

Mythical 221

Chapter 221: A Matter of Timing and Fate!

By the time Tai Shi Ci fought his way through the rear camp, the entire encampment was nearly consumed by a blood-red aura, with only a faint sliver of resistance remaining. If it weren't for that last bit of cloud-like energy desperately holding on, Tai Shi Ci might have been overwhelmed and killed in the fray.

With a single strike, he cut down a death soldier, then turned and swung his spear again, knocking aside another who had been preparing to ambush him. Even under Tai Shi Ci's command, his soldiers had suffered significant losses at the hands of the death soldiers before they could reach Gongsun Zan.

"Die!" Tai Shi Ci roared in fury, swinging his twin spears in a frenzy. He slaughtered more than a dozen enemies around him, fully aware that he had to push forward at any cost. If the death soldiers were allowed to fully unleash their power, even Tai Shi Ci, with strength comparable to Lu Bu, would fall here today. With this realization, Tai Shi Ci went all out, wielding every weapon he could seize—swords, spears, halberds—creating a whirlwind of destruction as he tore through the enemy ranks, reigniting a spark of morale among Gongsun Zan's remaining forces.

"General Gongsun, retreat!" Tai Shi Ci shouted as he flung aside the weapons he had picked up and charged forward, reaching Gongsun Zan's side.

By then, Gongsun Zan had regained his senses, fully aware of the grave mistakes he had made. However, he showed no sign of remorse. Seeing Tai Shi Ci coming to his aid, he clasped his hands in thanks and immediately began to withdraw northward.

"These death soldiers are fiercer than the troops selected by Yu Jin in Qingzhou. They are more disciplined, and most importantly, they are utterly fearless!" Tai Shi Ci led Gongsun Zan's remaining troops out through the path he had fought his way in, all the while observing and analyzing the death soldiers.

The more Tai Shi Ci thought about it, the more uneasy he felt. Whether he liked it or not, he had to admit that the soldiers Yu Jin had trained since before Fenggao was built had become formidable after more than a year of honing. While Tai Shi Ci was confident that he could defeat Yu Jin if they each commanded a thousand men, he also knew that if they engaged in a full-scale battle, Yu Jin would likely overwhelm him.

But the death soldiers Tai Shi Ci encountered at Jieqiao today shattered his previous perceptions. Even if Qu Yi was not as strong as him, if they each commanded a thousand men, Qu Yi could likely fight him to the death! And there were at least three to five thousand of these death soldiers. They had pushed through the White Horse Cavalry in the morning and launched a night raid on Gongsun Zan's camp by evening. This seemed like far too many of them.

As these thoughts crossed his mind, Tai Shi Ci's expression darkened. The death soldiers' overwhelming offensive power and their savage killing intent left him with an unsettling feeling. These elite troops could cause unimaginable destruction on the battlefield. If they could assault a camp with such ease, what was stopping them from launching an assault on a fortified city?

Though Tai Shi Ci's imagination ran wild, his thoughts weren't entirely off base. Historically, Qu Yi's death soldiers specialized in storming fortified positions.

After Qu Yi's death, the death soldiers were handed over to Chunyu Qiong, who, despite inheriting the troops, lacked the courage to lead them in such daring assaults. Instead, he confined their use to bullying infantry in open-field battles, but nothing more.

In fact, the death soldiers were indeed professional-grade assault troops. If their hidden attributes included something like a 25% increase in combat power during assault operations, it wouldn't be surprising—though this was, of course, just a jest.

In history, Qu Yi had stormed nearly every city in Youzhou, except for Yijing, which was impregnable. The name "death soldiers" wasn't earned through boasting; it was forged in blood. Unfortunately, after Qu Yi's death, his death soldiers and the heavily armored spearmen under his command were gradually squandered under the leadership of Chunyu Qiong and Zhang He.

Qu Yi's initial victories were nothing short of legendary, far surpassing the combined achievements of the four great pillars of Hebei. While Gongsun Zan's downfall at Jieqiao was partially due to his own misguided shift toward self-preservation, it was Qu Yi who relentlessly crushed Gongsun Zan, forcing him to the ground and keeping him there. Most notably, from the beginning of his campaign until the end, Qu Yi suffered only one defeat.

Moreover, the death soldiers had an undefeated record against cavalry. Whether it was Gongsun Zan's White Horse Cavalry or the elite forces of the Xiongnu chieftain Yufuluo, Qu Yi's troops crushed them all.

The entire northern conquest seemed to be Qu Yi's stage, and it was Qu Yi who ultimately trapped Gongsun Zan in Yijing.

Such an unparalleled string of victories led to Qu Yi's downfall. His pride grew so great that he even stole from Yuan Shao's own household, believing the rewards he received were insufficient.

Remarkably, Yuan Shao didn't become furious and demand Qu Yi's execution after his household was looted. At that time, Yuan Shao was still in his prime, showing wisdom and restraint. Instead, he sought to placate Qu Yi by examining his own actions. But Qu Yi's arrogance only grew, and eventually, Yuan Shao could no longer tolerate it and found an opportunity to eliminate him.

That was how Qu Yi met his end in history, but this time, things were different. Qu Yi, who was once proud and arrogant, had experienced a significant setback when his death soldiers were still untrained. Despite Yuan Shao's urgent orders, Qu Yi's own hubris led him to believe that his half-trained soldiers could still crush the White Horse Cavalry. But in his first battle, he failed, and by his own military law, he should have been executed.

It was Yuan Shao who shielded him from this fate. When everyone else looked down on Qu Yi, Yuan Shao alone handed him his sword and allowed him to continue training his soldiers until they were battle-ready.

Because of this, Qu Yi, in this life, would rather endure humiliation than allow anyone to tarnish Yuan Shao's honor. He could be arrogant with anyone, but before Yuan Shao, he would humbly bow his head. Yuan Shao was the only lord he acknowledged, and if Yuan Shao were to fall in battle one day, Qu Yi would be the first to enter the underworld to pave the way for him!

Sometimes, winning the loyalty of a proud man is simple, but often both sides misinterpret what's needed. In his previous life, Yuan Shao tried to win Qu Yi's loyalty with wealth, women, and luxury, but this only made Qu Yi more arrogant and reckless, leading to his eventual demise.

In this life, Yuan Shao didn't make any overtures to recruit Qu Yi. Instead, when he had no other choice, he opened his heart and trusted Qu Yi, despite his earlier failure. This time, their hearts aligned. Qu Yi no longer harbored any pride before Yuan Shao, and Yuan Shao accepted Qu Yi as one of his closest confidants, creating harmony between lord and vassal.

Chapter 222: Behold the Miracle Medicine Developed by Our Great Strategist!

Tai Shi Ci fiercely carved a path through the enemy, leading Gongsun Zan out of the encirclement. As for Gongsun Zan's infantry, he could no longer concern himself with them. The entire camp had been almost entirely consumed by the blood-red aura, and those who remained trapped inside had no chance of escape.

"Yan Liang, where is that Gongsun Zan?" Qu Yi roared, his fury still burning after the relentless slaughter. He realized that Gongsun Zan had vanished amid the chaos.

"Wen Chou, did you manage to kill Gongsun Zan?" Yan Liang shouted towards another direction.

"Where is Gongsun Zan?" Wen Chou turned to ask Qu Yi, and suddenly all three of them were left bewildered.

"Everyone, stop! Surrender and you won't be killed!" Qu Yi quickly regained his composure and gave the order to halt the attack.

The sound of weapons being thrown down reverberated through the camp. The already demoralized soldiers of Gongsun Zan's army immediately surrendered, relieved to hear what seemed like a divine decree.

"Whoever knows where Gongsun Zan fled to, step forward! You'll be rewarded with ten thousand coins!" Qu Yi shouted, determined to eliminate Gongsun Zan and leave no loose ends.

"He went north!" "He ran north!" "He fled north!" A chorus of chaotic voices echoed the same direction: Gongsun Zan had fled north.

"Yan Liang, you gather the surrendered troops. I'll chase down Gongsun Zan! Death soldiers, follow me!" Qu Yi commanded Yan Liang, without any hint of hesitation. Yan Liang showed no discontent, knowing full well that Qu Yi's strength and leadership were undeniable.

With that, Qu Yi led the remaining hundreds of death soldiers northward, determined to end Gongsun Zan's life.

“Wen Chou, go report to our lord that we’ve completely crushed Gongsun Zan’s army. Brother Qu is now leading his troops to pursue Gongsun Zan.” Yan Liang ordered, his tone casual, as if confident that Gongsun Zan stood no chance against Qu Yi.

“Got it. Big brother, quickly gather the surrendered troops. Once we’re done, we’ll lead the cavalry to chase down Gongsun Zan. We may not care much about the merits, but Gongsun Zan’s head will make our lord very happy!” Wen Chou laughed heartily, turning his horse back toward Yuan Shao’s camp—a great victory indeed!

Yuan Shao paced anxiously inside his tent. Although he believed in Qu Yi’s abilities, Gongsun Zan was no easy opponent. The sounds of battle from Gongsun’s camp reached his ears, and while Yuan Shao wasn’t afraid of casualties, he dreaded losing a key general. Now, he regretted letting Qu Yi go into battle while still wounded.

“Report!” Wen Chou rode into the camp, heading straight for the main tent, nearly shot down by the guards under Zhou Ang’s orders. However, being familiar with him, Zhou Ang refrained from hindering Wen Chou, although he planned to reprimand him later for breaking military protocol.

“Speak!” Yuan Shao rushed out of his tent as soon as he heard Wen Chou’s voice. Seeing Wen Chou riding in, Yuan Shao’s face lit up with joy. Wen Chou’s urgency was a sign of victory.

Leaping off his horse, Wen Chou saluted Yuan Shao, “A great victory! General Qu has successfully launched a frontal assault on Gongsun Zan’s camp, completely routing his forces. Our army now occupies Gongsun Zan’s camp, and Gongsun himself has fled. General Qu has taken several hundred soldiers to pursue the fleeing Gongsun Zan!”

“Hahaha!” Yuan Shao laughed heartily, “He did not disappoint me! He did not disappoint me! How could I let Qu Yi fight alone with his wounds? Pass my orders—pursue them with all our forces!”

Hearing this news, Shen Pei, Feng Ji, and the other advisors were overjoyed. Whether or not Gongsun Zan managed to escape, he was undoubtedly defeated. With his camp seized, the situation was irreparable. Qu Yi’s commanding ability had shocked everyone—no wonder he had been so arrogant before. He had the strength to back it up!

“Master, quickly send word to our forces defending Ji Province to launch a full-scale attack on Youzhou. Whether or not we capture Gongsun Zan, we must create the appearance of a decisive victory! We must drive Gongsun Zan to join forces with Liu Yu, causing chaos in Youzhou!” Feng Ji suggested, his eyes gleaming with calculation. Qu Yi’s overwhelming power might even push their forces deep into Gongsun Zan’s territory. Why not capitalize on the momentum to force internal strife in Youzhou and end the conflict in one decisive blow?

“Excellent!” Yuan Shao exclaimed, “Wenyuan, draft the orders quickly! This time, I’ll make Gongsun Zan understand my true power!”

Turning to Shen Pei, Yuan Shao said, “Prepare the rewards, draft the documents, and request a noble title for Qu Yi!”

“Yes, my lord!” Shen Pei responded, though a flash of envy flickered in his eyes. Yet, there was no room for complaint. Qu Yi’s achievements were too extraordinary. In truth, most of those present had merely reaped the benefits of Qu Yi’s efforts—he alone had dismantled Gongsun Zan’s power.

That night, Tai Shi Ci escorted Gongsun Zan northward, swiftly following the water route along the Zhang River. The autumn chill hardly affected a warrior like Tai Shi Ci, but the once-strong Gongsun Zan fell victim to the cold wind, quickly contracting an illness. Within a single night, he was bedridden, shivering with alternating chills and fever.

Tai Shi Ci washed his face in the icy river water, his expression puzzled. He still couldn’t understand how Gongsun Zan had suddenly fallen ill. Just a while ago, they were drinking and chatting together in high spirits.

Now, Tai Shi Ci was grateful for the habits instilled by Chen Xi: every soldier must always carry three days’ worth of dry rations, regardless of personal preference. Of course, the “three days” was an exaggeration—five steamed buns weren’t enough for that long. But in a pinch, it would suffice for short-term sustenance.

Thanks to these five buns, Tai Shi Ci’s men, though weary, regained some strength after eating and drinking water.

When Gongsun Zan fell ill, Guan Jing panicked. But Tai Shi Ci reassured him that there was no need to worry—he had soldiers trained as medics. In truth, they were battlefield medics. As long as they retrieved the wounded, these medics would disinfect the wounds with strong liquor, bandage them with cloth soaked in the same, and finally administer a bowl of “miracle medicine” to cure all ailments. That would usually do the trick!

He recalled instances where soldiers had been gravely wounded—intestines spilling out—and yet these medics would stitch them up with sewing needles, bandage the wounds, and feed them the medicine. Many were saved that way. A simple cold? That was child’s play!

Tai Shi Ci was visibly displeased by Guan Jing’s doubt. If you don’t believe in the miracle cure developed by our strategist, let the results speak for themselves!

Guan Jing had no better options. With Gongsun Zan’s condition worsening, he had no choice but to trust them out of desperation.

“General, I’ve given the medicine to Gongsun Zan. Based on past experience, he should recover soon,” the lead medic reported confidently.

If Chen Xi knew how recklessly his medics were administering treatments, he’d likely slap them senseless. Gongsun Zan had a cold, not blood loss! Those miracle powders were for replenishing blood and energy. You might end up curing him to death with that!

Chen Xi’s concoctions were specifically designed for battlefield injuries—wounds from swords and spears, essentially anything involving blood loss. The powders were meant to replenish blood and energy, ground into a fine powder for easy consumption. Now they were being used to treat Gongsun Zan’s cold—were they trying to kill him?

“Oh, that’s good. Don’t hold back, give him more,” Tai Shi Ci said, fully trusting the medicine. This cure-all had saved tens of thousands of lives. He even took it himself to stay awake through sleepless nights. Gongsun Zan’s minor ailment was no match for it.

As expected, after taking a dose of the medicine, Gongsun Zan’s pale complexion quickly turned rosy.

Tai Shi Ci proudly glanced at Guan Jing, confident in the power of his miracle medicine. It could cure all ailments—he'd even felt stronger after taking a dose before battle. Truly miraculous!

Chapter 223: My Miracle Medicine Isn't Just a Boast!

Seeing Gongsun Zan awaken, Guan Jing was overjoyed, feeling that Tai Shi Ci had proven reliable. "Master, you're finally awake."

"What happened to me?" Gongsun Zan asked, still feeling dazed.

Guan Jing recounted the events that had transpired. Gongsun Zan struggled to sit up and respectfully bowed to Tai Shi Ci. "Thank you, Ziyi, for your assistance. If not for you, I might have been trapped and lost."

"Gongsun General, there's no need to be so formal. I came here precisely to protect you. Since you've recovered, please mount your horse and continue along the Zhang River. Xingba's fleet should be on its way to escort us back to Youzhou," Tai Shi Ci said, waving off the gratitude, feeling undeserving of such praise.

"If that's the case, it seems Xuande had prepared for this in advance," Gongsun Zan muttered, a trace of suspicion flickering in his eyes. However, Tai Shi Ci didn't notice.

"Of course—" Tai Shi Ci was just about to boast about how brilliant his strategist was when a scout came riding in swiftly. "General, we must move quickly! Yan Liang of Hebei is only a few miles behind us with his troops!"

"Gongsun General, mount your horse and follow the river. I will go intercept the enemy," Tai Shi Ci said with a confident smile, leaping onto his horse and charging in the direction the scout had indicated. He had long wanted to test his skills against the famous generals of Hebei, Yan Liang, and Wen Chou.

After Tai Shi Ci left, a crazed look flashed in Gongsun Zan's eyes. "Shi, let's go!" he commanded, pointing in the opposite direction.

Guan Jing was startled. "Master, why not follow the river? Gan Xingba's reinforcements must be on their way. Why invite trouble?"

“Reinforcements?” Gongsun Zan sneered at Guan Jing. “Reinforcements or enemies—it’s still uncertain. Didn’t you hear what Tai Shi Ci said earlier?”

Guan Jing froze, staring blankly at Gongsun Zan. In a daze, he watched as Gongsun Zan rode away. When had the once honorable and righteous Gongsun Zan, who had roamed the land fearlessly, fallen to such a state?

Feeling lost, Guan Jing spurred his horse to chase after the now distant Gongsun Zan. In that moment, their paths truly diverged.

Meanwhile, Tai Shi Ci led his men, eager to engage Yan Liang in battle. After all, with Yan Liang’s force numbering less than a thousand, the encounter would most likely end in a one-on-one duel. And in a duel, why should he fear?

Shouting war cries, Tai Shi Ci rushed in the direction of Yan Liang, attempting to divert his pursuit and also looking for a secluded spot to eliminate him. At least, that was Tai Shi Ci’s plan.

“Whoa!” Yan Liang reined in his horse. His keen hearing had picked up on Tai Shi Ci’s war cries, and he laughed heartily. “Let’s go! Chase in that direction!”

Elsewhere, Qu Yi, who had gone ahead in pursuit, had somehow ended up north of the Zhang River and was now puzzled as to why he couldn’t find Gongsun Zan.

“Whoa!” Tai Shi Ci pulled his horse to a stop and turned to face Yan Liang. “You must be Yan Liang of Hebei.”

“I didn’t expect to run into a true expert instead of Gongsun Zan!” Yan Liang’s eyes gleamed with excitement. Since returning to Hebei, he hadn’t encountered a real challenge, especially not from someone like Gongsun Zan, who simply overwhelmed opponents with sheer force. “Will you surrender?”

“This spot, nestled by the river and surrounded by trees, seems like it has good feng shui,” Tai Shi Ci mused, ignoring Yan Liang as he pretended to be a feng shui master. He had picked up a lot of trivial

skills over time—though none of them could be considered true expertise, they were enough to impress and intimidate people who didn't know better.

"..." Yan Liang remained silent, unsure how to respond to something so far beyond his understanding.

"How about making this your burial ground?" Tai Shi Ci suddenly shifted his tone, his voice chilling as he delivered the sinister suggestion.

Though he hadn't understood the previous comment, Yan Liang definitely grasped this one. Without needing any further provocation, he charged at Tai Shi Ci. "This grave is yours!"

Tai Shi Ci smirked, gripping his Fangtian Halberd as he rushed to meet Yan Liang. In an instant, the two exchanged over a hundred blows, the force of their strikes tearing up the grass around them.

"Hahaha! It's been a long time since I've had such a satisfying fight! Come on!" Yan Liang roared, his internal energy coalescing into a blood-red aura that enveloped his spear, forming a faint, ghostly armor over his body.

Tai Shi Ci responded by unleashing a surge of internal energy, which he swiftly absorbed back into his body to form his own ethereal armor. The blade of his halberd shimmered with a sharp, menacing light.

As Tai Shi Ci clashed with Yan Liang again, his internal energy erupted in a chaotic storm, conjuring eighteen different weapons around him. These weapons lashed out at Yan Liang in a furious assault, pushing him onto the defensive.

Yan Liang, overwhelmed by the storm of attacks, struggled to keep his head above water. Frustration boiled over as his eyes turned bloodshot, and he forcefully parried Tai Shi Ci's halberd. Blood-red flames erupted around him, and he charged straight through the weapon storm!

No one knew how Yan Liang did it, but the blood-red flames that enveloped him seemed to corrode Tai Shi Ci's manifested weapons the moment they made contact.

As Tai Shi Ci watched his ethereal weapons being consumed by the flames, he felt a surge of panic as his internal energy began to drain at an alarming rate—something he had never experienced before.

Seeing the blood flames now wreathing Yan Liang's spear, Tai Shi Ci decided against prolonging the fight. He dispelled his ethereal weapons, concentrating his remaining energy into the Fangtian Halberd. A prolonged battle with Yan Liang seemed like a poor choice.

"Get out of my way!" In an instant, Tai Shi Ci seemed possessed by divine power. His Fangtian Halberd locked onto Yan Liang's spear, the blood flames failing to penetrate it. With one swift motion, he slashed the halberd toward Yan Liang's chest.

Yan Liang, caught off guard by the sheer force of Tai Shi Ci's attack, was forced to release his spear and leap backward, narrowly avoiding being cut in half. Despite his escape, a massive gash ran from his left shoulder to his right waist, so deep that parts of his internal organs were visible.

Blood continuously dripped from Tai Shi Ci's mouth, but Yan Liang was no better off. Though internal energy masters had remarkable regenerative abilities, the severity of their injuries meant recovery would take at least a month, even under the best circumstances.

"Are you still worthy of being called a warrior?" Tai Shi Ci growled, as his men helped him pull Yan Liang's spear from his chest, struggling to keep the blood from flowing freely. Yan Liang was in a similar state, barely able to hold back his injuries.

"My lord doesn't need warriors. My lord needs Gongsun Zan's head. You stand in his way, so as long as I can kill you, nothing else matters!" Yan Liang rasped, breathing heavily. "I've lost this time, but I know my brother Wen Chou will capture you. Without medical treatment, how long do you think you'll last?"

"..." Tai Shi Ci planted Yan Liang's spear into the ground, remaining silent. Meanwhile, his medics quickly brought over the miracle powder. Without hesitation, Tai Shi Ci poured an entire packet into his mouth, swallowing it down. The potent energy of the powder, fueled by his internal energy, rapidly restored some of his vitality, bringing a flush of color back to his pale face.

"..." Yan Liang stared in disbelief at the scene. The effects of the medicine were far too miraculous.

Chapter 224: A Three Hundred vs. Tens of Thousands Battle—How Thrilling!

After taking the medicine, Tai Shi Ci, wielding his Fangtian Halberd, charged towards Yan Liang. The halberd's energy wasn't particularly powerful, but with Yan Liang already seriously injured, he could hardly defend against it.

"Retreat!" Yan Liang cried out in agony, turning his horse and fleeing.

Tai Shi Ci chased after him for several hundred meters but soon realized that due to the speed of his horse and his being alone, he couldn't continue. Reluctantly, he stabbed the Fangtian Halberd into the ground.

His soldiers, inspired by Tai Shi Ci's leadership, were ready to continue the pursuit and finish off Yan Liang. But Tai Shi Ci held them back, turning his horse towards the direction where Gongsun Zan had retreated. After only a few hundred meters, he coughed up a large mouthful of blood. The slight flush that had returned to his face vanished instantly, and the wounds he had barely managed to suppress started bleeding again.

"Retreat immediately!" Tai Shi Ci ordered his soldiers. There was no way the medicine could have taken effect so quickly. Although he acknowledged that Chen Xi's medicine was indeed effective for blood loss and depleted vitality, it was impossible for it to work instantaneously. His earlier display of strength had been nothing but a bluff.

See, this is what's called battlefield intelligence. Tai Shi Ci understood that when heavily injured and alone, it was crucial to leave his enemies with the impression that he had recovered and create the illusion of an invincible miracle drug that could instantly heal him. His act had fooled Yan Liang, who genuinely believed that such a miraculous medicine existed.

"General, please dismount. We'll apply more medicine and bandages, and then you can take another dose of the powder. After that, if you eat some tiger or leopard meat to replenish your strength, you'll be fully recovered within half a month," the medical officer advised, realizing what had happened when Tai Shi Ci vomited blood. He had been skeptical of the medicine's rapid effect from the beginning—while effective, it wasn't that miraculous.

"Hurry up," Tai Shi Ci dismounted and sat on the grass, allowing the medics to quickly treat him. They applied a hemostatic herb powder to his wounds—Chen Xi only knew two types of herbs for stopping bleeding: Tienchi and Imperata Root. Since he had never seen Tienchi in person, he placed more trust in Imperata Root, which was abundant in the mountains.

After applying the external medicine, the medics bandaged Tai Shi Ci's wounds and then boiled some of the medicinal powder in water, which Tai Shi Ci quickly downed. With these treatments, both Tai Shi Ci and the medics were reassured. Even though they weren't well-versed in advanced medical techniques like changing dressings or adjusting bandage tightness, their basic methods were enough to save many lives. Despite the simplicity of these treatments, they hadn't yet managed to train many medical personnel.

Though his face was still pale, Tai Shi Ci felt much better after the treatment. With some rest and plenty of food over the next ten days, he would be well on his way to recovery. The regenerative abilities of a top-tier internal energy master were not to be underestimated.

"Put out the fire. Let's move!" After resting for a while and eating a rabbit caught by one of his soldiers, Tai Shi Ci felt a surge of strength returning to him. At least now, he could perform external energy attacks, ensuring his safety in battle.

On the other side, when Yuan Shao saw the massive wound on Yan Liang, he was scared half to death. Fortunately, Yan Liang assured him that it was a minor injury and that he would recover within a month, but Yuan Shao still summoned a doctor to treat Yan Liang and provided him with the best food and care. Then, he sent others to continue the pursuit of Gongsun Zan.

"Big Brother, how did you end up like this?" Wen Chou exclaimed upon seeing Yan Liang wrapped up like a mummy.

"Don't even ask. I always thought Gongsun Zan didn't have any real experts, but this time I met one. If I hadn't dodged quickly, I would have been cut in half. By the way, Little Brother, be careful not to trade injuries with him. We can't afford it. That guy has some kind of medicine that heals him instantly!" Yan Liang warned Wen Chou.

"Don't worry, Big Brother. You rest up—I'll go avenge you!" Wen Chou nodded, not even questioning the logic of Yan Liang's statement. If there was a medicine that could heal instantly, then they would just overwhelm the enemy with sheer numbers.

"What? White Horse Yi Cong lost?" Gan Ning grabbed a fleeing Gongsun soldier by the collar and asked, first stunned, then overjoyed. "Our strategist truly is unmatched! Boys, let's go avenge Gongsun Zan!"

After traveling a few more miles and encountering another fleeing Gongsun soldier, Gan Ning was shocked by the news. "What? The main camp was taken? Weren't they crushing Yuan Shao all this time?"

This information left Gan Ning dumbfounded. Even with his boldness, he understood the implications. It meant that Gongsun Zan was finished—the entire army had been defeated. How was he supposed to turn the tide with only three hundred men against tens of thousands? How could they rescue anyone with that kind of force disparity?

"Boss, maybe we should retreat?" one of Gan Ning's lieutenants, a former river pirate, suggested quietly.

"Call me Captain! Not Boss! I'm no pirate—I'm a naval warlord! Retreat? Hell no, we'll wait for our chance! If Gongsun Zan's lost and we didn't even show up, how am I supposed to explain that?" Gan Ning retorted, glaring at his subordinate.

"Yes, Boss!" the lieutenant snapped to attention.

"..." Gan Ning glanced at the lieutenant and ultimately gave up on further correcting him. "So, what should we do? We haven't achieved anything, and the battle's already over. We can't just let our three hundred men fight Yuan Shao's victorious army head-on!"

As he said this, Gan Ning suddenly had a thought—why not? A battle of three hundred against tens of thousands sounded thrilling! His eyes lit up as he turned to his men. If they couldn't win a direct fight, why not go for a sneak attack?

"Report, Boss! I caught a Yuan Shao supply soldier while hunting!" a small soldier rushed up excitedly.

"Good job! Let me think... what did our strategist's book say again? Oh, right—let's go burn their supplies!" Gan Ning exclaimed, growing more excited by the second.

A group of fearless, audacious water bandits, led by Gan Ning, hid in a patch of grass. When Yuan Shao's supply convoy passed by, they sprang out and quickly took down the soldiers.

"Hurry up and change into their uniforms," Gan Ning ordered, watching as his men dragged the Yuan Shao soldiers' bodies into the grass and swapped into their armor, laughing all the while.

Disguised as supply troops, Gan Ning and his men soon arrived at the granary in Handan. The officer overseeing the supplies stood at the gate and questioned Gan Ning, "Did you encounter any problems on the way?"

"Ha, just a few of Gongsun Zan's deserters," Gan Ning replied dismissively. He wasn't even pretending—his disdain for Gongsun Zan was genuine. How could someone lose such a massive advantage and still expect Gan Ning to respect them?

Chapter 225: Burning the Handan Granary

"You stay there for now. I'll have the grain tested before bringing it in," the supply officer instructed, pointing to a small camp outside the granary where Gan Ning was stationed.

"Sure, sure. And get some cooks while you're at it. My brothers and I are starving! Make sure to send over a few bowls for me too," Gan Ning replied nonchalantly as he moved the grain carts into the camp, his men cheering along.

"It'll be quick," the supply officer chuckled. Since they had won the battle at the front, everyone was in good spirits, and he didn't mind Gan Ning's casual attitude as long as military rules weren't broken.

Soon, lunch was prepared using the fresh supplies Gan Ning had brought in, with dried meat and other provisions. Gan Ning and his men each filled up several large bowls and found a spot to squat down and eat. The soldiers assigned to test the grain saw how heartily Gan Ning's group was eating and, reassured, joined in. Three hours later, after stuffing themselves, Gan Ning and his men were brought into the Handan granary.

That afternoon, Gan Ning lay in his camp, groaning in mock discomfort. The Yuan Shao army was disorganized, with soldiers coming from different regions, and no one in this grain transport unit knew each other.

"Gan Lan, did you find the tung oil I asked for?" Gan Ning groaned, still pretending to be in pain.

"Boss, I just scouted around. You wouldn't believe it! This Handan granary isn't just a storage for grain; it's a full-blown logistics hub. They've got tons of war supplies, horses, and everything!" Gan Lan's eyes sparkled, especially when he mentioned the horses.

"Why are you spouting all this nonsense?" Gan Ning slapped him on the head in annoyance. "I asked about the tung oil, not this crap."

"Got it, Boss. But what I'm saying is, we shouldn't just burn the grain. There are over a thousand horses and oxen here. We could take those too!" Gan Lan urged.

"Who said we'd only burn the grain? I'm gathering intel now. Did you find out about Gongsun Zan's situation?" Gan Ning asked pointedly.

"That was easy. I got some guys drunk earlier, and they spilled everything. Gongsun Zan fled north, and there's a fierce general who seriously injured Yan Liang near the Zhang River," Gan Lan grinned, clearly proud of his work. As one of the most capable of Gan Ning's loyal retainers, he excelled at gathering information.

"Looks like Ziyi isn't down for the count yet. Alright, since he's fine, we'll stay here and bide our time. Let's see when it's our turn to guard the camp. It wouldn't be right if we didn't get something out of this victory," Gan Ning smirked.

On the third day after arriving in the Handan camp, the supply officer assigned Gan Ning's group to night watch duty. Gan Ning pretended to argue with the officer but grudgingly went off to prepare tung oil and torches, grumbling all the while. After all, these were necessary items for night patrols.

"Hey, brother, I need a thousand ready-made torches," Gan Ning grumbled as he handed over some dried meat to the storekeeper.

"No ready-made ones here," the storekeeper replied, accepting the meat. "See those trees outside? Just chop some down, grab some oil-soaked cloth, and wrap them yourself. There's no threat of enemies right now, so just do what you need to do," he said, pointing to the woods twenty miles away from the camp.

"Brother, we're short a player for a game. You in?" Gan Lan called out from outside the storehouse.

"On my way!" The storekeeper laughed, eager to join the gambling. These past few days had been full of wins, and he wasn't about to miss out on another chance to score big against Gan Lan. "Help yourself to whatever you need, as long as it's not too much. Just watch the door for me while I go clean up at the game table!" The storekeeper hurried off, leaving the entire storehouse unattended in Gan Ning's hands. Over the past few days, Gan Ning had ingratiated himself with the necessary people, showing no signs of nervousness despite being deep in enemy territory.

Once the storekeeper was gone, Gan Ning had his men load barrel after barrel of tung oil onto carts. The supply officer was likely still gambling with the storekeeper and Gan Lan, completely unaware of what was happening.

"Brother, what are you up to?" one of the guards asked curiously as he saw Gan Ning's men pouring water around the camp.

"Just wetting the area down a bit to prevent fires," Gan Ning replied casually.

"Smart thinking, brother!" the guard praised. The dry autumn weather made fire a constant threat, so wetting the ground seemed like a great idea. The guard made a mental note to do the same when it was his turn on watch.

After completing the handover of the watch tokens, the previous guard left, satisfied that all was well. Meanwhile, Gan Ning carelessly splashed some water from his basin, then started pouring out tung oil mixed with liquor all around the camp. Through his research, Gan Ning had learned that tung oil could burn even on water, and the alcohol would mask the smell.

After spreading more than a dozen barrels of tung oil throughout the camp, Gan Ning still wasn't satisfied. He fetched another dozen barrels and doused the entire area. A faint smell of alcohol

permeated the camp, but with most of the soldiers asleep, no one noticed. The few who did assumed the patrols were drinking without sharing.

"Gan Lan, how's it going?" Gan Ning asked as Gan Lan jogged over.

"All set. I took care of those two guys," Gan Lan replied with a grin that belied the grim nature of his words.

"Alright, let's head to the back camp and prepare the horses. You're either from the Gan family or former water bandit leaders—don't tell me you don't know how to ride a horse," Gan Ning said, tossing his torch aside. His men followed suit, throwing their torches into the camp, and soon, flames erupted on all sides.

"Damn it..." Gan Ning nearly choked on his own words. He hadn't meant to toss the torch deliberately—he'd just done it without thinking. But his men, seeing their leader toss his torch, had followed suit, and now the entire camp was ablaze.

"Head to the rear camp and seize the horses, then make for the Zhang River. We need to get Gongsun Zan back to his camp," Gan Lan quickly took charge, covering for Gan Ning's awkward moment.

That night, the Handan granary was engulfed in flames visible from miles away. The fire raged through the night, reducing the entire camp to ashes with few survivors.

Riding hard, Gan Ning made his way back. The intelligence he'd gathered in Handan had snuffed out any thoughts of his three hundred men taking on tens of thousands. He now understood how Gongsun Zan had lost—not just due to mistakes but because the enemy was simply too powerful. The elite Xian Deng Death Warriors who had obliterated the White Horse Yi Cong were now in Yuan Shao's camp. Leading three hundred men against them would be suicidal.

With that realization, Gan Ning had stayed in Handan for a few days, plotting how to make up for their losses. Directly targeting Yuan Shao was out of the question, but there were other ways to strike a blow. Burning the Handan granary and cutting off Yuan Shao's supplies was a significant achievement.

Chapter 226: The Restless Heart of Burn, Burn, Burn...

Gan Ning, with his men each riding three horses, galloped madly until they reached the place where their boats were hidden. After dragging the boats out from the reeds, they were left staring at the nearly thousand horses they had seized. The problem was, they couldn't take them all with them.

"Gan Lan, see if there are any river bandits around here. As the boss, I'm going to requisition some boats," Gan Ning said helplessly. He couldn't bear to leave the horses behind.

This era certainly had its perks—mountain bandits in the hills, horse thieves on the plains, highwaymen on the roads, and naturally, river pirates on the waters. Gan Lan didn't take long to find a group of river bandits. Under Gan Ning's leadership, they launched a night raid, black on black, and seized all their boats. Now they finally had the means to transport their spoils.

Meanwhile, Gongsun Zan, disregarding Taishi Ci's advice, went in the opposite direction. Taishi Ci, heavily injured and not checking thoroughly, pursued the wrong direction, ultimately ending up empty-handed after a relentless chase.

Wen Chou led his troops to avenge Yan Liang, but after losing track of Taishi Ci, he stumbled upon Gongsun Zan's trail instead. Mistaking it for Taishi Ci's, he pursued relentlessly. Meanwhile, Ju Yi, realizing he might have overshot his target, turned back to search again. In short, Gongsun Zan unwittingly became the bait...

"General, after several days of investigation, we've determined that Gongsun Zan likely went in the opposite direction," Taishi Ci's personal guard reported.

"..." Taishi Ci was speechless. After all his efforts to block the enemy, Gongsun Zan had chosen to go the other way.

"General, should we continue north along the Zhang River?" the guard asked. "Our provisions can still last for half a month."

"Head north. Where the hell is that bastard Gan Xingba? Why hasn't he shown up yet?" Taishi Ci grumbled in frustration. They had almost run out of food a few days ago, and it was only by raiding a bandit camp that they managed to scrape by. His injuries were no longer severe enough to hinder his movements, as long as he avoided intense combat.

Meanwhile, up the Zhang River, things weren't looking good for Gongsun Zan. Ever since parting ways with Taishi Ci, his condition had worsened day by day, eventually leading to a high fever. The illness, which had initially been suppressed by his strong physique, now flared up uncontrollably due to the effects of the "medicinal" tonic he had taken.

Gongsun Zan was so feverish that he could barely function, and his command decisions began to falter. In the end, he had no choice but to delegate authority to Guan Jing, leaving everything in his hands. As his illness dragged on, the soldiers they had managed to gather along the way, numbering over a thousand, began deserting in increasing numbers.

"Water...water..." Gongsun Zan mumbled weakly, his parched throat barely able to form words.

Guan Jing, seeing that Gongsun Zan had regained consciousness, was overjoyed and quickly gave him water. "My lord, you've finally awakened."

"Where are we?" Gongsun Zan asked weakly, struggling to turn his head.

"We're still in Jizhou. Recently, Yuan Shao's men have been scouring the area for us. We've managed to evade them a few times, but it seems they're closing in," Guan Jing said with a bitter smile as he updated Gongsun Zan on the situation.

"Head north, to Youzhou. Once we reach Zhuo County, we'll be safe," Gongsun Zan said with difficulty, regret gnawing at him for parting ways with Taishi Ci. If only he had stayed, the special medicine Taishi Ci had could have spared him this misery. Leaving before fully recovering was a grave mistake...

Gongsun Zan had no idea that his current plight was entirely due to that so-called "medicine." Without it, even if he had fallen ill, he would have recovered after a few days of rest. With his Qi-Refining warrior's physique, he could have resisted the illness without much trouble—as long as it hadn't reached a critical stage.

Guan Jing ordered the troops to continue northward, slowly making their way while taking care of the ailing Gongsun Zan. Zhuo County was still far off, especially with the burden of a sick man.

The news of the Handan granary's destruction soon reached Yuan Shao. Learning that it had been burned by a mere three hundred of Gongsun Zan's remnants, Yuan Shao was furious. This was his strategic reserve for a prolonged campaign, the supplies he planned to use to fully conquer Youzhou. As for living off the land? Didn't they know that Gongsun Zan had already stripped the border between Youzhou and Jizhou of all its grain?

"Yuan Tu, has our plan to counterattack just been ruined?" Yuan Shao asked bitterly as he sat by the table.

"Resupplying from Bohai and Yecheng will take at least a month, and we only have enough provisions for ten days. We might not even have enough to retreat safely," Feng Ji replied with equal bitterness. The grand strategy was gone, reduced to ashes by a single fire.

"My lord, our only option now is to find Gongsun Zan. Otherwise, we'll have to return empty-handed, despite the favorable situation created by General Ju Yi," Shen Pei said, his expression grim. His hatred for the bandits who had torched the Handan granary burned as fiercely as the fire that had consumed their supplies.

"We have no choice. We've completely lost the initiative for a counteroffensive. We can only hope that You Ruo and Yuan Hao succeed," Yuan Shao sighed, reluctantly agreeing to scatter his forces to hunt down Gongsun Zan.

"If we don't see Gongsun Zan's head within three days, we'll have no choice but to retreat. What a waste of the opportunity Ju Yi created for us. Yuan Tu, remind me to learn from this mistake in future battles," Yuan Shao lamented. The golden opportunity had slipped through his fingers.

"Gan Lan, what's the latest?" Gan Ning asked as he gnawed on a beef leg.

"We've found General Taishi's markings. We should catch up with him in the lower Zhang River within two days," Gan Lan replied calmly. Finding the markings meant that Taishi Ci was safe.

"Oh, and what about Yuan Benchu? How did he like the gift I sent him? Burn, burn, burn! This book really is something—water and fire are indeed the deadliest. I can't believe we actually burned the place to the ground. Gan Lan, you did a great job remembering to bring the tung oil," Gan Ning praised, patting Gan Lan on the shoulder.

"Yuan Benchu knows about the Handan granary now, but they still think we're just a band of fleeing rebels. He's sent out a large number of infantry to search for Gongsun Zan, so our time is running short."

"So, Yuan Shao's main camp is vulnerable..." Gan Ning stroked his chin thoughtfully. "This seems like a good opportunity."

"General, I advise against taking unnecessary risks. Yuan Shao's army is already suppressing General Taishi and General Gongsun's movements. Our goal is rescue, not a challenge. Besides, we don't have the strength to confront Yuan Shao's forces, even if his cavalry and elite troops are currently out searching for Gongsun Zan," Gan Lan warned sternly, having seen through Gan Ning's restless, adventurous spirit. Gan Ning's father had specifically sent Gan Lan to rein in his son's reckless tendencies.

Chapter 227: A Fire in the Deep Autumn

Gan Ning cast a glance at Gan Lan, feeling an uncontrollable urge to set things on fire. Ever since he casually tossed a torch, and his men followed suit by throwing out a bunch of torches, turning the Handan granary into scorched earth, Gan Ning had suddenly realized a strategy—nothing beats setting things on fire!

"Gan Lan, I've got a task for you," Gan Ning said, tossing aside the half-eaten beef leg. "It's a tough one, something only someone extraordinary can handle."

"I'm not doing it," Gan Lan immediately refused before Gan Ning could even finish speaking. He wasn't foolish enough to follow Gan Ning's reckless ideas. When Chen Xi had presented them with a difficult task that only the strongest or the most clever could accomplish, Gan Ning had immediately believed it was tailor-made for him!

That was reckless to the extreme. After all, their ship had sunk five times, forcing them to swim from the ocean to the Yangtze River five times. On one occasion, they even encountered a mythical creature, and Gan Ning, undeterred, chased after and killed a legendary Kun! Gan Lan felt that following Gan Ning was a constant test of his nerves.

Gan Ning's motion to pat Gan Lan on the shoulder froze in midair, unable to proceed. "As the Navy Commander, I'm ordering you to take a hundred men and sail downstream along the Zhang River to meet up with Ziyi."

"A hundred men?" Gan Lan felt a headache coming on. While he didn't fear Gan Ning's status as the heir of the Gan family, he knew that in the military, Gan Ning's word was law. Even if Gan Ning's decisions were wrong, his subordinates only had the right to advise, not to overrule.

"Yes, a hundred men! You take a hundred to meet up with Ziyi, and I'll take a hundred to start a fire. This is a golden opportunity, and as the Navy Commander, I'd be remiss not to seize it. I'm going to burn them to ashes!" Gan Ning declared arrogantly.

"Let's just go together," Gan Lan suggested, seeing the determined look in Gan Ning's eyes. He realized he couldn't dissuade Gan Ning from his fiery determination, so he reluctantly agreed.

"You don't get it. With our numbers, it doesn't matter if we have a hundred or three hundred. I could lead a hundred men to total victory, but if you're there, we might lose a few people!" Gan Ning shot Gan Lan a disdainful look. He had to admit, Gan Ning's words, though harsh, were true.

Gan Lan hesitated for a moment before finally nodding. Though the words were unkind, Gan Ning was right—Gan Lan was more of a strategist than a fighter, and his close combat skills were inferior to even the average soldier. On the battlefield, it was unclear whether he'd be protecting Gan Ning or the other way around.

Although Gan Lan agreed to Gan Ning's plan, he stopped him from acting immediately, suggesting they scout Yuan Shao's camp from a high vantage point first.

By the time Gan Ning and Gan Lan returned from surveying the camp, the sun was already setting, and night was approaching.

"Xingba, though I don't fully support your decision, I'll give you a piece of advice as a friend. Don't target the grain stores or the logistics units; their defenses are too tight. Instead, aim straight for Yuan Shao's main camp. The defenses there are weaker. Focus on breaking their morale rather than killing enemies. If you move quickly enough, you might actually achieve your goal."

Though Gan Lan wasn't happy with Gan Ning's reckless plan, once Gan Ning had made up his mind, he stopped trying to dissuade him and instead offered advice on how to maximize their chances of success.

"Got it. You take a hundred men and quickly go find Ziyi. The remaining hundred will stay here and wait. I'll lead a hundred men and all the horses to launch the raid!" Gan Ning nodded, showing that he had taken Gan Lan's advice to heart.

"Xingba, while there's still time, have your men modify those carts carrying the oil barrels on the ship. Use the oxen to pull them. If you want to burn the enemy camp, those oil barrels are essential, and the oxen's strength and endurance far surpass that of horses. Even if you have to retreat, setting the oil barrels on fire and letting the oxen run wild could create an opening for you to escape!" Gan Lan suggested reluctantly, knowing that his role as Gan Ning's childhood tutor was to ensure his safety.

That night, at midnight, Gan Ning, with modified carts pulled by oxen, led a hundred men on horseback towards Yuan Shao's camp. Meanwhile, Gan Lan departed at sunset, taking his hundred men downstream to find Taishi Ci.

Gan Ning's progress was slow due to the oxen-drawn carts, but he eventually reached a few hundred paces outside Yuan Shao's camp. The main gate was brightly lit, and it was clear that despite planning to retreat the next day, Yuan Shao had not relaxed the camp's defenses. The guards were still patrolling, though this time, there was no Zhou Ang watching the gate, just a dozen or so minor soldiers.

"Who goes there!" a sharp-eyed guard spotted the shadows in the darkness when Gan Ning was fifty paces away.

"Searching for Gongsun Zan, that bastard! Just got back," Gan Ning replied nonchalantly. He had no qualms about bluffing.

As he spoke, Gan Ning walked alone for another dozen steps, his hand seemingly fumbling at his waist. A smile crept onto his face as he mentally marked the positions of all the guards. At this distance, he was confident he could take them all out in one strike. "Here, take a look at this—my token!"

In an instant, a cold, water-like gleam flashed, and the scattered guards, including those hidden in the shadows, all fell to the ground.

"Hurry, move!" Gan Ning ordered his men to carefully remove the barricades. He silently praised Gan Lan's suggestion. Once his troops were reorganized, they punctured small holes in the oil barrels on the carts, lit them on fire, and then drove their swords into the oxen's rumps. With a bellow of pain, the oxen, dragging the burning carts, charged into Yuan Shao's camp.

"Kill!" Gan Ning shouted as he followed the trail of flames into the camp. Yuan Shao's camp layout was already well-known to him. His goal now was to burn Yuan Shao's tent to the ground, not to kill enemies, though he wouldn't mind doing both.

"Enemy attack!" The screams finally erupted from Yuan Shao's camp as the burning carts plowed through tents.

"Kill, kill, kill!" Gan Ning roared as he unleashed his inner energy. Though he didn't kill many, it was enough to strike fear into the enemy. Despite his loud shouts, Gan Ning kept his primary objective in mind: to burn Yuan Shao's main tent!

"Who dares attack my camp at night!" Yuan Shao, wearing his nightclothes, roared as he sprang from his bed.

"Do not fear, my lord. Yan Liang is here!" Yan Liang, dressed in a single layer of clothing, rushed in. Despite the severe injury Taishi Ci had inflicted, Yan Liang had already recovered eighty percent.

"Come with me to see who dares attack my camp!" Yuan Shao, holding his sword, stormed out of his tent.

Chapter 228: A Hundred Riders Raiding the Camp

Gan Ning moved quickly because he knew that as soon as Yuan Shao's troops reacted and enough men left their tents, the camp's cloud-like formation would quickly form, making his raid a suicide mission. His only requirement for this operation was speed—so fast that ninety percent of the camp wouldn't have time to respond before he was already gone.

"Yuan Shao, prepare to die!" Gan Ning spotted a man holding a sword emerging from the central military tent. His heart leaped with joy as he immediately recognized his target—Yuan Shao himself, a target he hadn't even expected to encounter on this raid!

With unparalleled force, Gan Ning swung his heavy chain towards Yuan Shao. This attack, if it landed, would kill Yuan Shao. However, even as the weapon neared, Gan Ning noticed that Yuan Shao showed no fear. The aura of a ruler was fully on display before Gan Ning's eyes.

"Boom!" Yuan Shao wasn't without fear, but he knew what he represented and was confident that Yan Liang would protect him.

"Who dares attack!" Yan Liang swung his spear and deflected Gan Ning's heavy chain. With blood-red energy surging around him, Yan Liang charged at Gan Ning. He only needed to hold Gan Ning off for a moment, and the rest of the army would have time to surround and capture him.

"I am the naval commander Gan Xingba! Yuan Shao, prepare to die!" Gan Ning sneered. He was using a peculiar weapon, not a spear, and this one could change direction. As he spoke, he flicked his wrist, causing the tip of his chain to snake towards Yuan Shao once more. "Yuan Benchu, prepare to die!"

"Thud!" Just as the chain was about to pierce Yuan Shao, Yan Liang desperately grabbed the chain with his bare hand, preventing it from reaching Yuan Shao.

"Damn it!" Gan Ning yanked the chain back, the motion creating a wide arc that slammed into Yan Liang's chest. But Yan Liang blocked it with his spear, allowing Gan Ning to retrieve his weapon.

In that brief exchange, Gan Ning realized that Yan Liang was still injured, but his strength was undeniable, clearly still at the level of a warrior who could project his inner energy. With Yan Liang protecting Yuan Shao, Gan Ning knew he couldn't take Yuan Shao down. Even if Yan Liang was injured, it would take at least a hundred exchanges to defeat him—and by then, his men would be dead.

"Watch the arrow!" Gan Ning, though daring, wasn't foolish. In an instant, a crossbow appeared in his hand, and he fired it at Yuan Shao. "Yuan Shao, prepare to die!"

Seeing the arrow fly towards Yuan Shao, Yan Liang rushed to intercept it. His spear formed a wall, blocking the arrow. But as the arrow struck the spear tip, Yan Liang was shocked to find it shattered easily. By this time, Gan Ning had already nocked another arrow—not aimed at Yuan Shao but at the command flag.

"Bang!" The command flag fell, broken by Gan Ning's arrow. Wasting no time, Gan Ning tossed all the fire oil bags from his saddle and swung his heavy chain, puncturing the bags. As the chain struck a rock on the ground, sparks flew, igniting a wall of fire between the two sides. Yan Liang, uncertain of the situation and focused on protecting Yuan Shao, didn't dare pursue. Seizing the moment, Gan Ning turned and fled.

Gan Ning's raid was as swift as it was sudden. By the time he retreated, fewer than a hundred of Yuan Shao's men had fallen, but the camp was in chaos. Torches blazed, voices shouted, and though the fires were quickly extinguished, the camp was left in disarray.

"Hahahaha!" A mile away, Gan Ning and his hundred riders laughed uproariously. The raid hadn't resulted in many casualties, and they'd lost several hundred cattle and horses, but the blow to Yuan Shao's morale was severe. The raid wasn't about killing enemy soldiers—it was about killing their spirit!

After retreating without losing a single man, Gan Ning had dealt a heavy blow to Yuan Shao's morale. Though the battle had gone smoothly, Yuan Shao's retreat would now be a slower and more cautious process, as his troops were on edge and paranoid after the raid. Step by step, Yuan Shao's men would have to retreat, consuming precious time—and with it, their dwindling supplies.

Gan Ning had no idea how much trouble he had caused Yuan Shao with this seemingly reckless act. All he knew was that he had struck a significant blow to Yuan Shao's pride, and now he had something to boast about when he returned. Burning grain stores wasn't something worth bragging about since it hadn't involved much direct combat. But now, Gan Ning could proudly claim he had led a hundred riders against Yuan Shao's tens of thousands.

"Let's go! Let's board the ships and find Ziyi! Hahaha, I am the man who faced tens of thousands with just a hundred!" Gan Ning said arrogantly as he mounted his horse. Glancing back at his men, he saw that most of them were singed and battered, and they had lost several horses, but not a single man had fallen.

It was worth noting that Gan Ning had charged in first, while his men mainly focused on setting fires. Gan Ning had only exchanged two blows with Yan Liang before retreating. Most of his men had barely engaged the enemy. Had they lingered just a moment longer, the fully alert Yuan Shao's troops would have wiped them out, including Gan Ning himself.

Gan Ning's men laughed along with him. They had charged into the camp expecting to die, but all they had done was toss a few fire oil bags, and before they could even start fighting, Gan Ning had led them out. This mission had felt surreal, but the thrill of walking the line between life and death was something they wouldn't soon forget.

Meanwhile, Yuan Shao sat in his tent, face dark with rage, as he listened to his officers report the damage. Thirty-one tents had been destroyed, seventy-one men lost, eleven trampled to death in the chaos, and they had captured over three hundred cattle and horses. The actual losses weren't significant, and they had even gained something, but the blow to morale was severe.

"You're telling me that these horses were ours? That those who attacked were the same remnants of Gongsun Zan's forces who burned Handan's grain stores?" Yuan Shao roared.

"Yes, the horses and carts bear our military markings," Feng Ji replied with his head bowed.

"Damn it! Order a search for this Gan Xingba—I want him alive!" Yuan Shao roared, then paused and added, "Tell him I need brave warriors like him, men who are bold, cunning, and unmatched in strength! Let him know that serving Gongsun Zan will get him nowhere—I, Yuan Shao, will always welcome him!"

"Wise, my lord!" Shen Pei sighed in admiration. Yuan Shao had done exactly what he had been planning to advise—focus not on the losses but on recruiting this powerful warrior who had caused them.

"Wise? We're retreating tonight! We don't have time! Our supplies won't last, and if we fortify our position, we'll run out of food. If the enemy seizes that moment to strike, we'll lose everything!" Yuan Shao said helplessly.

"Order Zhou Ang to take responsibility for this failure!" Yuan Shao added, his voice tinged with resignation. He had to admit that their great advantage had evaporated, and now even retreating safely was a challenge.

Chapter 229: Let's Hide in the Temple of Shennong!

As Qingzhou anxiously awaited changes in the situation in Jizhou, the second urgent report finally arrived from Jizhou.

"..." Fazheng glanced at the report, and the anxiety he had been feeling instantly dissipated. He returned to the calm demeanor expected of a strategist.

"Mr. Jia, look at this report. Gan Xingba has certainly lived up to his title as Chief Commander. He is indeed a first-class general of our time. His courage and grasp of battle opportunities are truly impressive." Fazheng held the report as he walked toward Jia Xu, ready to update him on the recent developments in Jizhou. Guo Fengxiao had already led troops to Licheng, accompanied by Guan Yu, the newly arrived Wei Yan, and the ever-reliable Zhou Cang, along with the equally capable Pei Yuanshao.

Jia Xu sipped his tea, his expression remaining calm as he read through the report. After finishing, he set it down without showing any sign of surprise. In his view, Gan Ning's accomplishments were likely what Chen Zichuan had been expecting all along. Given how much authority Chen Xi had granted him, if Gan Ning didn't deliver a satisfactory result, Chen Xi would surely be displeased.

"Send a copy to Lord Xuande, and distribute the report to the others as well. It seems that the war in Youzhou has come to an end. I believe that Taishi Ziyi and Gan Xingba will handle the remaining troubles in Youzhou." Jia Xu sighed, remarking, "It's fortunate to have someone like Chen Xi leading the way. We can just follow along easily. But I have to admit, someone like Chen Xi, who constantly calculates and plans, won't last long. Even if he does nothing else and only focuses on suppressing the chaos in the world, it would eventually wear him out."

Jia Xu knew that Chen Xi was determined to elevate Liu Bei to the top, even at the cost of his own well-being. As long as Liu Bei had not yet secured his dominance, Chen Xi would continue to scheme tirelessly.

Jia Xu now acknowledged Chen Xi's unparalleled strategic abilities. In the short term, it might be manageable, but in the long run, Jia Xu believed that even he would be worn down by the relentless pressure. After all, a plan that could take years to unfold was fraught with countless uncertainties.

Jia Xu preferred to let others take the lead while he followed in their shadow, occasionally stepping out to make his presence known before retreating once again. This approach allowed him to live a more peaceful life.

"Yes, with Zichuan in control, unless Gongsun Bogui perishes, Yuan Benchu's chances of defeating him in the short term are laughable." Fazheng nodded in agreement. By this point, everyone knew that Chen Xi's real target was Liu Yu.

"What's he up to now? Has Lord Xuande's old residence been rebuilt? And the fabled library—is it finished? I also heard he was teaching dance at Manxiang Pavilion. How's that going?" Jia Xu asked, curious about Chen Xi's recent activities.

"Lord Xuande's old residence is nearly complete. We've been invited to attend the opening ceremony, and the library is also finished. As for the dance lessons, they've concluded. They're supposed to perform during the library's opening. Recently, Zichuan has been discussing land yield issues with Qu Hanmou. I'm not sure if they've reached a conclusion yet. Once the farming season ends, Zichuan will likely start collecting medicinal herbs again." Fazheng counted off Chen Xi's tasks on his fingers, noting how much there still was to do.

"I heard that Qu Hanmou's farming techniques increased the autumn grain yield by two dou per mu. Is that right?" Jia Xu brought up Qu Qi, finding the topic interesting as idle conversation.

"Yes, he's a professional when it comes to agriculture. We can't afford to let someone like him fall into the hands of other warlords. Once the food supply is stabilized, many other issues will start to resurface." Fazheng spoke seriously, recognizing Qu Qi's value. He also knew Qu Qi's official identity as the head of the Qu family in Yizhou.

"People like him are irreplaceable. You could kill him by accident, but you can't deliberately take him out. It would cause more trouble than killing a famous scholar. If Qu Qi truly produces seeds that yield three and a half shi per mu, next year there will be a bountiful harvest. If he achieves the four to five shi per mu yield he promised Zijian, you might as well prepare a spot for him in the Temple of Shennong." Jia Xu chuckled.

"You can't kill someone like that. If they die, it better be an accident, not by the hands of those in power." Jia Xu added. "In a time of peace, someone like him would be revered, even by the emperor. Killing him would be unthinkable, even for an emperor."

"Four to five shi per mu? That's practically a myth." Fazheng's face twitched at the thought. Such a high yield seemed too good to be true.

"Do you think Zichuan would waste his time visiting Qu Qi every day if there wasn't at least a fifty percent chance of success? A yield of four shi per mu could feed the entire population," Jia Xu said with

a sigh. "Even holding the highest official position doesn't compare to being enshrined in the Temple of Shennong. That kind of legacy will be remembered in history, and worshipped for generations."

As Jia Xu and the others discussed Chen Xi and Qu Qi, Chen Xi was already teaching Qu Qi about sample control and other simple concepts. In addition, Chen Xi was also advising Qu Qi on the benefits of experimenting with a group of subordinates rather than working alone. With a team, Qu Qi could open multiple test fields simultaneously and conduct many experiments at once. What would have taken twenty years could be completed in one or two, leaving plenty of time for further improvements.

Taking Chen Xi's advice to heart, Qu Qi quickly assembled a large group of apprentices and opened up a vast area of land. This time, instead of focusing on a single crop, he planted a variety of crops in different sections.

"Oh, we need to measure the growth progress every day and record it, then compare it with the control samples..." Qu Qi clapped his hands, suddenly realizing many new ideas. "It seems you know a lot about agriculture, Zichuan. Come study farming with me, and we can squat in the Temple of Shennong together!"

"Hahaha, I've already found my place to squat." Chen Xi laughed. With this year's favorable weather leading into winter, he realized that if he died, people would likely enshrine him as some kind of dragon king or deity associated with good harvests. After all, the weather had been perfect!

"Let's keep going. I feel like I've embarked on a different path. If I keep this up, I might surpass my original level." Qu Qi was practically glowing with excitement as he absorbed Chen Xi's scientific research methods. He felt like he was on the verge of achieving something divine. He was determined to keep working for the next fifty years!

Chapter 230: According to the Report...

When the news of Gan Ning's impressive achievements arrived, Chen Xi was in the middle of explaining to Qu Qi why simply relying on superior seeds wasn't enough, emphasizing how hybridization could yield miracles. He was also introducing Qu Qi to Mendel's pea plant theories.

Qu Qi's eyes sparkled with interest. Although he hadn't specifically studied these theories, as a professional agricultural expert with seven or eight years of experience, he'd encountered strange cases where purple-flowered pea seeds produced white flowers or tall pea plants produced short ones.

"Zichuan, put that report aside. Even if my aristocratic education was only half-completed before I took charge, I still understand the current situation. Qingzhou and Taishan hold the upper hand." Qu Qi, seeing Chen Xi laughing at the report in his hands, impatiently waved it off. Although Qu Qi had devoted most of his energy to farming, he still had the clarity of a bystander when it came to the affairs of the various warlords.

"Of course, that's only natural. With the plan I personally devised, how could there be any mistakes? Qingzhou is currently in an excellent position—money and grain are abundant, the troops are well-trained and well-fed, and there's no fear of any challenge. That's why I have the leisure to discuss these matters with you." Chen Xi smiled. "But I must say, Gan Xingba really did me a favor this time."

After speaking, Chen Xi handed the report to Qu Qi. "Take a look. Gan Xingba truly lives up to his title as Chief Commander of the Navy. His courage is remarkable, and his timing impeccable. It's just a pity he isn't more skilled at commanding large forces."

"No one is perfect, just as no gold is flawless. However, based on what I've seen of this fellow townsman of mine, his performance has been nothing short of spectacular. With just three hundred men, he forced Yuan Benchu to retreat, then followed up by leading a hundred riders to raid the camp without losing a single person. Yuan Benchu has truly lost face this time." Qu Qi quickly skimmed the report and understood the situation. "Yuan Benchu can forget about launching any further offensives against Youzhou. His plan to use others as pawns and position himself as the moral high ground has been completely ruined."

Chen Xi was momentarily taken aback. Qu Qi had grasped the entire situation after just a quick glance at the report. "You really are on par with most strategists, aren't you?"

"When a family invests a century's worth of resources into raising one person, that person is bound to know a little about everything. But..." Qu Qi trailed off, feeling a bit dejected, only to quickly shake off the feeling. "Let's continue talking about these basic genetic factors! I'm determined to cultivate a super seed that combines all the best traits!"

Chen Xi casually placed the report on the table between them, returning to his explanation of high school-level biology concepts like hybrid seeds. After all, he didn't have much time, and with Qu Qi showing so much interest, there was a good chance for a breakthrough in the future. However, it would take a lot of time to fully impart this knowledge, especially given Qu Qi's lack of foundational understanding.

While Chen Xi nonchalantly left the report on the table, he remained unaware of the shockwaves spreading among the warlords due to the conclusion of the Battle of Jieqiao. The battle had seen Gongsun Zan initially holding the advantage, only for Ju Yi to rise up, crush Baima Yicong, and then pursue Gongsun Zan. The situation had taken a dramatic turn when Gan Ning unexpectedly emerged, setting fire to Handan and launching a hundred-rider raid on Yuan Shao's camp. In the end, it was Ju Yi and Gan Ning who stood out as the main figures of the conflict, with everyone else reduced to supporting roles.

Compared to Ju Yi, who wiped out Baima Yicong in a field battle, and Gan Ning, who burned Handan and raided Yuan Shao's camp with a hundred riders, the other participants were overshadowed.

Was Baima Yicong powerful? All the warlords acknowledged its strength. Gongsun Zan had used it to dominate the battlefield, but Ju Yi's heavy-armored troops held the line, and his Xian Deng warriors completely annihilated Baima Yicong, leaving Gongsun Zan without even a remnant of his elite cavalry. That night, Ju Yi led his Xian Deng warriors in a final assault, destroying Gongsun Zan's camp. A figure like that could only be described with one word—fierce!

Yet, just as the tide had turned in favor of Yuan Shao, Gan Ning had upended everything with a single fire and a slap in the face, cutting down Yuan Shao's command flag before departing unscathed with all his men. For all the warlords, there was only one way to describe Gan Ning—audacious!

Of course, if it were only about bravery and audacity, there would be little cause for concern. What truly alarmed the warlords was the way both Ju Yi and Gan Ning displayed an uncanny ability to seize fleeting opportunities on the battlefield. Both men had shown a knack for turning those moments into decisive victories, leaving many in awe.

Their extraordinary courage, combined with their keen sense for seizing opportunities, made them figures that any discerning warlord would fear. Such men, fearless and sharp in battle, had a unique ability to transform dangerous situations into opportunities for success.

Because of the dramatic turns in the Battle of Jieqiao and the subsequent twists and turns, all the warlords' reports highlighted these two men equally. Despite Gan Ning's modest force of three hundred compared to Ju Yi's command of an entire army, both were acknowledged as exceptional figures who had demonstrated both unparalleled bravery and the qualities of top-tier generals. All they needed were the right circumstances and a capable lord to serve.

"A wise bird chooses the right tree to nest in! Gongsun Bogui failed to properly utilize such a talented general, so his defeat isn't surprising! Send someone to the north to make contact with Gan Ning. I, Cao Mengde, must have a warrior of such wisdom and courage!" After reading the report, Cao Cao immediately decided to recruit Gan Ning.

Cao Cao was certain that Yuan Shao was also searching for the man who had ruined his plans, not to seek revenge, but to recruit him. After all, with Gongsun Zan now in decline, there wouldn't be another opportunity like this anytime soon. If he missed this chance, who knew when another talent like Gan Ning would emerge? Just look at Ju Yi—Gongsun Zan's defeat was inevitable!

"Master, your wisdom is unmatched!" Xun Yu smiled. "But compared to this, there's another general whom you might want to consider approaching."

At Xun Yu's words, a hint of wariness flashed in Cao Cao's eyes. Xun Yu, Xun You, Xi Zhicai, Cheng Yu, and Chen Qun had all manipulated Yuan Shu to the point of near insanity, leading to a confrontation with Lu Bu under the walls of Wan. If Cao Cao hadn't also been present at Wan, the two sides might have clashed right there!

In the end, the outcome was predictable. Lu Bu and his men separated from Yuan Shu, and when they left, they made sure to plunder Yuan Shu thoroughly. This naturally led to a deep rift between them, with Yuan Shu losing all tolerance for Lu Bu, while Lu Bu began plotting to kill Yuan Shu and seize control of Yuzhou for himself. However, Yuan Shu's considerable strength meant that defeating him wouldn't be easy. And to make matters worse, Cao Cao was just waiting to take advantage of the situation from the sidelines.

But Lu Bu was like a tree without roots, a stream without a source. Even after robbing Yuan Shu, his resources were limited. With his men consuming supplies daily, he couldn't sustain his forces for long. In desperation, Lu Bu had already started preparing to move again, and now he was secretly proposing an alliance with Cao Cao, offering to help him eliminate Yuan Shu in exchange for grain.

With this opportunity at hand, Xun Yu, feeling that their forces were still insufficient, suggested testing Lu Bu's loyalty. As for the potential risk of Lu Bu turning against them, Xun Yu wasn't too concerned. As long as their core strength remained solid, there was nothing they couldn't handle. And as long as Cao Cao didn't foolishly provoke Lu Bu by pursuing his concubine Diao Chan, there was little to fear!

After all, Xun Yu believed that with him and his colleagues keeping a close watch, Lu Bu wouldn't stand a chance against their combined efforts. Could someone with Lu Bu's limited intellect really withstand

their scheming? Within three months of joining Cao Cao, Xun Yu was confident they could render Lu Bu powerless, absorbing his troops and leaving him with nothing. Xi Zhicai had even hinted that they could frame the whole thing in such a way that everyone—including Lu Bu himself—would believe it was all his fault!