell that being a tomb robber in this era wasn't a glamorous job.

"Please, sir, have mercy on us. We won't do it again," someone finally spoke up, and soon the entire group was begging for mercy, some even dropping to their knees. In this era, tomb robbing was a serious crime, punishable by death—unless, of course, you were one of Cao Mengde's yet-to-be-established 'Mojin Xiaowei.'

Chen Xi gave Hua Xiong a look, and Hua Xiong responded with a loud shout, "Silence!" The tomb robbers immediately cowered in fear.

Chen Xi then signaled Yu Jin, who quickly brought over a chest of money. Military campaigns typically didn't involve bringing money along, but as the campaign progressed, they always seemed to acquire some. When Chen Xi's army left Fan County, they had no money. But by the time they reached Pingyu, they had amassed treasures and over a billion in cash.

Of course, this was inevitable. Passing through various cities and not clearing out their treasuries would be a missed opportunity. Generally, the commanding officer would take at least thirty percent of the spoils. Anything less would raise eyebrows among the troops and staff, so Chen Xi had no qualms about taking his rightful share. It didn't take long before he realized that there was no business as profitable as war.

As for death benefits, Chen Xi thought it was only fair to distribute some of the wealth among the troops. Each fallen soldier's family would receive ten guan, with Chen Xi personally overseeing the distribution. Wounded soldiers would receive two to five guan, depending on the severity of their injuries. All in all, it amounted to less than ten thousand guan.

Injured soldiers who survived could continue to serve in non-combat roles, such as overseeing farming operations in the rear, where their battlefield experience would be invaluable. Chen Xi doled out the funds with a calm demeanor, as it was simply a matter of redistributing the wealth they had acquired. A mere ten thousand guan was pocket change at this point.

Overall, the survival rate was significantly better than if no care had been provided. Alcohol for disinfecting wounds and basic bandaging with linen drastically reduced fatalities, although some unscrupulous soldiers did occasionally sneak a drink from the medical supplies.

The sight of money quickly shifted the mood among the tomb robbers. The group that had been trembling and begging for mercy now stared intently at the chest. After all, most tomb robbers were far from wealthy.

Chen Xi turned to Yu Jin with a puzzled expression. He remembered asking for gold ingots, which would have been far less bulky than this chest of copper coins. Why had it been swapped out for something so cheap?

Chapter 175: High-Paying Tunnel Digging

Just as Chen Xi turned away, Yu Jin's voice reached him, "Strategist, if you give these people gold ingots, they might end up dead. You can use gold beads, gold leaves, gold ingots, or gold bars, but these guys can't handle gold ingots."

Chen Xi was speechless. He always carried gold beads on him, and while he had some copper coins, he didn't have more than twenty. How was he supposed to know if using gold ingots would get them killed? But thinking about the situation in this era, it wasn't entirely out of the question.

"Who among you is the best at digging?" Chen Xi decided to drop the gold vs. copper issue. As long as they were willing to work for money, that's all that mattered.

Immediately, the group scattered, leaving one hunched-over, forty-something-year-old man standing in the middle, shaking so badly it looked like he might spit blood.

"Alright, you're the one. Here, take half the money. Zijian, take this expert and let him assess the terrain. Figure out how we should proceed." Seeing that everyone had agreed this old man was the best, Chen Xi was delighted. Every profession has its leaders, and this was exactly the kind of person he needed.

The rest of the group nearly choked. The guy hadn't moved because he was stuck in the middle, but when everyone else stepped aside, he was left standing there like a sore thumb. Not a single person had actually acknowledged that the old man was better than them.

Yu Jin felt a bit embarrassed and turned away. Chen Xi could be a bit oblivious at times—like right now, where it should've been obvious that the old man wasn't volunteering. Yet Chen Xi had just made him the leader.

“Clatter!” Hua Xiong used a large bucket to fill a bucket with money. After seeing that the bucket was overflowing, he casually took out two gold ingots from his bodyguard's pouch and tossed them into the bucket. “Take this money and stick with me from now on. I need people with your kind of professional skills!”

Hua Xiong didn't quite understand why Chen Xi called it “professional skills,” but he thought it sounded impressive. Who knew when a person like this might come in handy? Best to keep him around.

Clearly, Hua Xiong's understanding of social interactions was a step behind Yu Jin's. What Hua Xiong had just done was pretty much poaching, but Chen Xi typically turned a blind eye to such things.

After Hua Xiong took the old man away, the remaining group looked at Chen Xi with teary eyes. If they had known, they would have stayed in the middle.

“Do you need anything else dug out, sir?” It was true that a large forest contains all kinds of birds, and among them, there's always one smart one. Here it was—a smart bird finally stepped up.

“You, yes, you! The one who spoke, step forward!” Chen Xi called out. He didn't know who had spoken, but someone volunteering meant they had initiative and guts—qualities worth rewarding.

The man hesitated for a moment but eventually stepped forward and cupped his fists in a salute to Chen Xi.

Chen Xi looked the man over. He seemed to be around twenty-seven or twenty-eight, with a muscular build, dressed in simple hemp clothing. Compared to the others, he was completely out of place. What was going on here? Never mind. Maybe he was an archaeology enthusiast. Who's to say? It wasn't like archaeology was unheard of in ancient times.

“Give him half the money. He’s the foreman now,” Chen Xi instructed Yu Jin. It didn’t really matter who took the lead; be it a tomb robber or an archaeologist, even if Hua Xiong had caught the wrong guy, it wasn’t a big deal. Chen Xi just needed someone to lead the way.

Meanwhile, Hua Xiong took the “professional” up to the hillside to start the assessment.

“What’s your name?” “They call me Pouch,” the old man replied.

“Pouch, stand here and figure out where to dig a tunnel that will safely reach Pingyu City,” Hua Xiong instructed, pointing toward Pingyu. In the background, the trebuchets kept launching stones every so often, just to lower the enemy’s morale. They weren’t aiming to kill—just to disgust them.

The old man was stunned for a moment, then squinted at the layout of Pingyu City. He wasn’t the best tomb robber out there, but he had the basics down.

“General, there are many places where we could dig, but the moat will be difficult to cross. It would be best to dig the tunnel deep, but the water veins in Runan are plentiful, so digging deep might cause flooding,” Pouch said cautiously.

Just by looking at the small pond under the mound, Hua Xiong knew the water in this area wasn’t something to be taken lightly.

“How long would it take to dig through to the inside of the city?” Hua Xiong asked.

“With this soil and if everyone works around the clock, we could dig a tunnel wide enough for two people to walk side by side in about twenty days,” Pouch replied cautiously, noting that this task was simple for any tomb robber.

“It needs to be discreet,” Hua Xiong warned.

Hearing this, Pouch breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed this general didn’t really understand their line of work. If tomb robbers weren’t discreet, they’d have died out a long time ago.

“General, rest assured. I can connect the tunnel to a well inside the city without disrupting its structure,” Pouch said confidently, now that he was certain Hua Xiong was an outsider. This was a piece of cake for them.

“Alright, then do it. If you get this done, I won’t be stingy with the rewards,” Hua Xiong said, patting Pouch on the shoulder. He was satisfied. Once the tunnel was finished, money wouldn’t be an issue.

With a designer in place—though perhaps not the best—and a foreman in charge, they were ready to start. Hua Xiong, like a ruthless coal mine boss, didn’t care about cave-ins or the labor force.

They worked eighteen hours a day, embodying the very definition of a heartless businessman. As for why the workday was so long, Hua Xiong had heard that tomb robbers were more efficient at night, but he didn’t want to waste daylight either...

Anyway, in Hua Xiong’s view, this group deserved to die, and digging a tunnel was their way of atoning. If they managed to dig through, all would be forgiven. If the tunnel collapsed while they were working, it would be a sign from the heavens, reclaiming those it couldn’t tolerate any longer—nothing to do with him. If they died of exhaustion, well, they just weren’t strong enough. After all, in this era, tomb robbers deserved to be drowned once caught...

For these reasons, Hua Xiong considered himself merciful and generous. Instead of tying these tomb robbers to stones and sinking them in the Yangtze River, he was letting them atone by digging a tunnel. Truly, the heavens have the virtue of cherishing life.

Meanwhile, a new mound had been built near Pingyu City’s walls. This one was closer to the city but much higher. With over ten thousand men working for five days, it was quite the construction. Once it was done, Chen Xi sent people up every day to shoot arrows down at the enemy—not to wound them, just to annoy them. Every day, Chen Xi stood on the mound and watched Qiao Rui curse. The man must be fuming.

But those things didn’t matter as much as the fact that the tunnel Hua Xiong was overseeing had already passed under the moat. It had to be said—these tomb robbers were skilled. Although the twenty-some-meter-long section under the moat was damp, they managed to prevent a cave-in by using wooden planks and supports.

However, Pouch had warned that this makeshift structure would only last for a month. After that, water would start seeping in more and more, eventually flooding the entire tunnel.

Chapter 176: When Morale Is Low, Money Rains from the Sky

Whether the tunnel collapses or not is of no concern to Chen Xi. In seven or eight days, they would have dug into the well Bag had identified. Then, they could send people in to open the city gates, and the cavalry could storm the city, overwhelming the unsuspecting Qiao Rui.

Speaking of cavalry, though Liu Bei's cavalry units had a one-to-one horse-to-rider ratio, their numbers had already exceeded ten thousand. Of course, they were far from the level of wealth and power held by someone like Gongsun Zan, but they were more than capable of overwhelming these central plains warlords. Even Cao Mengde was envious, jealous, and resentful of Liu Bei's cavalry.

Cavalry charges might not always be reliable, but their mobility was undeniable, especially when it came to disrupting disorganized enemy formations—it's almost like a steamroller!

On the other side, Guan Yu had found a few loud-mouthed individuals to taunt Chen Guo's commander, Chen Ji, from a distance. Guan Yu had clashed with Chen Ji multiple times, each time either defeating him head-on or ambushing him and scattering his forces.

Throughout their westward campaign, Guan Yu had not lost a single battle, regardless of the strategies Chen Ji employed. Liu Ye always managed to turn Chen Ji's schemes against him. However, due to the long journey, they had only just arrived beneath Chen Guo's city walls.

But after traveling with Liu Ye, Guan Yu found himself at a loss. Though Liu Ye could effortlessly see through Chen Ji's plans each time, he always presented Guan Yu with a pile of countermeasures. However, Liu Ye, clearly influenced by Chen Xi, was the kind who wrote down every idea, keeping it for future reference. As a result, Guan Yu was always handed a thick stack of strategies to choose from.

The options were all good, and if Guan Yu had only one to pick from, he wouldn't have hesitated. But with so many to choose from, his pursuit of perfection made it challenging to select the best one. So, recently, while battling Chen Ji, Guan Yu had also been increasing his knowledge. As someone who read *The Spring and Autumn Annals* by night, Guan Yu had recently started studying Han history. But Guan Yu had a habit of not reading during the day, instead spending his nights reading by lamplight.

"Ziyang, should we continue attacking the city?" After finishing his morning exercises, Guan Yu, refreshed, looked at Liu Ye, who had two dark circles under his eyes, and asked.

It's true that Guan Yu tended to look down on scholars, but fortunately, he only did so with people like Liu Yan, those so-called refined scholars. Recently, Guan Yu had stopped looking down on Liu Yan as well, mainly because Liu Yan had helped boost Guan Yu's reputation. Even though Guan Yu wasn't much of a talker, he would now nod in acknowledgment when he saw Liu Yan.

As for Liu Ye, who was genuinely capable, it was similar to how Guan Yu had respected Xu Shu in history. Liu Ye had directly won Guan Yu over, so Guan Yu greatly respected him.

"Today, let's throw something different at them. We never intended to capture the city anyway. Our goal is to force Yuan Shu to send reinforcements. If we actually take down this county seat, forcing Yuan Shu to dig in and fight for Jiangling would be troublesome. I imagine that after a month of this, the morale of Yuan Shu's forces at Jiangling must have plummeted," Liu Ye suggested, indicating that there was no need to storm the city—they were merely there to cause trouble.

"What are we throwing today?" Guan Yu asked, already feeling a chill. He had witnessed Liu Ye's mischief and knew this could get out of hand. Ever since they acquired a trebuchet, Liu Ye had only used normal stones on the first day. Every day since, he had been tormenting the enemy in increasingly creative ways.

"I've had people gather a lot of hornet, wasp, and yellow jacket nests from the mountains—about a hundred in total. These insects are about two inches long. It should be quite entertaining to see what happens when we throw those at the enemy," Liu Ye said, stroking his beard. "Recently, we've been short on tung oil, or else I'd have thrown fireballs to harass them as well," he added with a tinge of disappointment.

"Men, prepare to launch what the strategist has requested!" Guan Yu commanded the orderlies.

A dozen hornet nests were flung over the walls, and chaos erupted on the ramparts. The buzzing sound alone made Guan Yu shudder, while Liu Ye continued to watch the scene with great interest.

"It seems that Chen Ji's men lack loyalty and that their morale is so low they're on the verge of desertion," Liu Ye remarked, stroking his small beard.

Guan Yu remained silent, but inwardly he couldn't help but grumble, "Who wouldn't have low morale after being tormented like this? First, there were the rocks, then smoke, then you added dung and some unknown, foul-smelling fumes. Now it's hornet nests! It would be strange if morale wasn't low after all that!"

That day when Liu Ye tried to control the wind and blow the poisonous smoke, it backfired. The wind shifted, and the stench nearly made Guan Yu retch on the spot. Heaven only knew what Liu Ye had mixed in there, but it was so vile that Guan Yu almost lost his breakfast.

It was the perfect opportunity to storm the city. But Guan Yu, covering his face with a cloth soaked in water, charged into the smoke to lead the assault, only for his soldiers to start vomiting before they even reached the walls. That should give you an idea of how revolting Liu Ye's concoction was.

Even now, Liu Ye continued to burn those mysterious, foul-smelling substances, hell-bent on torturing the defenders of Chen Guo.

Liu Ye, unaware of Guan Yu's silent complaints, was still lost in his train of thought, his mind bubbling with ideas.

"Yun Chang, look at those Yuan Shu soldiers on the walls, running around in chaos. Doesn't it seem like they have no desire to defend the city? It looks like they're just about ready to give up. Let's add fuel to the fire," Liu Ye said, suddenly inspired by another idea.

"Trebuchet, change the payload!" Liu Ye ordered loudly.

Guan Yu didn't say a word. He had already handed full control of the trebuchet to Liu Ye. Who knew what the strategist had in mind this time?

"Go, bring up a dozen or so chests of money from the supplies. And get some gold ingots and gold beads," Liu Ye commanded Sun Kang.

Soon, dozens of chests of money were brought over. It was clear that these were not just Liu Ye's funds—some belonged to Guan Yu as well. Guan Yu was curious to see what Liu Ye would do this time.

"Yun Chang, once you see the soldiers on the walls descend into chaos, lead your elite troops and seize the city. This might be our best opportunity," Liu Ye said, turning to Guan Yu.

"Understood!" Guan Yu responded. Though surprised, he had witnessed enough of Liu Ye's cleverness to trust him completely. He immediately ordered his personal guards to prepare.

One by one, the chests of money were emptied into the trebuchet's basket and flung towards Chen Guo's city walls, now quiet after the chaos with the hornets. In an instant, it started raining money from the sky. The soldiers on the walls scrambled to grab as much as they could, completely ignoring their duties.

What did soldiers fight for in this era? If not for food, then for the few copper coins they could keep. These men were just regular soldiers, not personal guards. If money was falling from the sky, of course, they'd scramble to grab it!

Clink! A gold ingot hit the ground, and the soldiers, already in a frenzy over the coins, now had their eyes glowing red as they reached for their weapons. Morale, already low due to Liu Ye's constant harassment, quickly disintegrated as the Yuan Shu soldiers started fighting amongst themselves.

Chapter 177: Sometimes Half-Knowledge is Worse than Ignorance

"Charge!" Guan Yu roared, leading his elite Daodao soldiers in a ferocious assault. Within less than a quarter of an hour, the city gates were thrown open, and more than ten thousand troops poured in, advancing directly towards the residence of the prefect.

As Liu Ye watched the gates open, cold sweat dripped down his back. He finally understood why Chen Xi insisted on constantly educating the soldiers about discipline and morale. While it might not lead to absolute obedience, it at least ensured that they wouldn't fall into complete disarray when it mattered most.

Just a few million coins had been enough to throw the defenders into chaos, especially given their already low morale. It was incredible how quickly a city could be captured under such circumstances.

"This needs to be recorded as a cautionary tale!" Liu Ye wiped the sweat from his brow, hastily pulling out a brush and paper to jot down notes.

Liu Ye estimated that, with the morale as low as it had been, even if Chen Ji had been present, he likely wouldn't have been able to suppress the soldiers' urge to grab the money. However, Chen Ji might have been able to intimidate them with his sword, though whether that would have left lasting repercussions was another matter entirely.

When Chen Ji heard that the city had been breached, he didn't hesitate—he fled immediately. With Guan Yu's prowess in battle, the chaos among the troops only amplified his effectiveness. Chen Ji knew that if he tried to face Guan Yu, he would likely end up as just another head rolling at Guan Yu's feet. How he would face Yuan Shu afterward was no longer his concern.

On the other side, Jia Xu was staring at Qiao County, pondering his next move. Honestly, Jia Xu was not keen on attacking Qiao County. They had already gained more than enough from this campaign—carts full of gold, grain, and artisans were continuously being transported back to Taishan. Jia Xu figured that the resources they had gathered would be more than enough to sustain Qingzhou until it was fully rebuilt, so there was no need to waste more manpower on Qiao County.

Because of this, Jia Xu's plan was to besiege the city without attacking, while sending out troops to loot and gather resources from the surrounding areas, transporting everything back to Taishan.

After Jia Xu explained his reasoning, Liu Bei agreed that the decision to attack or not should be left to Jia Xu, the strategist of the Eastern Front. With Liu Bei's blessing, Jia Xu sent him off to Pei County to visit the ancestral homeland of the Liu family, dating back four centuries.

The more than thirty thousand troops on the Eastern Front began a gradual withdrawal under the cover of night and fog, moving to capture nearby counties. Only Zhang Fei and Jia Xu remained, guarding an empty camp with three thousand men, challenging the enemy every day.

Zhang Fei, with his rough and straightforward nature, didn't feel the danger in this at all. In fact, he enjoyed it, leading a thousand men to challenge the gates of Qiao County every day. As long as Zhang Xun wasn't foolish, he wouldn't come out to face Zhang Fei in a duel.

After more than ten days of this, one day while inspecting the city defenses, Zhang Xun noticed something odd: birds were landing in the enemy's camp, which struck him as strange. He couldn't quite put his finger on what was wrong, but he couldn't get a clear answer from any of his subordinates either. Frustrated, Zhang Xun left, scratching his head.

That night, at midnight, a severely wounded man carrying the county seal of Hao County arrived at the city gates. With great effort, he handed the seal and a letter to the guards before being hoisted up into Qiao County. Zhang Xun received the latest report but had to focus on saving the messenger's life, which he managed to stabilize by dawn. Only then could he ask about the situation.

"What?!" Zhang Xun roared at the wounded man in front of him.

"Hao County, Feng County, Pei County, Zhuan County, Zhuyi, Guyang, Xiao County, and Hong County have all fallen," the wounded officer, clutching his injuries, struggled to say, even coughing up blood as he spoke.

"How is that possible? Zhang Yide comes to challenge me every day. The entire camp drills daily... drills..." Zhang Xun trailed off, suddenly recalling the birds he had seen landing in the camp earlier. It hit him then—he had never seen anyone come out of the back of the camp!

"Zhang Yide, I will have your head!" Zhang Xun bellowed. "All troops, prepare for battle! I will take Zhang Fei's head myself!"

Meanwhile, Zhang Fei watched curiously as Jia Xu sprinkled grain around the back of their camp, attracting even more birds. Some even landed on Jia Xu himself.

Zhang Fei, a man who deeply respected capable strategists, held great reverence for Jia Xu's abilities, even if he didn't fully understand what the man was doing.

"Get ready, Yide. The time has come—Qiao County is about to fall," Jia Xu said, casually tossing the remaining grain into the air before turning to head back to the main camp. "Remember, when Zhang Xun comes out, all you need to do is retreat."

"Huh?" Zhang Fei scratched his head, utterly confused.

"Strategist Jia, why would Zhang Xun come out now? I've been taunting him for days, and he hasn't taken the bait. Why now?" Zhang Fei asked, still baffled by the situation.

"Because he's smart, but unfortunately, he's a bookworm. It's a simple matter of turning his own strategy against him. Half-knowledge is sometimes worse than knowing nothing at all. If you understand a military strategy completely, without major flaws in your character, becoming a good commander is simple enough," Jia Xu explained calmly as they walked towards the front lines. He was confident in their impending victory.

Jia Xu knew that as one of Yuan Shu's most capable generals, Zhang Xun needed to prove himself in this battle, especially after having been suppressed for so long. Given the opportunity, he would seize it, or else he would be no different from the other defeated commanders.

The most crucial point was the birds landing in the camp. Every military manual stated that when birds land in a camp, it indicates that the camp is deserted. After all, birds instinctively avoid danger. If soldiers were truly drilling everywhere in the camp, the birds wouldn't land there. This was the simplest proof.

But birds are still just birds. As long as all the soldiers hid in their tents and someone scattered grain around the camp, these brainless birds would naturally create the illusion described in military texts.

Liu Bei's forces had already completed their attacks and returned, hiding in the camp. And speaking of which, with just three thousand men, would any messenger dare to enter the camp without a plan? There's such a thing as a death trap, even if the victim doesn't die...

One thousand coins were all it took to buy a life—simple and effective. The information was real, just a couple of days old. The seal, the wounds—everything was genuine. But it seemed likely that this so-called dead messenger would actually survive and live a decent life afterward.

Jia Xu smiled as he walked away, unhurried and calm. Even in a battle of wits, his strategies would always unfold step by step. Just as Jia Xu and Zhang Fei left the camp, Zhang Xun appeared on the city walls, bow drawn, and unleashed an arrow towards Liu Bei's now-empty camp with all his might.

Without the ability to project his inner energy, the arrow only flew a few hundred meters before beginning to drop. Still, because it was a high-angle shot, it barely reached the camp, where it landed, startling dozens of birds into flight. Zhang Xun, now enraged, threw down his bow in fury, slamming his fist into the wall.

"Prepare the troops!" Zhang Xun ordered as he stormed down from the walls, determined to take Zhang Fei's head.

Chapter 178: Jia Wenhe's Perfect Strategy

While Zhang Xun was assembling his troops, Zhang Fei had already begun his usual, lackadaisical taunting of the enemy.

As Zhang Fei flaunted his prowess, Zhang Xun suddenly ordered the gates to be opened and charged out, shouting as he went, "Don't let Zhang Fei escape! Whoever brings me Zhang Fei's head will be rewarded with a thousand gold and a hundred thousand coins!"

Hearing this, Zhang Xun's soldiers roared and charged at Zhang Fei with renewed vigor. To his credit, Zhang Xun managed to maintain the formation of his troops as they advanced, even as he led the charge.

Furious upon hearing Zhang Xun's offer, Zhang Fei instinctively wanted to turn and fight. However, seeing the cloud of energy above Zhang Xun's troops, he suppressed his rage and veered off to the left, retreating towards his own camp.

"Hahaha, Zhang Fei, you truly are nothing! After him! We will crush him today!" Zhang Xun laughed, urging his horse forward to pursue Zhang Fei.

"Retreat! Retreat quickly!" Zhang Fei's voice echoed across the battlefield, filled with feigned panic, as he and his men fled towards the left side of the camp.

"Pursue them!" Zhang Xun shouted in triumph, spurring his horse after Zhang Fei.

"Send word to Li Feng—destroy their camp outside the city! I will personally deal with Zhang Fei!" Zhang Xun ordered his messenger.

In the central command tent, Jia Xu sat calmly, issuing orders to Sun Guan and Zhao Yun, who had just returned from overseeing the summer harvest, to prepare for a surprise attack on Qiao County. As for the ambush, there was no need. Within an hour, Zhang Fei would be safe, and within that same hour, Qiao County, left defenseless, would surely fall.

"Zhongtai, lead three thousand cavalry and charge as soon as the enemy opens the gates again to attack our camp. Don't worry about the horses!" Jia Xu ordered Sun Guan.

"Understood!" Sun Guan replied, bowing.

"Zilong, gather your troops and hide in the rear camp. The front camp will likely be set ablaze, so stay hidden in the back. When Zhang Xun returns to attack the city, ambush him from behind. If everything goes as planned, Zhang Xun won't have time to scout whether our camp is truly deserted. The fire in the front will create the perfect illusion." Jia Xu entrusted Zhao Yun with another task.

Just as Jia Xu predicted, when Li Feng sent half of his infantry out of the city gates, Sun Guan led the charge, crashing into the tightly packed ranks of Yuan Shu's troops. The ensuing battle was fierce.

After the initial clash, Sun Guan's infantry quickly followed, engaging in brutal combat with Li Feng's forces right at the city gates.

Li Feng knew that he had to prevent the enemy from breaching the gates at all costs. Even if it meant sacrificing his men to hold the line, as long as the gates remained secure, Zhang Xun could still turn the tide upon his return. But if the gates fell and the enemy breached the city, morale would collapse, and defeat would be inevitable.

Spotting Sun Guan among the chaos, Li Feng realized that the only way to rally his troops was to slay the enemy general. He fought his way toward Sun Guan, but Sun Guan's seasoned bodyguards, veterans of many battles, quickly alerted their leader to the approaching danger.

Although the clashing energy between the two armies neutralized most of their inner strength, Sun Guan's superior martial prowess allowed him to overpower Li Feng within twenty exchanges, knocking him off his horse. However, Li Feng's bodyguards managed to pull him to safety, preventing Sun Guan from delivering the final blow.

Realizing that killing Li Feng was not the priority, Sun Guan turned his focus back to the main objective—breaching the city.

"Li Feng is dead! Surrender, and you will be spared!" Sun Guan roared. As Yuan Shu's soldiers looked back toward Sun Guan, they saw Li Feng's riderless horse standing alone before him. Their earlier resolve evaporated, and they scattered, allowing Sun Guan's forces to surge through the gates.

"Surrender, and your lives will be spared!" Sun Guan shouted again as he led his men into the city, signaling that Qiao County was about to fall.

"General, we must retreat!" Li Feng's bodyguards helped him onto a horse, urging him to escape and inform Zhang Xun that Qiao County had been breached.

"The situation is already decided!" Jia Xu declared, standing at the camp entrance with his signature folding fan, a faint smile on his lips. As part of the enemy's troops began to dismantle the camp to build siege engines, Jia Xu could clearly foresee the outcome. With his intelligence and his mental prowess, he knew that if he remained cautious, achieving flawless strategies was not impossible.

Jia Xu had never disclosed his mental talent to anyone. Even in his youth, when he suspected that his gift might be precognition, he kept it to himself, never showing any signs of joy, as if the ability didn't exist.

As he grew older, Jia Xu analyzed and understood that his mental talent was not about predicting the future but rather piecing together future events based on information he consciously or subconsciously gathered. This talent allowed him to envision future scenarios with remarkable accuracy. The more information he had, the more precise his predictions became. Thus, Jia Xu was confident that as long as he was careful and activated his talent daily, no one could defeat him on the battlefield.

Chapter 179: The Fall of Pingyu City

After Zhang Xun's army dispersed, Zhao Yun, who had been hiding in the rear camp, finally seized the opportunity. He cautiously advanced with his troops before launching a fierce attack. Simultaneously, Sun Guan also opened the city gates and charged out, while Zhang Fei, after circling around, led his thousand cavalrymen into the fray.

Caught off guard and besieged on three sides, Zhang Xun's forces were quickly routed. Only a few thousand managed to escape towards the east, the path left by the three attacking armies. After this battle, Zhang Xun's forces were so depleted that they could no longer even mount effective harassment operations.

"Why not pursue them further?" Zhao Yun asked, puzzled, as he reined in his horse after seeing Jia Xu signal to halt the chase.

"There is no need," Jia Xu replied calmly. "We must leave Yuan Shu intact to keep Liu Biao and Cao Cao in check. After this battle, the balance of power among these three factions will ensure that they continue to fight each other for some time."

Meanwhile, on Chen Zichuan's side, the tunnels had already been dug. Due to the large number of grave robbers enlisted, they had managed to dig five tunnels, each just large enough for three people to crawl through, with the smallest tunnel requiring a person to hunch over as they moved.

"Manze, it's up to you now. Make sure everyone has a hearty meal tonight. Tonight, we take Pingyu and cut off Yuan Shu's escape route!" Chen Xi solemnly distributed the tasks.

"I will not fail you, military advisor," Yu Jin said, clasping his hands in a salute.

"Zijian, prepare the cavalry. As soon as the gates are opened, charge in and wreak havoc. Whether it's setting fires or looting, as long as we can defeat the enemy, all means are permissible. Tonight, only the victors will write the history," Chen Xi turned to Hua Xiong, giving him final instructions. He was not about to let any softheartedness jeopardize the success of the night raid, knowing full well that Qiao Rui's thirty thousand troops were no joke.

"Understood!" Hua Xiong stood up and saluted.

"Mengchang, Wenhong, you two each lead five hundred cavalymen. As soon as the gates are breached, head straight for Pingyu's treasury and granary. Don't let Qiao Rui burn them down. You two figure out who will guard which location, and you don't need me to tell you the routes, right?" Chen Xi said with a smile. After all, they had been spying on the city from the hilltop for quite some time, and it would be strange if they didn't know where the treasury and granary were by now.

"Understood!" Wu Dun and Xu Ding stood up, clasped their hands, and bowed.

"Good, I'll be here waiting for you to capture Pingyu, the capital of Runan!" Chen Xi raised his cup, toasting the others, before downing it in one gulp.

That night, Yu Jin led five hundred soldiers, divided into five groups, into the tunnels. Chen Xi sighed inwardly; this would be the last time they could use tunnels like this. Defending against them was far too easy once their existence was known.

[I wonder how Liu Ye and Jia Xu are doing. Given their capabilities, capturing the seats of Chen and Pei counties shouldn't be a problem.] Chen Xi thought as he gazed up at the stars.

[It's chaos in the world. Plans can never keep up with changes. We need to speed up the Qingzhou campaign. This battle was a stroke of luck, but with these resources, we might be able to reclaim Qingzhou by this time next year. It seems we can push things forward a bit. Once we fully control a fertile region, we'll finally have the foundation to vie for the world.] Chen Xi assessed the situation in Qingzhou, letting out a long sigh of relief as he finished.

Chen Xi quickly calculated the overall situation in the land, comparing the strengths of the various factions. Finally, he felt completely at ease. As long as nothing unexpected happened next year, he would no longer need to tread the lonely path of kingship and conquest. He had spent two years reaching this point, where he could finally say that he had barely achieved his initial goal!

After crawling out of the well, Yu Jin carefully surveyed the surroundings. As expected, this area was deserted; after all, the possibility of being hit by a random stone from the trebuchet was high. Anyone who didn't want to die had temporarily moved to stay with friends or relatives elsewhere in the city.

"General, our men are ready," a squad leader whispered as he approached Yu Jin.

"Good, let's move out," Yu Jin whispered back.

Quickly, five hundred men split into groups of one hundred, while the rest remained hidden among the deserted houses. These were all Yu Jin's personal guards, known for their discipline and exceptional training.

Yu Jin led a hundred men toward the city gates, moving with a boldness that bordered on arrogance, knowing they were disguised in Yuan Shu's armor. As expected, the gate commander mistook Yu Jin for a shift leader coming to relieve the watch.

"I didn't expect you to arrive so early today!" The gate commander didn't suspect a thing.

"Changing the guard!" Yu Jin ordered, speaking in a slightly awkward Runan accent.

"That accent..." The gate commander frowned, about to ask where Yu Jin was from, but before he could, Yu Jin's personal guards, who had been positioned in a crescent shape, ready to block the gate, suddenly drew their blades and rushed at their pre-selected targets.

In mere seconds, the sound of blades slicing through flesh filled the air, and several screams echoed in the gateway, alerting the guards in the gate tower. But it was already too late. Yu Jin and his men swiftly hacked through the gate's locking mechanisms and pushed open the gates of Pingyu.

"Hahaha, kill them all!" Hua Xiong laughed heartily, spurring his horse and charging in first. As soon as he entered the city, he threw a torch into one of the houses and shouted, "Capture Yuan Yao alive!" before charging deeper into the city.

"What's going on? Why is there chaos in the city?" Qiao Rui, who was drinking and enjoying himself, glared angrily at the messenger who had come to report.

"General, it's bad! The Taishan army has already entered the city! General Xun is leading troops to stop them, but with the confusion of the night and the unknown strength of the enemy, we can't mount a proper defense!" The messenger quickly relayed everything he knew.

Before the messenger finished speaking, Qiao Rui heard the distant cry, "Capture Yuan Yao alive!" which instantly sobered him up. In this city, anyone could die, but Yuan Yao couldn't. Yuan Yao was Yuan Shu's

only son, and Qiao Rui knew that if Pingyu fell, he might be demoted, but if anything happened to Yuan Yao, he would definitely lose his life!

"Quickly, notify Xun Zheng to gather troops to protect the lord's family! If the situation becomes untenable, evacuate the lord's family immediately! I'll go hold off the enemy!" Qiao Rui declared heroically before grabbing his sword and rushing out.

"You lot, set fires everywhere and create chaos! The rest, follow me!" Hua Xiong shouted, cutting down anyone who blocked his path. He then ordered some men to start fires, leaving the task of breaking up the enemy's forming ranks to himself.

Upon receiving Qiao Rui's orders, Xun Zheng, though surprised by Qiao Rui's loyalty, knew that there was no time to waste. He understood the Taishan army's strength all too well from previous encounters. In the current disarray, engaging the Taishan army head-on was a death sentence. So, he planned to evacuate the Yuan family as quickly as possible. If they lost Yuan Shu's family, no amount of heads would be enough to atone for it!

Chapter 180: Watching the Tigers Fight

Qiao Rui indeed moved to intercept the invading Taishan Army, but contrary to Xun Zheng's expectations, the first thing Qiao Rui did after leaving was to order his men to pour tung oil on Pingyu's main north-south street. Since it was clear the city couldn't be held, Qiao Rui wasn't planning to fight to the death, but he still needed to slow the enemy's advance.

"Hua Xiong! Come and face your death!" Qiao Rui, alone with three to five of his personal guards, stood at the intersection in the city center, shouting at the distant sound of galloping horses. He had sent his other men to guard the supply depot, but he held no illusions about being able to hold it. His real intention was to have them burn everything if they couldn't hold out—only destruction would suffice!

Hearing Qiao Rui's shout as he raced toward the city center, Hua Xiong was momentarily taken aback. He had never expected the usually cowardly Qiao Rui to choose a one-on-one duel under these circumstances.

"You all go elsewhere," Hua Xiong turned and instructed those behind him. "Let me give him a warrior's death!"

Hua Xiong, with his peculiar sense of honor, couldn't bear to see a fellow warrior, even an enemy, be desecrated. So, he decided to personally kill Qiao Rui.

With a nudge to his horse's flanks, Hua Xiong charged full speed toward Qiao Rui.

"Watch closely! As soon as you see him approach, don't hesitate—throw the tung oil jars and the torches! I've soaked half the street in tung oil! I refuse to believe I can't kill Hua Xiong!" Qiao Rui instructed his men.

Hua Xiong's speed was fast, and he quickly spotted Qiao Rui standing beneath a torch. Although a sudden sense of unease flickered through his mind, he remained fearless.

At that moment, a jar was hurled toward Hua Xiong. He instinctively slashed it apart with his blade, but as the sticky substance splattered onto him, he realized too late what it was. He immediately unleashed his inner energy in full force.

"Throw the torches!" Qiao Rui shouted.

As soon as the words left his mouth, five torches hit the ground. In the next instant, the tung oil, mixed with some unknown substance, erupted into flames, setting a good portion of the street ablaze. Hua Xiong, who had been splashed with a jar of the mixture, nearly caught fire himself.

"You seek death!" Hua Xiong roared, furiously shaking off the enhanced tung oil from his body, but his clothes had already begun to catch fire.

"Take this!" Hua Xiong unleashed a powerful strike in Qiao Rui's direction, despite the flames. Then, he dismounted and stomped hard on the ground, propelling himself a dozen meters into the air. Seeing Qiao Rui, now in a panicked state below, Hua Xiong's anger flared even higher—Qiao Rui's actions had severely tarnished his warrior's spirit.

With his entire body engulfed in flames, Hua Xiong unleashed his inner energy to shield himself from the fire's searing heat.

"Qiao Rui, meet your end!" Hua Xiong shouted as he leaped high into the air, ignoring the burning clothes on his body. Gathering all his strength, he brought his sword down upon the terrified Qiao Rui.

"Boom!" Hua Xiong's strike, fueled by his fury, sent a massive blade of energy, at least a hundred meters long, crashing down on Qiao Rui, killing him instantly and delivering a significant blow to Yuan Shu's army's morale.

After cutting down Qiao Rui with a single stroke, Hua Xiong landed back in the fiery street. His warhorse had fled the scene as soon as he dismounted. Stripping off his burning armor, Hua Xiong, now shirtless and clad only in his pants, grabbed his sword and charged out of the flames. This relatively small stretch of fire was no match for a warrior of Hua Xiong's caliber. To burn such a general alive, you'd need to turn the entire city into an inferno.

Glaring at Qiao Rui's corpse, which had been cleaved from shoulder to abdomen, Hua Xiong spat disdainfully. He despised cowards who resorted to such tactics.

Still bare-chested and wielding his sword, Hua Xiong, covered in soot and scorch marks, turned toward Yuan's residence. Upon entering, he found the place deserted. After returning to Qiao Rui's body, Hua Xiong's expression softened slightly.

"General, should we take the enemy general's head?" one of his guards asked.

"Forget it. Though he was a bit unscrupulous, he was also loyal. Sew his body back together and give him a proper burial," Hua Xiong ordered, waving his hand. He had a habit of judging others by his own standards.

The sounds of battle gradually died down, and soon, the entire city fell silent, except for the places still burning.

By the time Chen Xi entered the city, the sky was filled with raindrops, quickly quenching the flames that had engulfed the city under the summer's sudden downpour.

Within three days, reports from the eastern, central, and western fronts had landed on the desks of Liu Bei, Cao Cao, and Yuan Shu, the three major players in this conflict. As for Liu Biao, he wished to know but had no means to get the information.

Liu Bei was overjoyed, relieved of all worries. Cao Cao, however, sighed with a complex expression as he glanced at Chen Qun, who had recently defected to his side. Yuan Shu, upon reading the reports, furiously flipped his desk!

"Retreat the troops!" Yuan Shu roared in anger.

"My lord, please calm down," Yang Hong, Yuan Shu's chief strategist, stepped forward to placate him. "Although our soldiers are weary from the constant attacks, the Jiangling defenders are in worse shape. If we don't defeat Liu Biao now, we'll lose all the territory we've gained, and even our homeland will be at risk!" The situation had reached a point where they had no choice but to continue the fight.

Yuan Shu's expression wavered. He wasn't a fool. With Yang Hong's reminder, he immediately realized that the situation had reached a critical juncture—retreat was no longer an option.

"Attack! Take Jiangling! I want Liu Biao's head within ten days!" Yuan Shu screamed, driven to madness. He had no way out. Cao Mengde had locked down Yingchuan, Chen Zichuan had sealed off Runan, and Guan Yun Chang had secured Chen. His entire army was trapped in Jingzhou. If they retreated now, their morale would plummet, and Liu Biao's forces might sweep through Jingbei as easily as Yuan Shu had done to Liu Biao before! As for Jingnan, once Jingbei fell, it would submit to the victor in no time.

Yuan Shu gave no further orders about Yuzhou, only issuing the command to take Jiangling within ten days, even if it meant throwing everything they had at it!

Chen Xi and Liu Ye both had some capacity for continued operations, but like Cao Cao, who had also halted his advance, they knew pushing further would bring diminishing returns.

As attractive as Nanyang was, Liu Bei couldn't even fully annex Yuzhou, let alone this distant territory. In fact, most strategists believed that even the nominal control over Lu County was a burden best left to Cao Cao or Yuan Shu—let them fight over it. Liu Bei's forces had already reaped enormous rewards. If Liu Biao couldn't hold Jiangling even after this, Chen Xi had nothing more to say. He'd simply return to Qingzhou to focus on development, letting Cao Mengde and Yuan Shu tear each other apart!

After all, the troops hardened by the Yuzhou campaign, and the fertile land they had seized, would give the now well-supplied Cao Mengde the strength to resist Yuan Shu for at least a year. As for Qingzhou and Taishan, fortunately, they didn't border Yuzhou, so any future conflict would involve Cao Mengde first.

Even if Yuan Shu somehow managed to pull a miracle and defeat Cao Cao, by then more than a year would have passed. At that time, Liu Bei, having solidified his hold on Qingzhou, wouldn't hesitate to use Xuzhou and Lu as battlegrounds. Even if the land was devastated, he wouldn't care. Moreover, by that point, no matter how lucky Yuan Shu might be, even with a powerful mentor by his side, he'd be crushed all the same!