

Mythical 18

Chapter 18: Li Ru's Intentions

...

Strangely enough, despite Guan Yu having dispelled Hua Xiong's internal energy and not assigning anyone to guard him, Hua Xiong remained in the rear camp without attempting to escape. Chen Xi figured it was probably because Hua Xiong couldn't swallow his pride.

"Zi Jian, just surrender," Guan Yu and Zhang Fei began persuading Hua Xiong again after they had eaten and drunk their fill together. Previously, after being knocked down by Guan Yu, Hua Xiong had relied on his extraordinary physical strength to recover.

"Yun Chang, Yi De, I understand everything you're saying, but Lord Dong has shown me kindness. As long as he hasn't abandoned me or fallen, I won't surrender to anyone else," Hua Xiong shook his head with some melancholy. "Just as I said before, if Lord Dong is defeated and I become a masterless man, I will surrender to Lord Xuande. But such a thing is unlikely to happen."

"Not necessarily!" Chen Xi said as he lifted the tent flap, seeing the three burly men sitting on the ground, holding large pieces of meat and chatting while they ate and drank.

"Greetings, Mr. Chen," Hua Xiong cupped his hands.

"Why not make a bet? I know you have great confidence in Dong Zhuo. If Dong Zhuo is defeated at Hulao Pass, retreats with the population of Luoyang to Chang'an, and then burns Luoyang to delay the coalition, you should surrender. Because what he will do next will utterly disappoint you. He is no longer Dong Zhongying of Xiliang. His eyes have been dazzled by the prosperity of the Central Plains. He is no longer the righteous, generous warrior of Xiliang," Chen Xi said calmly.

Hua Xiong remained silent, merely looking at Chen Xi. After a long while, he finally said, "You don't understand how strong Lord Dong really is."

"So, you're agreeing?" Chen Xi smiled. "I understand better than you do. The world's strongest general, the world's finest soldiers, the best strategists, yet their leader is not the world's best ruler. In fact, Dong Zhuo is at best a third-rate ruler now."

"The world's strongest general!" Zhang Fei's eyes widened, and Guan Yu slightly opened his eyes, focusing on Chen Xi. They only paid attention to that statement, ignoring the rest.

"Yes, the world's strongest general," Hua Xiong said dejectedly. "Yun Chang and Yi De, you may be stronger than me, but compared to Lu Bu, I think even if you two joined forces, you might still lose."

"Really..." Guan Yu asked solemnly.

"Your third strike made me feel like I was facing him. What do you think?" Hua Xiong said with a bitter smile.

A flash of battle spirit crossed the faces of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. Their eyes burned with determination. They were eager to face such a powerful opponent. The path ahead might become clear through him.

"So, General Hua, it's settled. If those things happen, remember my words," Chen Xi said, ignoring the battle spirit in Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. They could handle themselves. With their skills, even if they couldn't defeat Lu Bu, they could still escape.

"The world's strongest general, huh?" said the du bo training the cavalry outside the tent, having overheard the conversation. Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and the others had not lowered their voices, and the du bo, with his sharp hearing, had clearly heard everything. He touched the sword at his waist, tightened his grip on his silver spear, and silently looked towards Hulao Pass with his bow and arrow in hand.

"I request permission to reinforce Hulao Pass!" Lu Bu once again asked for permission to fight. He had already heard that Hua Xiong had broken through during the battle but had still been defeated in three strikes. This was the kind of opponent he had been waiting for.

Dong Zhuo waved his hand, signaling Li Ru.

"Hulao Pass is secure with General Xu defending it. However, there has been a rebellion in the rear. Han Sui has incited the Qiang people again. Although Generals Li Jue and Guo Si can suppress it, we should still have Xu Rong take command in the rear. The Prime Minister should personally lead the army to meet the coalition at Hulao Pass," Li Ru said calmly. Without naming him, no one would have guessed that this frail-looking strategist was Dong Zhuo's foremost advisor.

Currently, Li Ru was somewhat disillusioned with Dong Zhuo. The once methodical Dong Zhuo seemed unable to adhere to Li Ru's initial plans, having become comfortable with the pleasures of Luoyang.

Born to a humble family in the western regions, Li Ru despised the intellectual monopoly of the aristocratic families. He had aspired to reshape the world, pushing Dong Zhuo to the top. Unfortunately, the splendor of the Central Plains had confused Dong Zhuo. The current Dong Zhuo was merely tyrannical, often forgetting the original goals that had driven him to his position.

This was why Li Ru planned to transfer Xu Rong to the rear. Not that he underestimated the coalition forces, but those guys couldn't possibly defeat Xu Rong and take Hulao Pass. As long as Xu Rong held Hulao Pass, the coalition would get nowhere. This unremarkable general had risen step by step from a border soldier to a colonel, his experience unmatched by the Central Plains nobles who had seen little real combat. His loyalty was also unwavering.

Dong Zhuo's strength was something Li Ru had only recently realized. While other warlords were still figuring out how to secure territory and manpower, they already had the momentum to swallow the world. Unwittingly, Li Ru had built such a solid foundation that even facing the entire world, they wouldn't be easily defeated.

But this solid foundation also led to the generals who followed Dong Zhuo to Luoyang indulging in pleasure, losing the fierce spirit of Xiliang warriors. Li Ru needed a ruler who could reshape the world, breaking old rules and establishing new ones with his guidance, not a fat man blinded by the Central Plains' prosperity.

Despite years of guidance and initial efforts, Li Ru believed that Dong Zhuo was merely blinded. Given a harsh enough wake-up call, Dong Zhuo could be redirected to his original path. As long as his own dreams were realized, Li Ru would accept any fate, even death by dismemberment like Shang Yang.

"Very well, let's deploy our forces and defeat the coalition at Hulao Pass!" Dong Zhuo agreed to Li Ru's proposal almost immediately, without much thought.

Despite his flaws, Dong Zhuo had developed a habit over the years of trusting Li Ru, his most capable advisor. If Li Ru said so, it must be right. No worries, he had the strongest general, the most elite soldiers, and the formidable Hulao Pass. The coalition would be crushed by Dong Zhuo himself!

However, Dong Zhuo didn't notice the slight shake of the head from the strategist sitting next to Li Ru. Jia Xu already understood Li Ru's intentions.

"Understood!" the generals responded loudly.

"I'll take the first battle!" Lu Bu said after scanning the room. "Though Hua Xiong's defeat angers me, I will avenge him!"