

Mythical 261

Chapter 261: In the Midst of Transition

"Zhongda, do you want to go in and take a look? A hundred thousand volumes of books, Chen Zichuan is indeed generous!" Sima Lang, with no concern for appearances, leaned out and laughed as he looked at the scene below.

"I'm interested in those books, but I'm more interested in this paper," Sima Yi said with a hint of mockery on his face, clearly disdainful of the scholars below, and also mocking the noble families of the world for their desperate pursuit of books.

"Don't even think about it. Chen Zichuan seems to be the type who excels at everything, including the smallest details. For example, this grand library might seem like it cost billions, but out of boredom, I investigated Chen Zichuan's past. He's someone who makes every coin work like ten. Tsk tsk tsk," Sima Lang said with admiration, "Either the actual cost wasn't that high, or someone donated the funds. Both possibilities exist."

"Big brother, I think we should stay in Fenggao for a few more days. This place isn't bad," Sima Yi said, retracting his gaze and smiling as he looked at the food on the table.

"I have the same thought. I'd like to take a good look at Taishan Fenggao and learn from it," Sima Lang said calmly, showing a strong interest in the current system and prosperity of Taishan Fenggao.

Elsewhere, Zhuge Jin was expressing a similar sentiment. Aspiring to be an excellent civil official, Zhuge Jin felt a strong urge to observe and learn from the extremely prosperous Fenggao.

"Hmm, just from observing the situation earlier, and considering another nearby building and the recent rumors of soldiers retiring, it seems the library will be opening soon," Zhuge Liang nodded and said.

Zhuce Liang was very satisfied with Fenggao. It was more prosperous than Xuzhou and had more vitality. However, this prosperity seemed a bit chaotic to Zhuge Liang, though he didn't look down on it. He understood that this was merely the result of rapid growth and that, given time, it would naturally stabilize. Every place that transitions from poverty to wealth goes through this stage.

"Let's stay at this inn," Zhuge Jin said as he led his younger brother into Mi's Inn.

"Hmph, the Mi family, one of the top five wealthy merchants? This is the one!" Sima Yi looked left and right, unabashedly scrutinizing the shops around him before stopping in front of Mi's Inn. The Mi family had become the wealthiest in just a short time, without the centuries of heritage of other noble families. Sima Yi thought of the information he had gathered, his face showing the arrogance of a noble family as he walked into the inn owned by Mi Zhu.

At the Lumen Academy in Jingzhou, Xu Shu, after a year of study, had started to find his footing. However, since he came from a rough background, his thug-like demeanor hadn't entirely disappeared after a year of study. Most of the students at Lumen Academy didn't like Xu Shu, and, of course, Xu Shu didn't like them either.

"Bang!" Xu Shu kicked open a door, then instinctively grabbed it. Back when he was a thug, he never opened doors with his hands, and even after a year of study, he still hadn't broken the habit. However, he had developed the habit of kicking the door open and then grabbing the door handle.

"Yuan Zhi, just come in. You don't need to bother with the door," Pang Degong's helpless voice came from inside. Ever since he impulsively took in Xu Shu, the door to his room had been replaced several times.

"Master Pang, I'm here. Got any classic books for me?" Xu Shu, with a mix of a thug and a scholar's aura that didn't quite fit together, walked through the courtyard and casually sat down in front of Pang Degong.

Don't expect Xu Shu to observe any master-disciple etiquette. When Pang Degong discovered Xu Shu, he saw him as a good seedling that had grown crooked. After cutting off the bad parts, he could become a pillar of talent, so Pang Degong decided to take Xu Shu as a disciple. However, Pang Degong was stunned by Xu Shu's worldly and street-smart theories.

Xu Shu's analogies were crude, but his explanation of the Han Dynasty as a small city, with wealthy households, poor people, thugs, and government offices, surprisingly fit the situation. The goal was simply to become the boss!

Pang Degong was astonished and brought Xu Shu to his Lumen Academy. He didn't officially take him as a disciple, and Xu Shu, being in his thug phase, didn't show much respect either. He casually called Pang Degong "old man" and didn't care. So Xu Shu ended up with the title of Pang Degong's peer in the academy, just attending classes.

After some time, Xu Shu understood his situation, but by then, admitting he wanted to be Pang Degong's disciple would have been a blow to his thug pride. So, Xu Shu didn't bother with it and continued to freeload at Pang Degong's classes, thinking that as long as he could mooch off Pang Degong, he was good.

"These are for you. Chen Zichuan asked me to give them to you," Pang Degong said with a sigh as he looked at the still-thuggish Xu Shu. He was indeed a good seedling, almost on par with the likes of Zhuge Liang, but he had grown crooked and now was even sprouting in all sorts of wild directions.

Pang Degong had hoped to personally educate Xu Shu, but he found himself powerless to do so. Xu Shu was simply too unruly. Now, he was studying military strategy, logistics, formations, and leadership all at once. Pang Degong had often wanted to tell Xu Shu to focus on one area, that he could become an outstanding strategist, but Xu Shu's attitude was always that of a genius who could do anything, leaving Pang Degong helpless to let him go his own way. Who knew, maybe he really was a genius who could master everything.

"Chen Zichuan?" Xu Shu thought for a moment. He didn't seem to have a friend by that name. Giving books as a gift was a significant gesture, especially these valuable paper-bound volumes. Which wealthy patron was this?

Lately, Xu Shu had been in a state where he ignored all worldly affairs, focusing solely on studying the classics. It was this dedication that had brought him to his current level, which would put many second-rate scholars to shame. If the students at Lumen Academy, who looked down on Xu Shu, knew about his progress, they would probably cough up blood in shock. His speed of improvement was astonishing.

"Chen Zichuan, the strategist under Liu Xuande, asked me to give them to you," Pang Degong explained helplessly. "It's time for you to start paying attention to the state of the world. A great general, strategist, or civil official must have a unique perspective on the world's situation. You can't just shut yourself away."

"Liu Xuande!" Xu Shu was stunned for a moment, then overjoyed. "I knew Liu Xuande wouldn't forget me, his former assistant. Thank you! I'll go read these books now. You can continue resting. If I have any questions, I'll come to you."

Xu Shu came and went as he pleased, with no trace of a scholar's demeanor. In his current state, it seemed unlikely that he would shed his thuggish habits anytime soon.

Chapter 262: Yuan Shu's Reckless Gamble...

Xu Shu took the books and slipped back to continue studying. As for Pang Degong's advice to pay attention to the world situation, Xu Shu had little interest. Coming from a background as a street thug, Xu Shu's primary hobby was taking advantage of opportunities. In his view, understanding the world's affairs was unnecessary since other knowledgeable people would have that covered. Anyone with some ability could talk circles around it.

Since anyone with some weight could discuss these matters, why bother himself with the effort? As for having unique insights, weren't they just minor details? As long as the main direction was right and the strength was sufficient, wouldn't it be possible to just bulldoze through? And when the time came to meet Liu Xuande and impress him with talk about world affairs, Xu Shu already had his material prepared.

Xu Shu had friends like Cui Zhouping and Shi Guangyuan, who were skilled at discussing world affairs. And if that wasn't enough, he had Pang Degong and Sima Hui (Shuijing) to consult. When he decided to leave, they would surely give him pointers on what to watch out for. With these four talking about the world's situation, Xu Shu figured their views would be 90% similar, with some personal touches. By listening to each of them along the way and adding his observations, he'd have his grasp of the world's affairs covered.

If Pang Degong knew what Xu Shu was thinking, he would probably slap him. How could someone be this lazy?

Meanwhile, back in Nanyang, Lu Bu had already taken half of the benefits from Cao Cao, but since Cao Cao was rather stingy and only gave him half, Lu Bu was told he'd get the other half after beating up Yuan Shu. Seeing through this, Lu Bu immediately turned around to find his brother Zhang Yang. Who in their right mind would fight Yuan Shu head-on, especially under Cao Cao's watchful eye? Lu Bu thought, "Do you think my intelligence is as low as yours, Cao Cao?"

Witnessing this, Cao Cao was furious and nearly sent his troops to block Lu Bu. Fortunately, Xun Yu managed to calm him down. However, after being tricked by Lu Bu, Cao Cao finally gave up on the idea of recruiting him. Calling Lu Bu untrustworthy, a "three-family slave," and a "father-killer," didn't change the fact that Lu Bu had outwitted him.

Looking down from the walls of Wan City at the seemingly endless ranks of Yuan Shu's forces, Cao Cao finally realized the vast difference between him and this extravagant warlord. The reason he had managed to suppress Yuan Shu earlier was due to the chaos that Liu Bei had caused in Yu Province, preventing Yuan Shu from mobilizing his forces.

Now, by the end of autumn, Yuan Shu had spent months restoring order in the chaotic Yu Province. No longer needing troops to suppress internal unrest, Yuan Shu did not hesitate to mobilize his army, preparing to give Cao Cao a thorough lesson. Of course, this was partly due to being humiliated by Lu Bu.

"This army must be at least 100,000 strong," Cao Cao said with a gloomy expression as he wiped the sweat from his brow. The sight was terrifying. It wasn't just because Yuan Shu could easily defeat Liu Biao, but also due to his overwhelming strength.

"Including the main force and auxiliary troops, it totals around 120,000. After restoring order in Yu Province, Yuan Shu immediately mobilized his forces. It seems Lu Bu's departure may be related to this," Xizhi Cai observed with interest as he watched the vast army below. He was particularly fascinated by the sheer amount of resources Yuan Shu must have to sustain such a force.

"So, what do we do now? This is far beyond our initial estimates. We thought Yuan Shu would only send 30,000 troops against us, but now it's 120,000. If they keep pressing day and night, traitors will inevitably emerge within Wan City since we've only just taken control," Cao Cao said with a bitter smile. Just a few months ago, he had been filled with confidence, thinking he could easily defeat Yuan Shu. But now, he realized it had all been an illusion.

"Rest assured, my lord. The situation is still within our control, and this farce should come to an end. It's time to stop playing games with Yuan Shu," Xizhi Cai said with a cold smile. They had anticipated this outcome and had prepared countermeasures. Did Yuan Shu really think having a large army meant being strong?

"Sigh, the strength of the Yuan family is truly formidable. Yuan Benchu defeated Gongsun Zan and now controls both Ji and Bingzhou. Yuan Gonglu defeated Liu Biao, and if Liu Xuande hadn't intervened in Yu

Province, Yuan Gonglu would already control three provinces," Cao Cao said, enviously gazing at the seemingly endless barracks of Yuan Shu's troops. Tens of thousands of veteran soldiers were a world apart from his own hastily assembled, barely trained forces.

"Unfortunately, Yuan Gonglu fails to understand the times and military strategy, squandering a great opportunity," Xizhi Cai said with a tone of regret. Yuan Shu's displayed strength was indeed enviable, but he lacked true military genius. His best general, Ji Ling, was merely a competent commander, far from being among the elite.

"Fails to understand military strategy?" Cao Cao perked up. Did this mean that Xizhi Cai had a plan to defeat Yuan Shu?

"Indeed. Yuan Gonglu truly believes that with winter approaching, no one will launch an attack? The only force capable of invading his territory, Liu Xuande, is not strong enough. Why would he assume such an advantage? By fully committing his forces to the attack, he has left his rear defenseless. Yuan Gonglu's borders are far too extended," Xizhi Cai said with a cold smile.

In Xizhi Cai's view, the time had come to end this farce. The soldiers had already faced bloodshed, and it was time to initiate long-term, small-scale battles in southern Nanyang. These continuous skirmishes would serve multiple purposes: weakening the local noble families loyal to Yuan Shu, replenishing Cao Cao's not-so-wealthy treasury, and gradually solidifying their control over Nanyang.

At the same time, it would give Liu Biao a glimmer of hope, encouraging him to keep resisting Yuan Shu, thus further draining Yuan Shu's strength. And of course, it would also provide an opportunity to train their forces using Yuan Shu's troops as practice dummies. The inevitable hell that southern Nanyang would become didn't concern Xizhi Cai; the fate of enemy noble families meant nothing to him. Even if some of their own noble families were wiped out, it wouldn't bother the cold-hearted strategist.

"Don't worry, my lord. Within three days, the outcome will be clear. However, after this, Yuan Gonglu will likely relocate. Runan is indeed a great place, but it's been stripped bare by Chen Zichuan. I wonder what Yuan Shu will find to bring back," Xizhi Cai said with a sigh, finding Yuan Shu's thinking to be riddled with flaws.

"Cut off the supply route from Runan?" Cao Cao suddenly realized the plan, quickly understanding everything. He had been intimidated by Yuan Shu's 100,000-strong army, but now it made sense. If Yuan Shu committed such a large force, wouldn't his rear be vulnerable? Grabbing a pen, Cao Cao eagerly

scribbled the plan to cut off the supply route onto his undergarment. This would be his ace move in the future—simple, direct, and lethal!

Chapter 263: So, I've Always Wanted to Save This Era!

Without Xizhi Cai and Xun Yu's knowledge, Cao Cao secretly contacted Chen Gong, asking him to help eliminate Lu Bu on his way to Zhang Yang. Currently, with Chen Gong still loyal and having not yet defected, he and Cao Cao maintained a decent relationship. Given the gratitude Chen Gong felt for Cao Cao's earlier support, and his own significant abilities, Cao Cao actually had a lot of admiration for Chen Gong.

This admiration was why, even though Cao Cao knew giving Lu Bu grain and supplies was akin to feeding a tiger, he still did it. Cao Cao coveted the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry and Lu Bu's eight fierce generals. While he didn't care for Lu Bu, it didn't mean he disliked those around him. In fact, he was quite pleased with the likes of Zhang Liao, who he found capable, and even the stoic Gao Shun, along with others like Cao Xing, Song Xian, and Hao Meng. And the idea of acquiring more than ten thousand Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry only increased his desire.

Cao Cao estimated that with a little preparation, Chen Gong could very likely eliminate Lu Bu. Though Chen Gong was not someone Cao Cao paraded around, everyone from Xizhi Cai to Cheng Yu knew that Chen Gong was, in reality, quite formidable. The only drawback was that Chen Gong was not adept at making quick decisions in battle, and his own spiritual talent could be quite aggravating.

If Xun Yu's apparent slowness was a façade, then Chen Gong truly did suffer from a delayed reaction time. However, he was not stupid. On the contrary, Chen Gong excelled when given time. If he was given enough time, he could even suppress top-tier strategists in a prolonged contest, holding his own against several elite minds without the situation collapsing—though this required a specific timeframe.

Xizhi Cai had once tried to study Chen Gong's talent and ultimately had to give up, acknowledging that it was frustratingly difficult. Chen Gong's talent involved actively lowering all five of his senses by ten percent, entering a state of delayed reaction. The energy saved by this reduction was then stored, about one percent of his total, to be used when needed.

Because of this, Chen Gong typically kept his talent active, making him seem a bit slow-witted. However, when trouble arose, Chen Gong could activate the positive aspect of his talent, unleashing the accumulated energy, which allowed him to perform near-miraculous feats, turning him into a one-man army.

This was why, when Chen Gong first rebelled against Cao Cao and fought him at the Battle of Puyang, he nearly defeated Cao Cao's renowned team of five top strategists and their forces. They battled to a standstill, with Chen Gong even gaining a slight advantage. Cao Cao was almost burned alive by Chen Gong, and if not for Lu Bu's momentary lapse in recognition, forgetting to finish off the disguised Cao Cao, the Wei state might have ended right there.

Just think of how terrifying Chen Gong was at that time—taking on what was arguably the most formidable group of strategists in the land and managing to hold his own, even gaining the upper hand. However, Cao Cao's side wasn't weak either. They forced Chen Gong to repeatedly activate the positive aspect of his talent, depleting his reserves, eventually exhausting him and reducing him from a divine strategist to an ordinary mortal.

After that, they gave Chen Gong no time to rebuild his energy, constantly provoking Lu Bu with minor but urgent issues that demanded immediate attention, ensuring that Chen Gong could barely accumulate any reserves over an entire year. Before he could muster any significant power, he was defeated.

Cao Cao understood Chen Gong's capabilities, which was why he believed that as long as Chen Gong put in the effort, Lu Bu, borrowing passage through Yanzhou, would have no chance of returning. The more than ten thousand Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry, along with the eight fierce generals, would all become his, greatly strengthening his forces.

However, Cao Cao still worried that his strategy might not be approved by his advisors. If things went wrong, Yanzhou, which had just stabilized, could be thrown into chaos by Lu Bu, leading to the deaths of countless civilians. This would contradict the policy of maintaining a stable rear while implementing scorched-earth tactics at the front, as favored by Xun Yu and others.

Weighing these considerations, Cao Cao decided to feign ignorance, pretending to have trusted Lu Bu and blaming any future failures on his own misjudgment. He constantly complained to Xizhi Cai and others, never revealing his true intentions.

After all, such a disregard for the well-being of his people was indeed somewhat heartless. However, Cao Cao believed that if they won, everything could be justified. This was his philosophy: once the outcome was set and the benefits were reaped, Xun Yu and others wouldn't care about these details. Cao Cao believed Chen Gong would create a *fait accompli* for him and do it well.

Cao Cao also believed that Chen Gong would be willing to shoulder the blame, possibly even fabricating an incident where Lu Bu plundered civilians, forcing Chen Gong to reluctantly confront Lu Bu and seize him or something similar.

In short, Cao Cao was confident that Lu Bu wouldn't cause much trouble in the face of Chen Gong's abilities and that no one would suspect him of orchestrating it. After all, he had never portrayed himself as overly intelligent.

However, what Cao Cao couldn't anticipate was that Chen Gong would find a kindred spirit in Lu Bu, leading to an unwavering loyalty that would baffle Cao Cao. This outcome was so contrary to his expectations that it was as if Lu Bu had some kind of protagonist's aura.

Setting aside what Cao Cao might think upon discovering that Chen Gong had found his destined lord in Lu Bu, the seemingly flawless plan he believed he had devised had already been observed by someone in Wan City.

"Lord Cao," Cheng Yu said, approaching not in the garb of a scholar, but clad in a general's armor.

His tall stature and robust muscles made Cao Cao almost mistake him for one of his generals, especially given the solid aura of Qi training that Cheng Yu had cultivated. As one of the rare strategists who had also mastered martial arts to such a high degree, Cheng Yu stood out even among the elite.

"Zhongde, what brings you here?" Cao Cao asked curiously. At this time, shouldn't Cheng Yu be in the rear, teaching Cao Ren how to arrange formations?

"Lord Cao, you've grown impatient. Lu Bu is not so easily dealt with. Chen Gongtai is too upright and might backfire. Although he's also very resourceful, this kind of task isn't suited for him. If you had this plan earlier, you should have sent me," Cheng Yu said calmly as he faced Cao Cao.

To someone as ruthless as Cheng Yu, sacrificing a few civilians to swallow up all of Lu Bu's forces was a small price to pay. After all, in history, Cheng Yu was the first to formally propose using human flesh as military rations and actually carried it out. For someone like him, the deaths of a few civilians were trivial.

Cao Cao was momentarily stunned. How had Cheng Yu seen through what he thought was a flawless plan? But as a true hero, even when his plot was exposed, Cao Cao maintained his composure, staring back at Cheng Yu without a hint of unease.

“Xun Yu and Guo Jia are essentially noble gentlemen. Wang Can is somewhat too pedantic, and Xizhi Cai might sense something, but he wouldn’t be certain. I’m the only one who can be sure you’d do something like this,” Cheng Yu said, locking eyes with Cao Cao.

“For a ruler, besides benevolence and virtue, there must be sufficient ruthlessness. Sometimes, when the righteous path cannot solve a problem, the evil path can, and it should be used. This chaotic world has reached a point where, to end it, we must have enough power, no matter how that power is acquired. Even if we tread on corpses, once we are strong enough to change this era, we’ll have the right to save others. Even if it sullies my hands and stains my heart, even if it tarnishes my virtue, I will not waver in my dream of bringing peace to the land!” Cheng Yu declared, his gaze intense.

This was the first time Cao Cao had heard such words—words that were so contrary to traditional values but also so impactful. Many memories from his past surfaced in his mind.

The Five Colors Stick incident, where despite doing a good deed, he was forced to return home. Had it not been for his father’s intervention, he might have died.

Then, when he joined the court again and participated in purging the eunuchs with the Grand Tutor, he was betrayed instead.

Later, during the Yellow Turban Rebellion, he fought bravely and became Governor of Jinan, where “governance and education flourished, and the county was at peace.” Yet soon after, he returned home once more.

The Grand General He Jin invited external forces into the capital, and despite his advice being ignored...

The forged imperial decree, the campaign of the Eighteen Lords against Dong Zhuo, the burning of Luoyang, and his lone pursuit of Dong Zhuo—all these scenes flashed through Cao Cao’s mind. He realized there had been so many times he had tried to save the Han dynasty...

"To end this chaotic era, we need power. Even if it sullies my hands, stains my heart, and diminishes my virtue, I will not falter! I will end this chaotic era! Even if I am cursed for a thousand years, I will end this era!" Cao Cao proclaimed, meeting Cheng Yu's gaze with determination.

"No matter how difficult the road ahead, I will follow you to the death!" Cheng Yu vowed, kneeling.

Chapter 264: Who's Ambushing Whom!

Chen Gong looked at the letter from Cao Cao and couldn't help but feel a bit irritated. What kind of situation is this? If something goes wrong, I'll end up taking the blame. Even worse, if things get out of hand, too many innocent civilians could die. This... doesn't sit well with me.

Returning to his usual sharp mind, Chen Gong began to ponder the situation. After thinking it through for a while, he decided to go and meet Lu Bu to assess his strength. If Lu Bu truly had the capability, it might be best not to make a move against him in Yanzhou. However, if Lu Bu proved to be as reckless as rumored, Chen Gong figured it might be better to help Cao Cao eliminate him.

Meanwhile, Wei Yan and Guan Ping had switched roles. Wei Yan led 2,000 troops to lie in ambush outside, while Guan Ping remained inside the camp, instructing his men to maintain a loose exterior defense while keeping a tight interior one. All soldiers and officers were ordered to sleep in their clothes, ready for any situation.

At Le Ling, Zhang He had already mapped out the flaws he noticed in Guan Ping's camp layout.

"Junyi, since you're injured, I'll lead the night raid tonight. You stay behind to defend Le Ling. What do you think?" Gao Lan said after studying the camp diagram and memorizing the key points.

"Very well. But please, Yuanbo, be cautious. If anything goes wrong, retreat immediately. I'll be here in the city, and if you don't return within the hour, I'll send reinforcements!" Zhang He nodded, but his warrior's prudence led him to voice some caution.

Gao Lan's face stiffened briefly before he forced a smile. "Don't worry, Junyi. I'll be careful. Just bear with me for a while."

Zhang He nodded in agreement and then returned to studying the camp's weaknesses. He failed to notice the complex emotions in Gao Lan's eyes. As one of the famed "Four Generals of Hebei," Gao Lan often felt overshadowed by the likes of Yan Liang and Wen Chou, who were known for their brute strength, and even Zhang He, who was a superior tactician. Despite being one of the four, Gao Lan often felt like an afterthought.

After Zhang He and Gao Lan reviewed Guan Ping's camp, they ordered their soldiers to eat well and rest. By the third watch of the night, they prepared to launch their attack.

Similarly, Guan Ping had his men eat and rest early. Only a few soldiers patrolled, while the rest were told to sleep with their weapons, ready for any potential night raid. The veteran soldiers quickly recognized the signs of a possible attack and tied their rations to their belts, resting with their weapons in hand. Their years of military experience told them that a night raid was likely.

"Report!" came a loud shout. A messenger arrived at the headquarters where Guan Yu was stationed, a hundred miles away from Le Ling, delivering a detailed report.

"Ping'er is injured!" Guan Yu's grip on his Green Dragon Crescent Blade tightened. In his moment of panic, he forgot to use his son's courtesy name and called out his childhood name instead. After quickly scanning the report and the diagram of Guan Ping's camp, Guan Yu's face darkened as he handed the report to Guo Jia. "Military Advisor Guo, do you think Ping'er and Wen Chang can handle the situation? As for the camp layout—hmph!"

Guo Jia glanced over the latest intelligence and immediately guessed what Guan Ping and Wei Yan were planning. He smiled as he put down the report and said, "Congratulations, General. Ping'er has indeed inherited some of your skills. This is merely a ruse to lure Zhang He and Gao Lan into a trap."

Guan Yu was momentarily taken aback, but he quickly understood the plan, and a rare smile appeared on his face. He felt proud that his son was starting to make a name for himself. However, the thought of his son being wounded dampened his mood.

Seeing Guan Yu's expression, Guo Jia knew what he was thinking. It's natural for a father to be upset when his son gets injured on his first campaign. Guo Jia recalled a detail from the report about Zhang He being wounded and couldn't help but smile.

"General Guan, how about we take a trip to Le Ling tonight?" Guo Jia suggested with a grin. "Who knows, we might even capture the city or take down one of Yuan Shao's top generals."

"Le Ling? But it's at least a hundred miles from here. Even if we set out now, our main force won't be able to catch up," Guan Yu said, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"We'll take your elite saber-wielding guards. If we leave now, we should be able to make it in time," Guo Jia replied with a smile. "The rest of the troops can be led by Zang Ba and Gao Shun, marching overnight to Le Ling."

"Do you think this will work, Fengxiao?" Guan Yu asked, dropping the formal title of "Military Advisor" and addressing Guo Jia by his courtesy name, a sign of growing trust.

"There's a fifty-fifty chance, but I believe luck is on our side," Guo Jia said with a grin. "If we're lucky, we could take Le Ling and force Yuan Shao to shift his focus back south, giving Gongsun Zan some breathing room."

"Very well, fifty percent is good enough for me," Guan Yu said, his cold and stern demeanor softening into a rare smile. He grabbed his Green Dragon Crescent Blade and headed for the door.

"Zhou Cang!" Guan Yu called out.

"At your command!" Zhou Cang responded with a booming voice.

"Gather my saber-wielding guards. Tell them to prepare provisions and water. We must reach Le Ling within four hours, before midnight. If anyone fails, I'll allow them to leave the unit!" Guan Yu commanded.

"Understood!" Zhou Cang answered loudly.

Soon, five hundred elite saber-wielders were assembled, all armed with large sabers and mounted on horses. With Guan Yu leading them, they set off on a swift march toward Le Ling.

"Move out!" Guan Yu shouted, spurring his horse forward. Guo Jia downed a mouthful of wine before following suit. Despite his basic martial skills, he could still take down a few weak recruits.

However, despite their efforts, Guan Yu and his troops didn't reach Le Ling by midnight. In fact, they were still on the road past the third watch. Guo Jia had overestimated his stamina and was nearly shaken to pieces halfway through the journey.

Yet Guo Jia wasn't too concerned. His goal wasn't necessarily to save Guan Ping but rather to ambush the enemy. Arriving late wouldn't hurt; as long as they could ambush someone, the mission would be a success. By the time they passed Guan Ping's camp around the third watch, no signs of chaos or fire indicated that the night raid had begun.

But just as Guo Jia and Guan Yu passed, shouts erupted from Guan Ping's camp, followed by a blaze of light and the sounds of battle.

"It seems our luck isn't too bad. At ten miles away, no one should have noticed us yet," Guo Jia said, panting. "I overestimated my stamina, but General Guan, don't worry about me. Go quickly and set up an ambush between Le Ling and Ping'er's camp. If the enemy forces are large, cut through their middle. If they're small, strike them head-on. I expect Wei Yan and Ping'er to pursue as well."

Guan Yu glanced at Guo Jia's state, then listened to the distant battle cries. He knew time was of the essence, so he said, "Zhou Cang, stay here with ten men to guard Fengxiao. If anything happens, you'll be held accountable!"

"Rest assured, General! I, Zhou Cang, will protect the Military Advisor with my life!" Zhou Cang responded with a solemn salute.

Guan Yu nodded, leaving ten soldiers behind before heading to the location Guo Jia had indicated on the map. There, he planned to ambush Gao Lan as he retreated from the failed night raid. Little did he know, instead of Gao Lan, he would encounter Zhang He leading three thousand soldiers to reinforce the city.

Chapter 265: Slaying the Enemy General Before a Thousand Troops!

That night, during the hour of the Ox (1-3 AM), Gao Lan led 2,000 infantrymen out of the city with copper coins in their mouths to ensure silence as they carefully approached Guan Ping's camp.

At the same time, around midnight (11 PM - 1 AM), Guan Ping had already awakened all his soldiers, instructing them to stay within the camp and not make any noise. Meanwhile, Wei Yan had taken 2,000 soldiers out of the camp, positioning them a mile away. Although the night air was chilly in late autumn, these were well-trained soldiers, so there was no concern about them catching cold.

After Gao Lan left the city, Zhang He began to feel an uneasy premonition. He wanted to send someone to recall Gao Lan but couldn't find a good reason, so he paced anxiously back and forth in his quarters.

With a swift arrow, Gao Lan shot down a patrolling soldier, followed by a loud roar as he led his troops into the camp. However, after trampling over several empty tents, Gao Lan quickly realized that something was wrong.

"Kill them all!" Guan Ping charged out on horseback, shouting commands. A large number of soldiers emerged from all directions, their collective battle energy (cloud energy) forming a dense mass as they attacked Gao Lan's forces.

"Form up and retreat slowly!" Gao Lan quickly ordered a strategic withdrawal, recognizing the dire situation. Surrounded on three sides, he dared not order a full retreat.

"Slash!" In the confined space of the camp, Gao Lan's troops collided with Guan Ping's forces before they could even set the camp on fire. The two sides engaged in fierce close combat.

With a calm and calculated gaze, Gao Lan assessed the situation and decided on a bold move. Without seeing the other general Zhang He had mentioned, Gao Lan knew he had to make a tough decision—sometimes experience can be more frightening than intelligence, especially when honed in life-and-death situations.

"Throw the oil!" Gao Lan roared. Without hesitation, he ordered his men to throw oil forward and then lit it with torches.

"Ahh!" The fire quickly spread, separating Gao Lan's forces from Guan Ping's. The flames created a chaotic scene, allowing Gao Lan to regroup and issue new orders: "Rear units to the front! Shield bearers on the sides, spearmen behind them, and archers ready to shoot!"

Meanwhile, Wei Yan, who had been lying in wait, noticed that some soldiers were retreating from the camp, realizing that Guan Ping had failed to hold the enemy. Frustrated, Wei Yan got up, grabbed his large sword, and charged toward the enemy while shouting.

"It's coming from the left!" Gao Lan heard the commotion and felt a sense of relief. The uncertainty of an ambush had weighed heavily on him, but now that it had materialized, the pressure was lifted. While ambushes can be devastating, knowing where they are allows for some countermeasures—at least as long as it's not a near-impossible trap like the mythical "Ten Sided Ambush" (Shi Mian Mai Fu).

"Shoot!" Gao Lan shouted, calculating the distance between his troops and Wei Yan's. At the perfect moment, he ordered a volley of arrows to be fired.

"Damn it! Charge!" Wei Yan roared, his eyes bloodshot as he saw nearly a hundred of his men fall to the volley of arrows. He rushed toward Gao Lan, eager to understand why everything had gone awry despite his careful planning.

Wei Yan had many questions, but he couldn't get close to Gao Lan. The veteran general refused to give him the opportunity for a one-on-one duel, blocking Wei Yan's path with elite troops who nearly killed him with their coordinated attacks.

However, this close brush with death taught Wei Yan an important lesson: never stray too far from your own troops. After being given a horse by Guan Ping, Wei Yan and Guan Ping led their soldiers in a more calculated advance, gradually pressuring Gao Lan rather than recklessly charging in.

Despite Gao Lan's wealth of experience, the combination of being outnumbered and ambushed left him with limited options. His only hope now was for Zhang He to arrive quickly with reinforcements.

By the third watch (3-5 AM), Zhang He sensed that something was amiss. He had already prepared 5,000 infantry and cavalry, and now led them toward Guan Ping's camp—not to attack but to create enough chaos to extract Gao Lan safely.

"General, the gates of Le Ling have opened, and the enemy is advancing with no fewer than 3,000 troops," one of Guan Yu's officers reported.

"Three thousand men?" Guan Yu paused, stroking his beard thoughtfully. After a long moment, his eyes flashed with determination—the outcome would be decided here.

"Listen to my command," Guan Yu ordered. "I will position myself alone on the road and wait for the enemy general. Once I have slain him, you all must charge out without hesitation and wipe out the remaining forces during the ensuing chaos!"

Guan Yu had devised a bold strategy that only a fearless warrior could execute—a plan that relied on his strength and the enemy's lowered defenses.

"General, you mustn't!" His personal guards were shocked.

"Prepare yourselves and follow my orders. I will stand on the road alone and show you how to slay an enemy general before a thousand troops!" Guan Yu spurred his horse forward, positioning himself in the middle of the road. His guards exchanged uneasy glances but ultimately obeyed, hiding their horses some distance away.

Guan Yu took a deep breath, calming his mind. His excitement surged as he prepared for the darkness before dawn, the blackest part of the night. It was the end of October, with no moon in the sky. Even he could only see a thousand meters ahead, while the enemy wouldn't spot him until they were within five hundred meters. This was his only chance—one strike, one kill, and the illusion of a massive ambush would be created.

Chapter 266: Seizing Le Ling at Night

As Zhang He approached within 500 meters of Guan Yu, he vaguely noticed a figure standing on the road ahead. After advancing a few more steps, the silhouette became clearer. Just as he was about to order someone to investigate, he saw the figure move—swiftly, like a streak of light.

Before Zhang He could fully react, a blue-green glow, carrying a massive blade that stretched a hundred meters long, was already upon him.

"Block it!" Zhang He shouted, recognizing Guan Yu. He knew that Guan Yu's target was his head and that this attack, even with the cloud energy dissipating some of its force, would still be strong enough to pulverize him. He shouldn't have been leading from the front!

In that critical moment, Zhang He mustered all his inner energy, pushing his body to its limits without considering the toll it would take. His black inner energy erupted outward as he reached the brink of death, breaking through his own limits. But there was no time for celebration—both hands gripped his spear tightly as he thrust it toward the massive blade. He had to survive!

Boom! Zhang He barely managed to block Guan Yu's strike. Fortunately, the cloud energy had absorbed much of its power. Even so, Guan Yu's concentrated attack was too much for Zhang He to handle, even with his newly attained breakthrough. The remaining force shattered Zhang He's spear and sent him flying hundreds of meters.

"The enemy general is dead! Follow me and slay the rest!" Guan Yu didn't concern himself with whether Zhang He was alive or dead. Ignoring the emptiness within his own body after such a powerful attack, he charged toward the enemy. Inspired by Guan Yu's godlike display of strength, his personal guards roared and rushed forward, while Zhang He's troops, seeing their commander fall and the enemy's true strength unknown, naturally began to flee in panic.

Meanwhile, several miles away, Wei Yan and his forces also saw the massive, ethereal blue blade. Although they didn't understand why Guan Yu was there, they recognized it as a great opportunity.

"Everyone, fight with all your might! General Guan is on his way!" Wei Yan shouted, slicing through an entire row of enemy soldiers. The troops under Guan Ping, being Guan Yu's subordinates, recognized the distinctive blue blade. Despite their exhaustion, the sight of that blade reinvigorated them with newfound energy—reinforcements were coming!

In contrast, Gao Lan's troops, hearing Wei Yan's declaration that Guan Yu was arriving, experienced a sharp drop in morale. The boost in confidence they had from Zhang He supposedly coming to their aid evaporated under the impact of that tremendous blade.

The once-tight formation of Gao Lan's troops, steadily retreating and fighting back, began to crumble. Wei Yan and Guan Ping seized the opportunity, leading their personal guards in a fierce assault that completely shattered Gao Lan's forces.

"General, retreat quickly!" Gao Lan's personal guards shouted. At this point, the focus was no longer on minimizing losses but on ensuring their general could escape. "General, retreat! We'll cover you!"

Gao Lan fought fiercely, leading half of his guards through a weak point in Wei Yan and Guan Ping's defenses and managing to break out. However, of the more than 2,000 soldiers who had accompanied him, only about a hundred managed to escape. The rest, except for Gao Lan's personal guards, surrendered to Wei Yan and Guan Ping.

"Tanzi, leave a portion of our forces here to guard the captives. The rest will follow me to meet General Guan. It's a shame we couldn't capture that enemy commander, though," Wei Yan said, somewhat disappointed. He couldn't understand why, despite the opportunity being right in front of him, he hadn't managed to seize it.

"I'll go with you. We only need to leave a hundred men to guard the camp and prisoners. I wonder why Father came here—perhaps he feared we might fall into an ambush?" Guan Ping assigned a detachment to stay behind and guard the prisoners, then mounted his horse and headed toward the spot where the blade had appeared.

"General, we've routed the enemy, but unfortunately, the enemy general escaped, likely rescued by his subordinates. From what we've gathered from the prisoners, the enemy commander was Zhang He of Hejian—the same one who injured the young general," a junior officer reported to Guan Yu.

"I see," Guan Yu replied, closing his eyes as he stood still, trying to grasp the fleeting sensation he had felt during his strike. There was a rare sense of improvement, but it had been too brief to fully capture. "Any special reports from Le Ling?"

"According to the prisoners, Le Ling's defenses now consist of only about a thousand troops. Zhang He has been gravely injured by your attack and likely won't return. Gao Lan, who led the night raid, was most likely ambushed by the young general and won't be able to return either. However, it's a pity that we don't have enough troops to capitalize on this perfect opportunity to take Le Ling. If Zhang He recovers and regroup his fleeing forces, we'll lose our chance," the officer reported regretfully.

"Halt!" came a distant shout. Guan Yu's personal guards, who had just routed Zhang He's forces, immediately mounted their horses, vigilant and ready to charge toward the source of the voice.

"Vanguard Wei Yan, Guan Ping," Wei Yan and Guan Ping responded, halting their horses about a dozen steps away from the guards.

The guard cautiously examined the two, finally breathing a sigh of relief. As Guan Yu's personal guards, they recognized both Wei Yan and Guan Ping. With Guan Yu's son present, there was no need to remain so on edge.

"Greetings, General," Guan Ping and Wei Yan dismounted and bowed as they approached Guan Yu.

"You both did well!" Guan Yu opened his eyes, and the fierce light within them startled both Guan Ping and Wei Yan. They felt as though Guan Yu had grown even stronger, his presence more imposing than before.

"Thank you for the praise, General!" Wei Yan replied.

"Wei Yan, you will lead your men and follow me to seize Le Ling under the cover of night!" Guan Yu commanded, his aura exuding such confidence that it left Wei Yan in awe. Attacking Le Ling, a city defended by 8,000 troops, at night seemed utterly impossible.

"Understood!" Despite his astonishment, Wei Yan, holding Guan Yu in the highest regard, asked no questions and promptly complied.

"Guan Ping, you will head southeast to escort Strategist Guo to the camp. Ensure nothing goes wrong! At daybreak, lead the troops to join us at Le Ling!" Guan Yu instructed his son. Unlike Wei Yan, Guan Yu felt that Guan Ping still lacked maturity and needed more time under his guidance to truly grow.

"Understood!" Guan Ping responded with a bow. Though disappointed at not being part of the assault on the city, he harbored no resentment toward his father's decision.

Chapter 267: The Brave General of the World

Wei Yan led nearly four thousand spirited veteran soldiers, following closely behind Guan Yu. As they arrived outside the city of Le Ling, illuminated by the torches on the city walls, Guan Yu could already see the panic among the soldiers on the ramparts.

Guan Yu rode forward, entering the range of enemy arrows, and shouted at the military officer standing at the city gate, "I am Guan Yu! Your commander, Zhang He, has been slain by me. Surrender now, or when the city falls, your death will be certain!"

Thud! An arrow struck the ground near Guan Yu's feet, followed by a rain of arrows aimed at him. However, Guan Yu merely swung his great sword, deflecting all the arrows effortlessly. Without a large contingent of elite archers, Guan Yu had no fear of being hit.

"Let me show you the difference in our strength!" Guan Yu's voice carried a hint of anger as he deflected the arrows. Suddenly, a green glow erupted from his body, and the blade of his Green Dragon Crescent Blade grew immensely. Guan Yu became a blur, charging at the city wall of Le Ling with the massive blade. With a thunderous crash, under the astonished gazes of both Yuan Shao's and Liu Bei's soldiers, Guan Yu's strike shattered the city wall.

"Attack the city!" Guan Yu roared. The stunned soldiers on both sides snapped back to reality. Liu Bei's troops, led by Wei Yan, surged forward, their morale sky-high as they shouted, "General's divine might!" Meanwhile, Yuan Shao's soldiers were already hearing the clattering of weapons hitting the ground.

Standing in the breach of the city wall, Guan Yu's face was slightly pale, and his breathing was uneven, but his eyes gleamed with a fierce light. The pent-up frustration in his chest had been completely unleashed with that single strike.

The wall had shattered—something that even Guan Yu himself found astonishing. It was probably the first and last time someone had ever cleaved through a city wall. It was akin to the legendary feat of Confucius' father, who had supposedly lifted a city gate by himself—something that could never be repeated.

"There is still room for improvement," Guan Yu thought as he sensed the emptiness in his body. His ultimate technique was being perfected—not three strikes, but one. Just one strike, an unparalleled strike, to finish his opponent. Any additional moves would be mere flaws.

Guan Yu ran his hand along his Green Dragon Crescent Blade. The steel blade seemed to come alive, its surface gleaming with a pale green light as his fingers traced its edge. As he gripped the hilt, a green flame-like aura appeared on the blade, with a dragon's tail coiling around the base and its head biting the tip.

At that moment, Guan Yu finally understood the significance of the two dragons on Lu Bu's halberd. They weren't just for show; they were the manifestation of the weapon's power. Now, as his own essence fused with the blade, his weapon had given birth to its own power—the Azure Dragon.

As Guan Yu caressed the sacred beast that had emerged from his blade, he believed it to be one of the four celestial beasts, far more powerful than the golden and fiery dragons of Lu Bu. Though it was still weak, with its scales not fully grown, a dragon was still a dragon. Guan Yu could feel the growing aura within himself, a sign of his rising strength and an elevation in his state of being.

In reality, the dragon wasn't a mythical creature but a product of Guan Yu's own imagination. The blade had absorbed Guan Yu's essence, and because he envisioned it as such, it became what he desired. The dragon was merely an extension of his power, and the awe it inspired was a reflection of his latent strength. But sometimes, such illusions were necessary...

For now, Guan Yu felt as if he had been possessed by the Azure Dragon, his power surging. His presence grew more imposing, so much so that enemy soldiers quaked in fear under his gaze, unable to move. This was the aura, the "威" (Wei), that he had long sought.

"Enter the city!" Guan Yu commanded as he slowly opened his eyes, sensing the cessation of battle noises around him. Wei Yan stood nearby, awaiting his orders.

As Guan Yu's gaze swept over him, Wei Yan felt a crushing weight, a sense of awe that surpassed even his respect for Huang Zhong. Seeing Guan Yu's immense power firsthand, Wei Yan's reverence for him deepened further.

"Yes, General!" Wei Yan replied in awe, bowing his head respectfully. He finally understood why everyone held Guan Yu in such high regard. This was the aura of a godlike figure. Seeing the breach in the wall, Wei Yan bowed deeply in reverence.

Guan Yu had no idea how much his actions had shocked the world. First, Zhang He had brought five thousand troops, not the three thousand counted by Guan Yu's scouts, which meant Guan Yu had single-handedly taken on an entire organized military unit, defeating it head-on. Then, he had single-handedly breached a city wall...

This was why Wei Yan held such awe for Guan Yu. Although Guan Yu might not have fully grasped the significance of his deeds, Wei Yan understood that Guan Yu had accomplished two unprecedented feats—something that demanded immense respect. In Wei Yan's eyes, while Huang Zhong might rival Guan Yu in strength, he lacked Guan Yu's imposing presence and aura.

However, Wei Yan still felt a tinge of regret that Guan Yu hadn't killed Zhang He. If he had, it would have been perfect—one man defeating five thousand elite troops and slaying their commander with a single strike. That would have been truly awe-inspiring!

Meanwhile, on the other side, Zhang He, with several broken ribs and a shattered arm, was finally reunited with Gao Lan, both of them wearing bitter expressions. In their current state, they knew that if Guan Yu wasn't a fool, he would surely lead an assault on Le Ling. With only a thousand soldiers left to defend the city and no capable commander, losing Le Ling seemed almost inevitable.

"Junyi, how are you holding up?" Gao Lan asked after hearing Zhang He's account of the previous day's events. He, too, was at a loss—who could have expected such audacity? A man charging into the enemy ranks alone, nearly killing Zhang He—how could anyone have foreseen that? This was beyond mere surprise; it was sheer madness.

"I'll survive," Zhang He replied with a bitter smile. "Guan Yun Chang is truly a courageous general of the world. It takes boldness, strength, and intelligence to succeed in such matters. We all underestimated him."

"But this..." Gao Lan looked at Zhang He's chest, where bone fragments protruded. This was far from just "surviving"—without proper care, he might not make it.

"Don't worry," Zhang He raised his one functional hand, summoning a dark inner energy. "By some stroke of luck, I broke through in the heat of battle. If not, I would have been slain by Guan Yu. When we return, the Lord will understand what we've been through. Let's hope we can avoid punishment."

Chapter 268: The Greenhouse in the Eyes of the Ancients

Chen Xi weaved through the city streets until he arrived at a plot of farmland within the city. Well, it was called farmland, but in reality, it was just a cluster of hastily constructed large huts. These huts were fitted with numerous glass windows and housed several coal stoves inside.

"How's the situation?" Chen Xi asked as he pushed open the door. A blast of warm air hit him, mixed with the acidic smell of coal fumes and a stifling sensation. "What the—! Qu Hanmou, what are you doing?" Chen Xi grabbed the flushed-faced Qu Hanmou and dragged him out of the building.

"Zichuan, what are you doing!" Qu Qi angrily protested. "I was in the middle of observing!"

"Observing what? If you keep 'observing,' you'll end up dead! Didn't you notice that you've been feeling dizzy, with ringing in your ears and difficulty breathing?" Chen Xi scolded.

"Huh? How did you know that?" Qu Qi was taken aback. "Though, I admit, getting some fresh air does help. What's going on here? Hmm, it makes sense, though. This method does go against the natural cycle of spring planting, autumn harvesting, and winter storing. It's only natural that there's some danger since we don't have the Emperor's mandate to control the elements."

Before Chen Xi could explain the concept of carbon monoxide poisoning, Qu Qi had already come up with his own explanation.

"Well, I guess your reasoning makes sense. It's more or less the same idea. Now, did the vegetables I asked you to plant sprout yet?" Chen Xi had pulled Qu Qi out as soon as he entered, so he hadn't had the chance to inspect the plants.

"The vegetables have sprouted, but those peach and apricot trees you had me transplant with their soil are acting strange. They bloom, but they don't bear fruit!" Qu Qi said with a hint of panic. "It doesn't make any sense. It's already shocking enough that they're blooming at this time, but to bloom and not bear fruit?"

"Didn't I tell you to manually pollinate them when they bloom? How could they not bear fruit? Even if you didn't pollinate them, there should still be at least one or two fruits," Chen Xi said, puzzled.

"Zichuan, do you think what we're doing might be going against the will of the gods? Peach and apricot trees that only bloom but don't bear fruit—is this the heavens warning us to stop?" Qu Qi said with reverence.

Chen Xi rolled his eyes. What nonsense! But he had to admit that from an ancient perspective, it must indeed be quite frightening.

"Don't worry about it. If anything goes wrong, I'll take responsibility. Oh, and don't let those other peach trees bloom—I need those petals for a flower petal rain at my wedding." Chen Xi looked at Qu Qi with disdain. "You were brave enough to suggest we camp out in front of the Shennong Temple a few days ago, and now you're scared of this? Ancient people, tsk tsk..."

"You want peach blossoms just for a petal rain at your wedding? That's extravagant! You built these ten or so large greenhouses and installed all that crystal glass, spending millions just to have a petal rain in winter? Are you insane? You could get married in spring with that kind of money!" Qu Qi exclaimed in shock.

"Get lost! Do you think a noble's wedding date can be changed on a whim? I have to get married in an intercalary eleventh month. A good day like this that only occurs fifty times in five thousand years isn't easy to come by," Chen Xi firmly rejected Qu Qi's suggestion. Besides, he hadn't actually spent millions.

"I'll never understand you rich people. Fine, let's talk about what I'm good at," Qu Qi said, his tone noticeably sour. It was frustrating to be outdone in his own area of expertise.

"Go ahead, I'm listening. But I still think you should follow my advice: open the windows every now and then to ventilate the place. Otherwise, one day you might just keel over and die," Chen Xi warned, spreading his hands in exasperation, knowing that his words would probably scare Qu Qi.

"What the heck! I quit! If you want to challenge the natural order of life, why drag me into it? I'm out!" Qu Qi fumed. "Why didn't you tell me earlier that this could be life-threatening? Growing vegetables with the risk of death? What the hell!"

"I told you, as long as you follow my method, you'll be fine. But clearly, you haven't been ventilating the place properly!" Chen Xi grabbed Qu Qi by the collar. Lately, Chen Xi had been feeling less fatigued and no longer looked as perpetually exhausted as he had during the early days of Liu Bei's rise.

"Explain to me what's going on. And what are those black stones?" Qu Qi demanded, turning to face Chen Xi.

"Those black stones are also wood, but they've been buried for millions of years and compressed into what you see now, so they can burn. But since they contain other elements, if they don't burn completely, they release a gas that can kill you," Chen Xi explained as simply as he could, avoiding technical terms like "carbon monoxide."

"You should've just said that burning those stones can release some sort of vengeful spirit. I get it now," Qu Qi concluded with a straightforward and brutal analysis.

"Sure, that works," Chen Xi silently wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Now tell me why the peach blossoms bloomed but didn't bear fruit, and why the seeds sprouted at this time of year?" Qu Qi asked.

"It's because of the temperature and humidity. In spring, the temperature rises, which triggers the sprouting. What we're doing here is simulating spring conditions to make them sprout. It's like in the Jiangnan region, where they can grow vegetables even in winter." This explanation was easy for Chen Xi to give and for Qu Qi to understand. "As for the blooming without fruit, it's because flowers also have male and female parts, just like people. Without bees and butterflies to pollinate them like in spring, we have to do it ourselves."

"I see. So, even flowers need a matchmaker. A peach blossom requires all these considerations," Qu Qi said, feeling like he finally understood. Although the explanation was somewhat illogical, it was enough to stop Qu Qi from digging deeper.

"How's the bean sprout experiment going?" Chen Xi shifted the conversation to a safer topic. This was something that should've been done ages ago—no fresh vegetables? Well, bean sprouts are vegetables, right? Soybeans have been around forever, after all—they're used to feed horses!

"No problem with that. I found a doctor who's already sprouted plenty of them. But are you sure these things are edible? I recall reading in the Shennong Bencao Jing that they're medicinal, used to replenish qi. You can't just eat medicinal herbs carelessly." Qu Qi found the task easy; he had enlisted an old doctor who had produced a full basin of black bean sprouts. As he spoke, he had someone bring them to Chen Xi.

"..." Chen Xi looked at the basin of black bean sprouts. They were small, but definitely free of any harmful chemicals. However, they had already sprouted roots and turned green, making them bitter and medicinal rather than edible.

"Forget it, just dry them out and use them for medicine. If you sprout yellow ones, bring them to me. And could you use your brain a bit? Radish seeds can sprout, mung beans can sprout, soybeans can sprout..." Chen Xi said, exasperated. "Try sprouting some edible seeds and see which ones taste good."

"Oh, right!" Qu Qi suddenly realized that he'd been so focused on sprouting black beans for two thousand years that he hadn't considered sprouting anything else.

"What about the other things I asked you to plant? Like wood ear mushrooms and other fungi on rotten wood—any success?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"I used that space to plant other crops. Mushrooms and wood ear fungi are everywhere in the mountains. You can buy them for a little money, so why bother with the hassle? I repurposed the land to study growing various out-of-season vegetables," Qu Qi said with visible displeasure, clearly unhappy with what he saw as a waste.

"Do as you please, but if you fail to produce the crops I need, you're in trouble. I'll take back all the greenhouses I've given you," Chen Xi retorted with a raised eyebrow. He wasn't worried; even without Qu Qi, he could still manage. Besides, Qu Qi now had a bunch of students from Taishan.

Chapter 269: Auspicious Signs and Troubles...

After parting ways with Qu Qi, Chen Xi began to ponder whether his design had any flaws. Peach blossoms blooming in winter, with petals drifting down like rain, would undoubtedly be seen as an auspicious omen during this period.

Yes, Chen Xi intended to create an auspicious sign. On the day of his wedding, he was sure that people from Li Jue and Guo Si's faction would come, which meant that representatives from the Yang family of Guanzhong would also come, as would those from the young emperor's camp. With all these people attending, not putting on a grand show for them would be a wasted opportunity!

However, Chen Xi was also worried about potential problems that might arise after the show. This was Taishan, under Liu Bei's rule. By then, all the prominent lords of the land would likely send

representatives to attend the ceremony. The flower rain from the sky would certainly be witnessed by all the lords and would inevitably spread across the entire Han Dynasty. While there were risks, there were also benefits!

The biggest benefit would be that with such a universally witnessed auspicious sign, combined with the current prosperity of Liu Bei's territory, people across the land would inevitably start thinking. The rise of a new hegemon in the Central Plains, possibly destined to become the ruler of the world, could indeed be seen as something blessed by the heavens.

In short, after pulling off such a spectacle, public morale in Liu Bei's territory would undoubtedly soar. At the same time, some fence-sitters might be forced to reconsider their stance. For certain influential families, opposing Liu Bei would become a more daunting prospect. After all, two hundred years ago, during the time of Emperor Guangwu, there were countless inexplicable events. Who's to say that today's world might not once again be blessed with a divinely appointed ruler to restore order to the universe?

Of course, just having this one event might mean that even if Liu Xie, the young emperor, fled to Chang'an, he might refuse to come to Fenggao, even if Liu Bei offered him refuge. If, in that case, Cao Cao managed to bring the emperor to Chenliu, then the dynamic of Chong'er thriving outside and Shen Sheng perishing within would be set in stone.

Once this dynamic was established, Liu Xie would inevitably clash with Cao Cao over power, even if Cao Cao were a loyal minister. This would force Cao Cao into the role of a traitor. At that point, with a few more strategic moves, Liu Bei could retrieve the Imperial Edict and claim the righteous cause, thereby securing the Han Dynasty's banner and its moral authority.

With the moral high ground and the Han Dynasty's banner in Liu Bei's hands, along with his reputation for benevolence, it's easy to see how this would draw talented individuals to his side. Historically, even without territory or fame, figures like Chen Zhen, Xu Shu, Yi Ji, and Wei Yan all sought out Liu Bei. If he now held these three critical elements, Liu Bei would have no trouble solidifying his foundation in the short term.

However, there were significant downsides to this plan as well. Liu Bei's power was already substantial, and after witnessing the prosperity of Taishan, the attending lords would undoubtedly elevate Liu Bei's status to that of a hegemon. If another celestial event like a flower rain were to occur, Liu Bei might quickly become a target of jealousy and opposition.

Given that Liu Bei was officially recognized by the Ancestral Office as a member of the Han royal family, this advantage would make him even more formidable. If things went badly, Liu Bei could find himself beset by enemies from all sides.

Yet, after analyzing the situation further, Chen Xi realized that a scenario where Liu Bei was besieged by multiple factions was unlikely. His position was strong, with his territory bordering only Yuan Shao and Cao Cao. In the worst-case scenario, he would face them directly. However, Cao Cao was known for being cautious and wouldn't pick a fight unless there was something to gain. As for Yuan Shao, he would never look southward as long as Gongsun Zan remained a threat in the north!

With this in mind, the situation became much more manageable. Even if an auspicious sign were to provoke the other lords, there wouldn't be any immediate danger. Cao Cao wouldn't risk a direct confrontation with Liu Bei over a celestial event, and his advisors, especially Xun Yu, would urge caution.

As for Yuan Shao, he would remain focused on the Qingzhou and Jizhou front, avoiding unnecessary conflict. Though he had defeated Gongsun Zan, he was still far from fully controlling Youzhou!

In other words, while the auspicious sign might create some hidden risks, most of the benefits could be secured right away.

Having considered all this, Chen Xi decided not to dwell on the potential dangers. As long as he could solidify his foundation quickly and develop at a rapid pace, those hidden dangers might never have the chance to manifest.

Jian Yong and Liu Yan, sent as emissaries to the lords of the land, delivered invitations. Their first stop was Cao Cao's territory. Fortunately, Cao Cao had already defeated Yuan Shu and chased him relentlessly, seizing vast amounts of grain and supplies. Given Cao Cao's previous friendly relations with Liu Bei at Hulao Pass, he agreed after a brief conversation to send someone to attend the wedding ceremony.

Cao Cao knew well that attending Chen Xi's wedding was just an excuse—what really mattered was strengthening ties. Liu Bei had clearly severed ties with the Shu alliance, and Cao Cao's relationships with Yuan Shao and Liu Biao were also deteriorating. With the major alliances on shaky ground, this was a good opportunity to talk.

"Gentlemen, who among you would like to go to Taishan as my envoy?" Cao Cao asked, placing the invitation on the table with a smile. The latest intelligence on Yuan Shu had put him in a good mood. Yuan Shu was preparing to move his capital from Runan's Pingyu to Shouchun in Jiujiang, significantly increasing the distance between him and both Liu Bei and Cao Cao.

"Lord, I am willing to go!" Chen Qun and Xi Zhicai stood up simultaneously.

"Hmm, both of you?" Cao Cao was surprised. Why would two of his top strategists want to go to Taishan? Was there something he didn't know about? A flicker of doubt crossed his mind.

"My lord, Chen Zichuan is a member of the Yingchuan Chen family, though I'm reluctant to admit it," Chen Qun sighed.

Cao Cao was stunned. He had always thought Chen Xi was simply another person from Yingchuan who happened to share the same surname as the Chen family. Given his talents, Chen Xi shouldn't have been an obscure figure if he were truly a member of such a prestigious family.

Xun Yu and Xun You exchanged glances, both surprised that such a formidable individual had emerged from their home region.

"In that case, I'll leave it to you, Changwen," Cao Cao nodded. These family ties and formalities couldn't be ignored. For someone as renowned as Chen Xi, the head of his family had to make an appearance at his wedding.

"My lord, I would also like to go. I have a keen interest in Taishan," Xi Zhicai said, glancing at Chen Qun with a hint of resignation. He had thought this would be an easy task, only to have Chen Qun steal it with sound reasoning.

"Zhicai, why do you need to go? Changwen can represent both Yanzhou and the Chen family. If you go, I'll be down two strategists here," Cao Cao said, puzzled by Xi Zhicai's insistence.

"I wish to gain a clearer understanding of Qingzhou's strength and, if possible, enhance our own abilities. The scholars and generals of Qingzhou are no less formidable than ours," Xi Zhicai said, a gleam

in his eye. He intended to steal some talents and bolster his own capabilities. With three slots for storing talents and one active talent, he planned to pick the three best ones in Qingzhou!

Cao Cao looked confused and turned to Xun Yu, who sat at the seat of honor to his left. Seeing Xun Yu nod slightly, Cao Cao agreed to let Xi Zhicai go to Taishan. Xi Zhicai would represent Yanzhou, while Chen Qun would represent the Chen family.

Chapter 270: Giving the Idle Something to Do

After arranging all these matters, Cao Cao thought about his current territory and then about his father. He stroked his beard with a satisfied smile. The once troublesome and mischievous son his father had spoken of had now become one of the most prominent warlords in the land, having just defeated Yuan Shu. His achievements were undeniable.

A smile spread across Cao Cao's dark complexion as he considered his accomplishments. Returning in glory? He felt his aspirations had surpassed that.

After dismissing Xun Yu and the others, Cao Cao began making arrangements to welcome his father to Chenliu. He also planned to return to Chenliu with his army, leaving Wan City under the defense of Cao Ren and Cheng Yu.

"Zhicai, this time it's all up to you. Hurry up and help Fengxiao with his talent clearing. If it's useless, wash it away," Cheng Yu said bluntly.

"Zhicai, to put it simply, we've had a good grasp of the weather patterns these past two years. It's clear that Qingzhou's climate isn't normal. Every year, the Taishan region experiences small bumper harvests, and—" Xi Zhicai certainly had his own understanding of the matter.

"I'll keep an eye on this talent. If there's indeed a mental talent that can change the weather on a large scale, I won't miss it," Xi Zhicai nodded. "I'll make sure to record the talents of each of them and select three to bring back. This time, I'm relying on Gongda's talent to slip through. I'll clear out all three slots."

"Sometimes it's good to appear a bit dull and slow. With a protective layer, people are less likely to notice you. But I must say, I never heard of Chen Zichuan being from our hometown," Xun Yu remarked, acknowledging that Xi Zhicai's strategy was sound. They could always swap talents as needed, but Taishan was a place they might only visit once.

Xun You, feeling a bit frustrated, tugged at his lips. After all, it was his uncle speaking, so he couldn't outright refute him. He just pretended to be more slow-witted than he actually was.

"Chen Zichuan's wife is the legitimate daughter of the Fan family, another prominent name. So, contrary to what Changwen suggested, it might not be so simple," Cheng Yu remarked, finding it difficult to get along with Chen Qun, whose aristocratic pride was evident.

"That's quite strange. If he married the legitimate daughter of the Fan family, then he must also be from a distinguished branch," Xi Zhicai pondered. Though he wasn't from an aristocratic family, he understood enough about their traditions to know that such marriages required matching statuses.

"Who knows? Perhaps the Chen family deliberately kept him hidden. Given the times... hmph," Cheng Yu commented with a hint of sarcasm, making it awkward for Xun Yu and Xun You, who could only chuckle and try to defuse the tension.

Meanwhile, Chen Xi looked at the robe that Chen Lan had made for him and didn't know what to say. As his official wife, Fan Jian had forgotten to prepare his formal attire. As a result, Chen Lan, despite being a concubine, had taken the initiative. Was this due to the age difference? After all, if Fan Jian had prepared it, the robe Chen Lan had painstakingly embroidered would have just ended up stored away.

"Looks well-made. Let me try it on," Chen Xi patted Chen Lan's shoulder and said, "But it's difficult to put on. I'll need your help."

"Husband should wait until the appropriate time to wear it," Chen Lan shook her head, folding the robe and putting it away. She didn't care about protocol, but she had spent a lot of time and effort on it. The golden patterns and cloud motifs had all been carefully embroidered by hand, and she wasn't about to let him wear it before the wedding.

"Why not try it on? It might not fit," Chen Xi teased with a playful smile, only to see Chen Lan's expression darken as she pouted at him.

"Alright, I misspoke," Chen Xi relented with a sigh. "But I find it strange. You always seem to be resting, yet you've somehow managed to finish embroidering both the wedding dress and my robe. You even

strung the beads for the official's attire. Do you really have so much free time? I thought you were always resting."

"I worked on them diligently at night," Chen Lan proudly declared. Unlike Fan Jian, who barely lifted a finger, she was well aware of her status. Even though Chen Xi doted on her, and they had been through hardships together, she knew that people said a concubine was married for her beauty. After observing Fan Jian for a while, she realized that the only area where she surpassed Fan Jian was in her bust size. Everything else was evenly matched, but Fan Jian was only fifteen, and she was already twenty...

"Keep up the good work. The official documents have already confirmed your status as my wife. You can relax now—you're officially the Marchioness," Chen Xi said with a smile, recalling that Chen Lan wasn't slow when it came to embroidery. The fact that she needed a reminder to finish the wedding dress probably meant she had been working on his robe from the start.

Elsewhere, Jia Xu and Liu Ye were busy sorting through intelligence from Xiliang. As for the administrative work assigned to Liu Ye, he managed to juggle both tasks, gathering and organizing information on Xiliang while also tackling government affairs. Since the so-called governance template couldn't be completed overnight, and Liu Bei wasn't likely to conduct surprise inspections, Liu Ye felt no need to alter his usual leisurely work pace.

"Wenhe, isn't this a bit too far-fetched?" Liu Ye commented, reading through the reports from Xiliang, which mentioned ordering Ma Teng and Han Sui to rally forces for the emperor.

"It's entirely plausible. Li Jue and the others will think the decree came from the emperor, while the emperor will believe they forged it. Neither side will openly discuss it, and they'll both hold onto their grudges, waiting to settle the score when the opportunity arises," Jia Xu replied nonchalantly.

"Isn't that exactly what the emperor is thinking?" Seeing Liu Ye rendered speechless, Jia Xu feigned a look of realization, nearly choking Liu Ye in the process.

"Well, Li Jue is likely thinking along the same lines. It's inevitable—they see Xiliang as their homeland, and taking control of it is only natural," Liu Ye remarked disdainfully. He had realized that Jia Xu didn't hold Liu Xie in high regard.

"That's why I'm helping them out. It wouldn't do any good for Ma Teng and Han Sui to keep fighting amongst themselves, especially with winter approaching and the Qiang people likely to cause trouble again. Sending them to 'rescue' the emperor with the Qiang in tow is the perfect solution," Jia Xu added, wiping away nonexistent tears with his sleeve.

"You win," Liu Ye conceded, admitting defeat.

"It's nothing. I've simply given Ma Teng and Han Sui a noble cause to rally behind. With the Qiang as allies, saving the emperor should be no problem at all," Jia Xu's insincerity drew more scorn from Liu Ye, though he couldn't help but admire Jia Xu's ability to deliver such lines with a straight face.

"Fine, I'll add fuel to the fire. Han Sui and Ma Teng are no match for Li Jue and Guo Si, even with the Qiang on their side. They'll just be cannon fodder," Liu Ye said, waving his hand in resignation, feeling drained by Jia Xu's antics.

"If they defeat Han Sui and Ma Teng, Li Jue and Guo Si will inevitably turn on each other once they face no external threats. There's no need to accelerate that process," Jia Xu countered, dismissing Liu Ye's suggestion. His real goal was to eliminate the Yang family. He wanted to strike while they were still unaware, ensuring that a potential giant like the Yuan family never arose in Yong, Liang, and Hanzhong.