

Mythical 271

Chapter 271: Ma Teng and Han Sui

The bitterly cold land of Xiliang had seen Ma Teng and Han Sui rise to power after Dong Zhuo's downfall, both stepping into the vacuum left by his absence. However, as the saying goes, "One mountain cannot house two tigers." Once Dong Zhuo was gone, the two former comrades immediately turned against each other, openly clashing with their armies across Xiliang.

Compared to Ma Teng, Han Sui had more troops, more capable generals, and superior strategies. However, Ma Teng had his own advantages. As a descendant of Ma Yuan and fighting on his home turf, with the Qiang people as his allies, he wasn't easily defeated. Although he often fell prey to minor schemes, losing a few hundred or even a thousand soldiers here and there, the plentiful Qiang forces meant that such losses barely affected him.

In short, ever since Dong Zhuo's death, these two had been locked in an endless struggle, their battles turning the land into a chaotic wasteland. Unlike the constant scheming seen in the Central Plains, these two valued brute strength above all else. Though Han Sui was known as "Nine Curves" in Xiliang, renowned for his cunning plans that often frustrated Ma Teng, he was still ultimately a novice in the grand scheme of things.

Recently, both Ma Teng and Han Sui received news of an imperial envoy's impending arrival. Regardless of their personal feelings, they had to cease fighting and await the envoy.

Ma Teng, along with his son and a contingent of elite soldiers, met with Han Sui in Jincheng to await the arrival of the envoy.

However, as soon as they met, the two immediately began exchanging insults, and before long, they resorted to the usual Xiliang practice of settling matters with their fists. This time, however, both sides were relatively restrained compared to their previous deadly encounters. After all, with the imperial envoy arriving soon, it would be improper to engage in a life-or-death struggle without first cleansing themselves and offering incense in prayer. Killing each other now would be tantamount to disrespecting the emperor.

"Yan Xing, this time, I'm going to kill you!" Ma Chao threw down his helmet, mounted his horse, and glared furiously at Yan Xing, who stood behind Han Sui. The humiliation from a year ago still burned

within him, and this time, he was determined to settle the score. During their last encounter, he had narrowly escaped death at Yan Xing's hands.

"Come at me again, and you're dead!" Yan Xing sneered, gripping his spear. "This time, I won't hold back!"

"Who asked you to hold back? Prepare to die, Yan Xing!" Ma Chao's eyes blazed with fury as he spurred his horse forward, charging at Yan Xing.

"Report! The imperial envoy has entered Jincheng!" A messenger rushed in, interrupting Ma Chao's charge. The news also brought relief to Ma Teng, who had been worried about his son. While he didn't mind the loss of other soldiers, Ma Chao was his eldest son and the one in whom he had placed the most hope. He couldn't allow him to fight Yan Xing again, especially since, a year ago, Yan Xing had nearly broken Ma Chao's neck with a single strike.

"Mengqi, stand down," Ma Teng commanded.

"Yanming, calm your temper. What's the point of quarreling with a child?" Han Sui also intervened, hoping to prevent further escalation.

"You! Let me go, Lingming! I'm going to kill that bastard!" Ma Chao, who had been dragged back by Pang De, was enraged by Han Sui's words. He struggled to break free, determined to finish Yan Xing.

Yan Xing glanced coldly at Ma Chao, his eyes filled with disdain. If he hadn't been just a junior officer with a newly issued spear a year ago, Ma Chao wouldn't be standing here today.

Ma Chao's anger only intensified, but Pang De, who was as strong as Ma Chao and older by a few years, easily restrained him.

Pang De knew that although Ma Chao wouldn't be in serious danger against Yan Xing, he didn't want the young warrior to risk exposing his true strength. At seventeen, Ma Chao was already at the peak of the Qi-refining level, only a step away from breaking through. Compared to Yan Xing, who was in his twenties and had likely reached his peak, Ma Chao had far greater potential. Pang De believed that

within three years, Ma Chao could become a formidable expert, and there was no need to reveal their trump card prematurely.

"Haha, Shoucheng, it seems your son needs more discipline. How disgraceful, behaving without respect for his elders. I thought your family was descended from General Fubo, but where's the Han family's sense of decorum?" Han Sui taunted, clearly unimpressed by Ma Chao's actions.

"Chao'er, stand down!" Ma Teng commanded angrily.

"Father!" Ma Chao protested, glaring at Ma Teng.

"Stand down! Lingming, make sure he stays in line!" Ma Teng glared back at his son.

Soon after, a man claiming to be the emperor's envoy arrived, prompting both Han Sui and Ma Teng to rise in welcome. However, when they saw the envoy, they were shocked. The man's clothes were tattered, his face gaunt, and his eyes vacant.

This was, of course, the appearance carefully chosen by Jia Xu. Only someone in such dire straits could convincingly portray the emperor's desperate situation and make it clear that the emperor was grasping at straws.

"Why has the imperial envoy come..." Han Sui began, frowning.

The envoy, with his hollow eyes, weakly reached into his robes and pulled out a tattered imperial edict, handing it to Han Sui with a withered hand. Ma Teng grabbed the other half.

"Both of you... I haven't eaten in days..." The envoy seemed too weak to even read the decree aloud.

"Hurry, prepare a feast for the envoy," Ma Teng ordered, pointing to a nearby room. "The banquet is ready."

The envoy feebly returned the salute and staggered toward the inner room, leaving Han Sui and Ma Teng staring at each other.

"It seems the emperor isn't living well," Ma Teng sighed after the envoy was out of earshot.

"I think we should open the edict first," Han Sui replied. He didn't care about the emperor's fate; as long as he was living well, that was all that mattered. To him, the emperor was only useful if he could offer benefits. Otherwise, he was irrelevant.

Together, Ma Teng and Han Sui unrolled the imperial decree.

"Now that the Han Dynasty is in decline and the court has fallen into the hands of traitors... Upon hearing of the virtuous and loyal Ma Teng, descendant of General Fubo, and his meritorious service in defeating rebels, I hereby bestow upon him the title of General Who Conquers the West. As for the wise and resourceful Han Sui of Jincheng, who has successfully mediated between the Han and Qiang people, I grant the title of General Who Guards the West. Both are summoned to the capital to assist the emperor!"

In short, the emperor needed their protection and was offering them titles in exchange for their assistance. It was that simple.

Upon reading the decree, Ma Teng immediately knelt, tears streaming from his eyes. "My Ma family has been loyal for generations. Upon hearing of the emperor's plight, I am deeply moved and swear to serve to the death!"

Han Sui smirked, but seeing Ma Teng's display, he had no choice but to kneel as well, swearing his allegiance.

"Wenyue, since we are both willing to serve the Han Dynasty, why not swear brotherhood and end this senseless conflict? The Qiang and Han are all brothers, after all," Ma Teng suggested, his eyes red with emotion as he looked at Han Sui.

"Very well. Since we are both dedicated to serving the Han Dynasty, we should be brothers. This endless war has shed enough unnecessary blood. Let us put an end to it!" Han Sui replied, seemingly moved by Ma Teng's words. "Together, we will restore the Han Dynasty!"

"Agreed!" Ma Teng laughed heartily. "Let us burn incense and swear brotherhood, then march on Yongzhou, defeat Li Jue and Guo Si, and save the Han Dynasty!"

Chapter 272: The Decline of Imperial Power

Ignoring the schemes that Ma Teng and Han Sui, two sly characters, might be plotting, it's quite surprising that these two actually became sworn brothers. They even started addressing each other as "older brother" and "younger brother" in such a friendly manner.

"Menqi, from now on, Wen Yue will be your uncle. You must treat him with respect!" Ma Teng said, patting Ma Chao's shoulder.

"..." Ma Chao stared wide-eyed at Han Sui.

"Nephew, you are indeed a young hero. I believe you will achieve great things in the future." Han Sui, who had previously been sarcastic and critical, now appeared to be a kind and caring elder, leaving Ma Chao utterly confused. What was going on here?

"From now on, we brothers will work together to fight against the traitors of the state and restore the Han dynasty to save the Emperor!" Ma Teng proclaimed righteously.

"Yes, restore the Han dynasty and fight against the traitors!" Han Sui echoed. After a lifetime of struggles, he finally earned an official position with legitimacy.

"Chao'er, Lingming, quickly return to Longxi to mobilize troops! Coordinate with the Qiang people and prepare to rescue the Emperor," Ma Teng said with high spirits.

"Yanming, you also need to organize your army quickly. The Emperor is still waiting for our rescue. I expect you to lead your troops to Gaoping in An Ding within ten days. Brother Shoucheng and I will go ahead and wait for you there, while we also scout the situation in Yongzhou!" Han Sui spoke as if he

were fully committed to the role, smiling and showing none of the tension that had been present when they first met. It really seemed as though he intended to join Ma Teng in the endeavor.

It's quite remarkable how Ma Teng and Han Sui have come to this point. Initially, they had deep grudges against each other and fought in Xiliang for over a year, resulting in many deaths on both sides. However, a forged imperial edict forced them to come to a truce. To prevent each other from sabotaging their efforts during the campaign, they followed the Central Plains custom and became sworn brothers.

Normally, such brotherhoods, formed with different goals in mind, wouldn't last long. After the battle, it would be expected that they'd turn against each other again. However, the threat posed by Li Jue and Guo Si was so great that it nearly destroyed both Han Sui and Ma Teng.

In their unfortunate situation, the two had no choice but to lick each other's wounds. Over time, a genuine bond developed between them. After the battle in Yongzhou, they realized that their only chance of survival against the Central Plains heroes was to unite. So, they stopped their internal conflicts, started supporting each other, and let bygones be bygones. Surprisingly, their relationship began to improve steadily.

By the time Jia Xu and Liu Ye received intelligence that the imperial edict had reached Jincheng, Ma Teng and Han Sui had already mobilized nearly 100,000 troops. The army was primarily composed of Xiliang cavalry, as the region had an abundance of horses and Qiang people. Ma Teng, who had a good rapport with the Qiang people, along with Han Sui, who was revered by them for his intelligence, made for two strong leaders that the Qiang people couldn't help but follow.

Initially, Ma Teng and Han Sui had only around 40,000 troops. However, along the way, they gathered Qiang people who brought their own provisions, swelling their forces to nearly 100,000. People like Cheng Yin, Ma Wan, and Liang Xing arrived with three to five thousand or even eight to ten thousand troops to participate in the new Loyalist Assembly, recognizing Ma Teng as the leader and Han Sui as the military strategist. Their soldiers were willing to follow their commands.

It's important to note that these people weren't driven by loyalty to the Han dynasty. Instead, they knew that if they didn't surrender now that Ma Teng and Han Sui had reconciled, their future prospects would be bleak. As a result, they all joined the new Loyalist Army.

However, the fact that all the local Xiliang leaders joined this campaign and were subsequently decimated by Li Jue and Guo Si is precisely why Ma Teng and Han Sui's forces survived after this event—because everyone else had perished.

Ma Teng led his force of over 90,000 troops, falsely claiming it was 100,000, and marched toward Yongzhou in grand fashion. Before they even reached Zuofengyi in Chang'an, Li Jue had already received urgent reports, which infuriated him.

"Ado, that brute Ma Teng dares to cause us trouble! And that damned little Emperor dares to plot against us from behind!" Li Jue cursed as he angrily read the report. Immediately, he blamed Liu Xie for everything. "Let's go to the palace and select some noblewomen to humiliate that scoundrel. If it weren't for the Chancellor back then, how could he have ascended the throne?"

Guo Si, a high-ranking general who had risen from the ranks of banditry, couldn't make sense of the report. However, he agreed with Li Jue's sentiment. If it weren't for the Chancellor supporting the little Emperor back then, who knows where he would be now? And yet, he still dares to cause them trouble!

"Let's send Zhang Ji and Pan Chou to deal with those two scoundrels, Ma Teng and Han Sui," Guo Si said disdainfully. "We two will go to the palace and ask the little Emperor what he plans to do! How dare he secretly communicate with outsiders and ignore us, the state's regents?" Such bold words, directly questioning the Emperor's authority...

"It shouldn't be a problem. Although Ma Teng's forces are numerous, in terms of strength, our Xiliang cavalry far surpasses theirs," Li Jue said, scratching his head. "It's a pity that our strategist and Mr. Jia are missing. If they were here, we wouldn't have to deal with such trouble."

"Ah, our strategist and Mr. Jia... Why weren't we in the city at that time?" Guo Si lamented with regret. They had realized that court affairs were far more complex than they had initially thought. Relying solely on military power wouldn't necessarily solve the problems; there were too many intricate schemes involved.

"Enough of that. Let's go to the palace and warn the little Emperor. If he dares to cause us trouble again, Ado, what should we do?" Li Jue asked, trailing off as he pondered. It seemed that besides humiliating the Emperor by sleeping with his women, they didn't have many other options.

"How about we kill some ministers?" Guo Si suggested reluctantly. Killing the Emperor was out of the question, and as for sleeping with his concubines, they'd already done that countless times. Causing chaos in the harem had been a practice since Dong Zhuo's time, and yet, who cared? What, the loyal ministers with some ability had all been eliminated, and those without ability were only good for dying or bleeding; they were utterly useless!

"Good idea. Let's intimidate them. During the court session, we can pick out anyone we don't like and kill them on the spot," Li Jue proposed. "I've been annoyed with this bunch for a long time. Killing a few will also scare the little Emperor. It's a good way to make use of these useless fools."

"I think we should start with Yang Biao," Guo Si immediately targeted Yang Biao, the Grand Commandant. He found Yang Biao particularly annoying, even though Yang Biao hadn't done much. But Guo Si had a feeling that if he killed Yang Biao, the court's troubles would disappear.

"No, don't. When the Chancellor killed Yuan Wei, it provoked Yuan Shao to attack us. If we kill Yang Biao and anger Yuan Shu, it won't be good," Li Jue advised, recalling the complex relationships in the Han dynasty. He hadn't forgotten that Yuan Shu's wife was Yang Biao's daughter. Yuan Shao's previous wrath had indeed frightened Li Jue and his cohorts. If it could be avoided, Li Jue preferred not to provoke the Yuan family again.

"Fine, we'll just pick a few others and kill them instead. We'll make sure to splash Yang Biao with some blood too!" Guo Si, remembering Yuan Shao's fury, shuddered and abandoned the idea. He decided to randomly select a few ministers to execute and settle for splattering Yang Biao with their blood.

"Idiot! Why don't we summon everyone to the court session?" Li Jue, prompted by Guo Si's suggestion, came up with an even grander idea.

Chapter 273: The Inferior Hundred-Forged Steel

Liu Bei glanced at the gift list in his hand and felt a bit embarrassed as he looked at Lady Zhang. Previously, when he had repaired Fenggao, it could be considered a gesture of apology. However, this gift list seemed to be taking advantage of the Zhen family.

"There's no need for this, my lady," Liu Bei said, feeling a bit uneasy.

"I heard that Lord Liu plans to establish academies. The Zhen family has made preparations and is willing to build academies in the Taishan and Qingzhou regions for free. We are also willing to cover the costs of food and lodging for the students," Lady Zhang said with a smile. Building academies wouldn't cost much, and donating some chairs and tables was insignificant. Feeding those kids breakfast and lunch at the academy was nothing. The Zhen family had over ten thousand servants; what's a few more?

A small expense like this could win Liu Bei's favor—no big deal. When Lady Zhang presented this plan to the elders of the Zhen family, they didn't even take it seriously.

The truth is, the Zhen family's elders were currently occupied with bigger matters, such as collaborating with the Mi family, the Wei family, and other prominent merchants to establish business regulations that would benefit the Zhen family. Matters like this, which Lady Zhang could handle on her own, weren't worth their attention. She just wanted to get it done quickly so she could return to dealing with the bigger issues.

"This doesn't seem right. The expense is too large; I can't let the Zhen family bear such a burden," Liu Bei said, shaking his head. He could tell that the Zhen family meant well, but he felt the expense was too much for a single family to handle.

"Is Lord Xuande underestimating the Zhen family?" Lady Zhang said playfully, covering half of her face with a silk fan, a smile tugging at the corners of her eyes. "I would very much like to see just how large this expense could be."

Liu Bei smiled wryly. To him, it seemed like Lady Zhang was overconfident. This was something that a single family couldn't possibly bear.

"In that case, please let me know the exact figures later. The Zhen family also wishes to contribute to the prosperity of Lord Xuande's territories," Lady Zhang said, narrowing her eyes slightly. She knew Chen Xi wouldn't let Liu Bei act recklessly, so if he said it couldn't be done, it wasn't just idle talk.

"Rest assured, my lady," Liu Bei said, taking a sip of tea.

Under the cover of her fan, Lady Zhang's lips twisted in dissatisfaction. She then gracefully rose, curtsied to Liu Bei, and slowly exited.

"Lady Zhang really has sharp instincts," Chen Xi said, emerging from behind a screen. "But why did I have to hide?"

"If she saw you, she would hide. And if you saw her, you would do the same. Now, let's continue discussing our previous matters," Liu Bei said, pointing to a nearby seat, signaling Chen Xi to sit and continue.

"Apart from the forces under Yun Chang, Ziyi, and Xu Gao, and the navy, which doesn't need adjustment, the other troops have completed the first round of demobilization. They are being reorganized from the agricultural troops. Meanwhile, the city guard unit, composed of veterans over thirty-two who have fought in a hundred battles, has been fully selected. After we hold a memorial for the fallen soldiers in a few days, we can proceed with the reorganization," Chen Xi reported on the tasks he had managed in recent days.

Liu Bei nodded repeatedly, clearly satisfied with the progress. However, after a moment's hesitation, he said, "Actually, Zichuan, there's no need to produce new weapons. You might not have observed the weapons closely enough, but let me put it this way: a spear made from hundred-forged steel isn't as sharp as a standard spear that has been used by a soldier for a year. It also lacks the resilience of a standard spear."

"Really? How could that be?" Chen Xi asked in confusion. He had been planning to start a coal mine to re-equip the elite troops. How could such an irrational situation arise?

"Simply put, inner energy can alter the nature of weapons and armor. That's why the weapons that Yun Chang and I use are also made of refined iron, but they can easily cut through newly forged weapons of the same material," Liu Bei explained. "In this sense, weapons that soldiers have used for a year have far surpassed the quality of hundred-forged steel."

"..." Chen Xi was speechless. He hadn't expected such a situation. If this were true, then his coal mine plan would only be good for making coal briquettes. His dream of a steel revolution was over!

"Because of this, the regular army won't undergo a large-scale equipment upgrade. Every time we do that, it significantly reduces the effectiveness of our forces. This is also why we primarily repair soldiers' weapons rather than replace them with new ones."

As he spoke, Liu Bei pulled a standard sword with many nicks from the top of his bookshelf. He then found one of the swords that Chen Xi had planned to promote, a horse-slaying sword. With a single clash, the hundred-forged steel sword, in which Chen Xi had placed high hopes, was easily cut in half.

"See? That's how it is. Generally speaking, this is the situation with weapons. Of course, some master craftsmen can forge weapons that are sharper than those that have been used for over a decade, but such weapons clearly can't be mass-produced," Liu Bei said, sighing as he tossed the nicked sword onto the table.

"In that case, where did we get our previous equipment?" Chen Xi asked curiously. If the horse-slaying sword was ruined, then so be it. He was now more interested in how they had acquired those high-quality weapons.

"New weapons, so they were very inferior. This is also one of the reasons why new recruits are easily crushed by veterans—the difference in weapon quality is too great. That's why I never allow soldiers who haven't trained for a year to go into battle, because their equipment is simply too inferior," Liu Bei said helplessly. Because of this, new recruits were completely useless in combat...

Chen Xi picked up the nicked standard sword in disbelief. "So, these weapons can only be repaired, not reforged?"

"Yes, repairs are fine, but if you reforge them, they will become new weapons," Liu Bei replied with frustration. "That's why weapons are a headache for any warlord. It's said that the Han Imperial Guards' equipment has been passed down for generations."

Chen Xi was instantly stunned. If what Liu Bei said was true—that a standard sword made of pig iron used for a year could cut through a hundred-forged steel horse-slaying sword—then the equipment of the Han Imperial Guards, refined over four centuries, must have become divine weapons.

Liu Bei noticed the shock in Chen Xi's eyes and waved his hand dismissively. "It's not as exaggerated as you think. Everything has its limits. Whether it's ordinary iron, refined iron, hundred-forged iron, or meteorite iron, as long as it's still iron, its ultimate limit remains the same. It can't turn into something else."

"Oh, so upgrading equipment is completely unnecessary. All we need is to use the weapons left by previous generations, right?" Chen Xi shrugged and asked.

"The problem is, there aren't enough weapons from previous generations. That's the biggest issue! Once a weapon has been 'cultivated,' if it's not used for a long time, it deteriorates. Unless someone can refine a weapon to the point where it possesses a spirit, which is just a myth," Liu Bei said with a sigh. Over the past few centuries, no one had managed to refine a weapon with a spirit. Where did this idea even come from?

Chapter 274: Lady Zhang is a Good Choice!

"This is the situation. Although your horse-slaying sword design is impressive, replacing all the weapons with horse-slaying swords would leave our army without combat capability for over a year. The process of nurturing weapons on the battlefield is faster, and those with inner energy can accelerate it, but most of our soldiers don't have inner energy because they can't even get enough food. It would take at least a year and a half for our soldiers to bring a horse-slaying sword to its optimal condition," Liu Bei explained helplessly. Although he was optimistic about the horse-slaying sword, he couldn't afford to make such a foolish decision that would cost lives.

"Oh, it's not a big deal. We'll just equip our tens of thousands of agricultural soldiers with weapons and armor, nurture them like we nurture the soldiers, and eventually, their weapons will be battle-ready," Chen Xi responded with a look that said, "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

Liu Bei was stunned. Why hadn't he thought of this before? Equipping the agricultural soldiers with weapons and armor and then swapping the nurtured weapons for new ones was a simple solution.

"Make a note of this. But if that's the case, doesn't that mean Cao Mengde (Cao Cao) has already benefited? After Yuan Shu's 100,000-strong army was routed, they left behind their weapons and armor. If those were seized by Cao Cao, wouldn't that mean Yuan Shu is done for?" Chen Xi suddenly recalled a recent event.

"Indeed, if Yuan Shu lost that much armor and weapons, it would be tough for him, even with his vast resources," Liu Bei said, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead. It was easy to overlook such a significant detail.

"This is going to be a real problem," Chen Xi said with a frown. It meant that after the battle, Cao Cao had likely gained a large number of high-quality weapons, effectively elevating his troops to the same

level as Liu Bei's, if not higher. It seemed that wealth truly comes to those who seize it, and they would need to target some wealthy enemies.

"Yes, Cao Mengde has always been an ambitious figure," Liu Bei recalled, thinking back to their discussions during the Battle of Hulao Pass.

"Xuande, how long does it take for weapons to return to their original state after they are no longer nurtured by inner energy? I need to make preparations," Chen Xi asked with a sigh. There was no point in being jealous of Cao Mengde. They would have to proceed cautiously and steadily.

"Generally, once weapons are no longer used or nurtured by inner energy, they revert to their normal state within a year. However, even though they lose their enhanced properties, they still retain some of the improvements. When they are nurtured again, the process is much faster—about half the time compared to the first time," Liu Bei explained. "Of course, this only applies to regular soldiers."

"Oh, that's reassuring. As for our generals, we don't need to worry. Weapons like those of the Third Brother are always kept close by," Chen Xi said, feeling more confident now that he had a better understanding. Since Liu Bei mentioned a year, he knew that for regular soldiers, nurturing their weapons again would still be effective, although not as fast as during the first year.

"What do you plan to do now?" Liu Bei asked curiously. After all, Chen Xi had prepared heavy armor and large shields for the city guards, but now it seemed those would be unnecessary.

"We won't switch their equipment. They'll just use their previous gear," Chen Xi said with some frustration. The shiny, eye-catching new armor would have to be abandoned—it was now nothing more than a burden. The enemy could easily overpower their heavy iron shields with lighter, well-used wooden ones.

"But let them carry the large shields you made. In a year, they should be good to go," Liu Bei said with a smile. After all, the city guards didn't have heavy duties, so they could join the ranks of those upgrading their equipment.

"That's all we can do," Chen Xi said, resigned. The living energy in this world was too powerful—it completely outclassed technology. What was the point of forging high-quality steel when it was so easily overshadowed? Technology was failing them!

"What do you think of Lady Zhang's proposal? Should we let her handle it?" Liu Bei asked, returning to the topic of Lady Zhang's earlier offer.

"That depends on what Xuande thinks," Chen Xi said, pouring tea for both of them, using the action to hide his expression.

"What I think?" Liu Bei asked, puzzled.

"If Xuande takes on this task himself, there's no problem. But if the Zhen family handles it, it could be seen as inappropriate. Regardless of the situation in Jizhou, all those students would have been educated at the Zhen family's expense," Chen Xi explained with a shrug. "Of course, I don't think Lady Zhang has thought of it that way, and she probably won't mention the Zhen family's involvement either."

After a moment's thought, Liu Bei understood what Chen Xi was concerned about and nodded. "In that case, I should decline the Zhen family's goodwill. It would be better for both parties."

"There's no need to go that far," Chen Xi said, shaking his head. "When it comes to handling this matter, Xuande won't have the time to manage everything. The most suitable person would be Lady Gan. But if Xuande has any intentions toward Lady Zhang, then it would be fine to let her handle it as well."

Chen Xi's words made Liu Bei's face flush, and he waved his hand dismissively. "How could I mix personal feelings with public matters? This is official business, Zichuan. Think of another solution. There's no harm in declining the Zhen family's offer."

"I'm being honest, Xuande. If you truly have feelings for Lady Zhang, she is a good match. It's perfectly normal for her to remarry, and having her handle some matters would eliminate the need for the kind of deliberation we've had today," Chen Xi said, exasperated. He wasn't trying to provoke Liu Bei.

Liu Bei remained silent, but Chen Xi's words struck a chord. Just as Guan Ping had an interest in noble ladies who had fallen on hard times, Liu Bei couldn't help but be attracted to Lady Zhang, who was noble and graceful.

Lady Zhang, who had managed the Zhen family's affairs, was not only beautiful and of noble birth but also highly capable. Although she had shown some short-sightedness, Chen Xi had corrected that, and she had since become steady and reliable—qualities that strongly appealed to Liu Bei. However, while he was attracted to her, Liu Bei wasn't the type to harm her family for his own gain.

"If you have feelings for her, there's no harm in entrusting this matter to Lady Zhang and Lady Gan," Chen Xi said. Liu Bei's hesitation was a sign that he was inclined toward the idea but couldn't find a perfect solution.

After a long silence, Liu Bei asked an unexpected question. "Zichuan, do you think Lady Zhang's daughter, Zhen Mi, is very beautiful?"

Chen Xi was taken aback. How did the conversation take such a surprising turn? Liu Bei wanting both mother and daughter? That didn't seem like him! Even when Mi Zhen occasionally appeared before him in her official attire, Liu Bei had shown no particular interest, treating her more like a niece. And now, was he suddenly interested in someone younger than Mi Zhen? Impossible!

Liu Bei studied Chen Xi's expression for a while, then nodded and smiled. "Zichuan, you don't need to worry about this matter anymore. I'll handle it myself."

Chapter 275: Let's Create a Forgery

Even a genius like Zhuge Liang had moments of ignorance, so it was no surprise that Chen Xi didn't fully understand Liu Bei's thoughts. However, since Liu Bei had said not to worry about it, Chen Xi wouldn't interfere. As long as Liu Bei wasn't acting irrationally, he generally knew what he was doing and what he was good at.

With Liu Bei's assurance, Chen Xi didn't linger. After exchanging a few casual words, Chen Xi left before Liu Bei could even offer him tea to see him off. Despite his seemingly idle wandering, Chen Xi had plenty of tasks on his plate.

After Chen Xi left, Li You entered the room and noticed Liu Bei happily sipping tea. "Xuande, do you have some good news you'd like to share with me?"

"Please, sit here," Liu Bei said, pointing to the seat opposite him. "What do you think of Lady Zhang?"

Li You immediately understood what Liu Bei was getting at and naturally responded with praise. "Lady Zhang is a woman of noble birth, capable and graceful—a perfect match."

Li You wasn't just flattering; given Liu Bei's current status, taking a concubine was one thing—he could choose anyone he wanted. But when it came to marriage, it required careful consideration. The woman had to come from a prominent family, be well-educated, and be of equal social standing. Lady Zhang met all these criteria.

"I heard that Zichuan, who is usually indifferent to women, once had a fondness for the Zhen family's youngest daughter. Is this true?" Liu Bei asked, bringing up an unrelated matter. But Li You, unlike the inexperienced Chen Xi, quickly grasped Liu Bei's underlying intent and real thoughts.

"Indeed, it's true. I recall Mi Zizhong once joking about it while drunk, mentioning that Zichuan was indeed moved by the Zhen family," Li You confirmed.

"That's good," Liu Bei said with a satisfied smile. As long as Chen Xi was interested, Liu Bei was reassured. The matter of social standing wasn't something Liu Bei cared about; he knew Chen Xi's potential was enormous, something Lady Zhang also recognized.

If Li You had been 80% confident before, he was now certain—Liu Bei wanted to strengthen his bond with Chen Xi. Marrying Lady Zhang wasn't something Liu Bei objected to, and if it also brought him closer to Chen Xi, all the better.

"However, Xuande, this isn't the right time," Li You cautioned, pointing out that the current circumstances weren't suitable for a marriage with Lady Zhang.

"I know, but some things should be planned ahead, just like Zichuan, who always looks three steps ahead. Occasionally, I should learn from him. By the way, Wenru, have you prepared the gift for Zichuan?" Liu Bei nodded, not wanting to dwell on the matter, and changed the subject.

"It's ready," Li You replied, not probing further into Liu Bei's plans to marry Lady Zhang. After all, the benefits to Liu Bei were too great to ignore. Just thinking about Chen Xi's abilities made Li You see the value in such a marriage.

"Is the golden cauldron prepared?" Liu Bei asked, somewhat obscurely.

"It's been made," Li You answered. In fact, what he wanted to say was that the two cauldrons, representing the Heaven and Earth, that Chen Xi had ordered to be forged as replicas of the legendary cauldrons of Emperor Xuanyuan, were now completed. As for where the copper came from, that was something he couldn't reveal. In fact, Li You knew that this secret would have to stay buried with him forever. Even if Chen Xi asked, he would feign ignorance.

Legend had it that after defeating Chiyao, Emperor Xuanyuan (the Yellow Emperor) had forged three cauldrons to worship Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, which later became the nine cauldrons of Emperor Yu. When Emperor Wu of Han found one of these cauldrons, it became a symbol of his authority. The other two, however, had disappeared. Chen Xi had subtly hinted to Li You to create forgeries of these two missing cauldrons and bury them. Later, they could be "discovered" by accident, along with the very spot where they should be unearthed!

Li You had been shocked by this audacious plan, and since then, he'd regarded Chen Xi with a certain wariness. Anyone capable of suggesting such a scheme clearly had a devious mind!

But whether Chen Xi was devious didn't matter. Li You recognized that this plan was indeed brilliant. After burying the cauldrons for a few years, they'd be unearthed, and whoever possessed them would be seen as the rightful ruler, blessed by Heaven itself.

If these cauldrons were genuinely believed to be authentic, their significance would surpass even that of the Imperial Seal. When the nine cauldrons were whole, there was no need for an Imperial Seal. It was only after the nine cauldrons were lost that the first Emperor created the seal. Thus, in terms of authority, the nine cauldrons surpassed the Imperial Seal, and the three cauldrons of Emperor Xuanyuan were even more revered than the nine cauldrons of Emperor Yu! Holding these cauldrons would give their possessor the confidence to challenge even the Emperor himself.

Chen Xi had suggested that these two cauldrons be buried somewhere in Jizhou. Then, by some "accident," one cauldron would be found by Yuan Shao and the other by Liu Bei. A grand battle between these two Heaven-ordained kings would ensue, with the victor claiming all of Heaven's mandate.

Li You hadn't needed much convincing to agree with this plan. Despite Chen Xi's subtle hints, he understood the implications. While there were risks, the potential benefits were enormous.

If this plan did spark a war between the two major warlords, with the contest centered around these Heaven-mandated cauldrons, no one would question their authenticity. By that point, the victor would gain immense morale and popular support. After all, when Emperor Wu of Han found the middle cauldron, he immediately renamed his reign to reflect this auspicious event. The importance of these cauldrons in the eyes of the ancients couldn't be overstated!

Li You wasn't a virtuous man, and he knew how to keep a secret. This kind of low-cost but high-reward strategy was exactly his kind of plan. So, he accepted the task. The two cauldrons had already been forged. Now, he just needed to age them convincingly—a process that would take some time, but he had plenty of that. Once the cauldrons were ready, he would bury them in the right locations and stage a balanced battle between Liu Bei's and Yuan Shao's forces, during which these cauldrons would be "discovered."

For Li You, this part of the plan was easy. The real challenge was making sure the cauldrons ended up in credible locations, ones that could withstand historical scrutiny. That meant he had to juggle his duties as Liu Bei's advisor while researching ancient texts and maps to find the perfect burial sites. Then, he'd quietly bury the cauldrons in those spots.

From the moment Li You took on this task, Chen Xi had nothing more to do with it. How the cauldrons were created, where they were buried, and how to keep everything secret—that was all up to Li You.

Thinking about this, Li You couldn't help but smile. Chen Xi's schemes always seemed audacious, forcing him to think outside the box. It was enlightening and refreshing for someone like Li You, who was used to conventional strategies.

Chapter 276: Merit and Fault

As Gongsun Zan headed north, he was fortunate not to encounter any of Yuan Shao's pursuers. Although he felt groggy on the way, he safely returned to Youzhou. However, perhaps due to the long duration of his fever or the severity of his defeat, Gongsun Zan showed signs of irritability and his thinking had become somewhat irrational.

"Report to the lord, Taishi Ziyi and Gan Xingba have arrived," a messenger rushed in and loudly reported.

Ever since parting ways with Gan Ning, Gan Lan had traveled north along the river. Taishi Ci, who didn't have the same concerns as Gongsun Zan, continued along the route he had previously agreed upon with Gan Ning along the Zhang River, planning to rescue Gongsun Zan once he was safe. After all, Gongsun Zan's sudden departure left Taishi Ci somewhat hurt, though he didn't want to dwell on it. Since he was an ally, not a subordinate, Taishi Ci wasn't inclined to play nanny for Gongsun Zan anymore. Besides, he had already been seriously injured while protecting Gongsun Zan, so he felt he had done his duty to the fullest.

Gan Lan continued along the river, and by the next evening, he encountered Taishi Ci. Although Taishi Ci was curious about why only a few small, broken ships had come to meet him, he didn't ask any unnecessary questions and boarded the ship immediately. After all, in Jizhou, where there was no naval force to speak of, being on the water meant they were completely safe.

Even though Taishi Ci didn't ask, Gan Lan knew what he was thinking. With a bitter smile, he recounted everything that had happened during that time. Taishi Ci was deeply stirred upon hearing that 300 men had burned down the granary in Handan and retreated unscathed, forcing Yuan Shao to turn back due to a lack of provisions.

"And where is Xingba now?" Taishi Ci asked curiously.

"He led a hundred men to raid Yuan Shao's camp," Gan Lan replied helplessly. Upon hearing this, Taishi Ci spat out his drink in disbelief. Was this something a person could do?

Just as Taishi Ci was about to inquire further, a navy soldier approached. "Commander, some of the brothers have spotted the leader's ship heading this way. There are no pursuers in sight, so the leader must have succeeded."

"General Taishi, please rest. I will go welcome our general," Gan Lan glanced sideways at the soldier, noting that the habits of these river bandits hadn't changed.

"I'll go with you to see Xingba," Taishi Ci said, putting down his wine bowl, eager to witness firsthand what made this seemingly unruly Gan Ning perform so impressively on the battlefield.

"Very well!" Gan Lan bowed and then led the way for Taishi Ci.

"Everyone, your commander has returned! Welcome me!" Gan Ning's arrogant voice echoed over the river even before he arrived.

Gan Lan sighed helplessly. His young master was truly embarrassing, far from the demeanor of a great general. He had just reprimanded his subordinates for their bandit-like behavior, yet he himself showed none of the grace of a military leader.

"Xingba, come over and let me see what changes the man who burned down Handan's granary has undergone!" Taishi Ci called out loudly.

"Hahaha, Ziyi is here too!" Gan Ning laughed heartily as he flipped off his boat and, with a few leaps, landed on the same boat as Taishi Ci.

"I didn't just burn down Handan's granary. If Yan Liang hadn't blocked me, I would have killed Yuan Shao! But even so, I cut down his command flag. I'm the man who can take on ten thousand soldiers with just a hundred riders!" Gan Ning boasted arrogantly. Having returned safely after raiding the camp, he was already thinking about how to regale his brothers with tales of his exploits. This was a real achievement—how could he not brag a little?

"Impressive!" Taishi Ci gave Gan Ning a thumbs-up. After all, if he had been in Gan Ning's position, he doubted he could have pulled off such a daring feat.

"You're too kind," Gan Ning said smugly, waving his hand dismissively. He was the type who thrived on praise, especially when it came from someone like Taishi Ci, who wasn't tainted by jealousy. After all, Taishi Ci was a master in his own right!

As Taishi Ci watched Gan Ning's uninhibited and flamboyant demeanor, he thought about himself and came to understand why Gan Ning was the commander while he was merely an excellent general. Taishi Ci had led more men and accomplished less than Gan Ning—this was the difference between them!

"Hmm? Where is General Gongsun?" Gan Ning asked after boasting for a while, finally realizing that the other main character was missing.

Taishi Ci recounted everything that had happened during that time, and Gan Ning immediately frowned. Gan Ning wasn't foolish—he just didn't like to think too much. Naturally, he realized something was off about Gongsun Zan's behavior.

"Forget it. We'll search along the river for a few days, and if we can't find him within ten days, we'll return to Youzhou. After all, the White Horse General is blessed with great fortune," Gan Ning said with a look of displeasure. He had never been satisfied with Gongsun Zan, and now his dissatisfaction had only grown.

Over the next ten days, Gan Ning searched carefully and eventually confirmed that Gongsun Zan hadn't taken Taishi Ci's words seriously. When they found some of the defeated soldiers and escapees, they all said that Gongsun Zan had headed north. Where could he go if not Youzhou?

Gan Ning, being the type who clearly distinguished between love and hate, decided that since Gongsun Zan didn't care about them, he wouldn't bother with Gongsun Zan anymore. Without another word, he set sail back to Youzhou to wait for news. Whether Gongsun Zan lived or died, they just wanted an explanation.

"Let them in," Gongsun Zan said coldly.

"General Gan Xingba, General Taishi Ziyi, meet General Gongsun," the two entered and greeted Gongsun Zan with a bow.

"So it's the two generals. What business do you have with me?" Gongsun Zan asked sarcastically, his tone particularly hostile toward Gan Xingba. If you were on the battlefield, why didn't you burn down Handan's granary earlier? Why wait until after my defeat to take action?

Gan Ning naturally sensed the hostility from the Youzhou generals. He looked up and sneered, "Setting aside our loyalty in coming to your aid from a thousand miles away, Ziyi saved you from danger, and I risked my life to burn down Handan's granary, giving you a chance to escape. Yet you left without a word, and now you want to deal with us?"

Gan Ning, being a straightforward person, wasn't one to mince words. In his view, merits were merits, and faults were faults. Those who achieved merit should be rewarded, and those at fault should be punished. How could he tolerate injustice against those who had done their duty?

"How dare you! Soldiers, arrest this madman!" Gongsun Zan, caught off guard and embarrassed, grew furious. His face turned ashen as he roared in anger.

"Hmph! Who dares to make a move!" Gan Ning's powerful internal energy exploded, instantly overwhelming everyone present. "Gongsun Bogui, I was ordered by Lord Xuande to save your life, and Ziyi was as well. Don't overestimate yourself. Now that we've completed our military duties, we plan to leave. Do you intend to stop us?" Gan Ning sneered, "Let me show you our power!"

Before Taishi Ci could stop him, Gan Ning waved his hand toward the roof, causing it to shatter. The ripple-like shockwave that followed destroyed the entire building. Gan Ning then grabbed Taishi Ci and leaped outside, burying Gongsun Zan and his men under the rubble.

Chapter 277: Just Familiarity

Gan Ning grabbed Taishi Ci's arm, and with a few leaps, they covered over a hundred meters. They turned into an alley before the Gongsun infantry stationed outside had any chance to react. By the time Gongsun Zan and his men furiously emerged from the rubble, Gan Ning and Taishi Ci were long gone.

"Search for them! If you find Gan Ning, kill him on sight!" Gongsun Zan roared in fury, having made up his mind to eliminate the insolent Gan Ning who dared to challenge him.

"My lord, please reconsider!" Tian Kai immediately stepped forward to intervene. "Gan Xingba is a top general under Liu Xuande and has indeed rendered us great assistance. Although he has provoked you, why not turn a blind eye to show your magnanimity?"

Gongsun Zan glared coldly at Tian Kai before turning his head to gaze at the sky. "And where does that leave me? I'll capture Gan Ning and hand him over to Liu Xuande for an explanation!"

Tian Kai was stunned. How could Gongsun Zan think like this?

"Report, my lord!" Just as Tian Kai was about to continue his plea, a messenger rushed in. "My lord, General Zou reports that our troops stationed outside Zhuo County have run out of provisions. Please urge the Governor to release supplies, or we may face a mutiny."

"What?! That old fool Liu Bo'an dares to withhold my supplies! All generals, follow me to confront that old bastard Liu Bo'an!" Gongsun Zan roared in rage, instantly forgetting about Gan Ning and addressing the crowd.

Tian Kai breathed a sigh of relief. He believed that Gongsun Zan, embarrassed by Gan Ning's earlier actions, now had an excuse to step down thanks to Liu Yu's interference. With this thought, Tian Kai couldn't help but curse Gan Ning for being so tactless. If he had just shown a bit of humility earlier, the situation could have been resolved peacefully. Now there was a thorn between both sides.

Gongsun Zan might not have been aware of the situation in Youzhou, but Tian Kai, stationed at the rear, knew it well. Youzhou had been receiving a steady flow of provisions from Liu Bei, though the quantity wasn't large, it was consistent. This showed that Liu Bei had no ill intentions toward Gongsun Zan. Given this, why offend their strongest ally over a moment of frustration? Was Gongsun Zan tired of living?

Of course, Tian Kai wasn't trying to exonerate Gan Ning either. After all, from his perspective, if Gan Ning could burn Yuan Shao's provisions, why didn't he act sooner? Instead, he waited until after Gongsun Zan's defeat, which made Tian Kai very displeased. The same sentiment was shared by many generals in Youzhou after hearing about Gan Ning's feat.

"My lord, Liu Bo'an is ultimately a nuisance. Since we are now stationed at Zhuo County, why not..." Shan Jing suggested an idea that, although foolish, excited everyone present.

"Hmph, I've been fed up with Liu Bo'an for a long time. Not only did he secretly pass information to Yuan Shao, but now he dares to withhold my supplies!" A hint of madness flashed in Gongsun Zan's eyes. Shan Jing's suggestion matched his current thinking perfectly!

Meanwhile, on the other side, Gan Ning and Taishi Ci had leapt into a small courtyard. When they had entered the city, it was just the two of them; the rest of the men had been sent by Gan Ning to contact his main naval force. If they had more people, Gan Ning wouldn't have been so reckless.

"Xingba! How could you speak to General Gongsun like that?" As soon as they landed, Taishi Ci grabbed Gan Ning's arm and threw him aside, furious at Gan Ning's earlier actions.

"Hmph! What right does Gongsun Zan have to deal with me?" Gan Ning flipped in midair, adjusted his stance, and landed with a proud expression. "If it weren't for me, he might have already been captured

and beheaded. Besides, I was following orders from my lord. I'm a subordinate of Lord Xuande, not Gongsun Zan! Who does he think he is?"

"But we are allies. Lord Xuande relied on General Gongsun's assistance to..." Taishi Ci couldn't finish his sentence.

"Hmph, that was in the past. I've heard about the Battle of Hulao Pass, but what's the big deal about three or five thousand infantry and cavalry? If it were the White Horse General of old, who kept the borderlands safe, I would endure the humiliation. But look at Gongsun Zan now! Does he still have that heroic spirit? He suspects us! With that attitude, who does he think he is?" Gan Ning sneered repeatedly.

"Xingba, calm down!" Taishi Ci, although educated, was no match for Gan Ning's sharp tongue, leaving him speechless. He could only try to calm Gan Ning down.

"Forget it, forget it. Good intentions taken for donkey's liver and lungs. I won't come to help again. What does Gongsun Zan's life or death have to do with me?" Gan Ning said irritably. "Ziyi, let's find a time to leave tonight. I originally planned to buy some white fox and white deer pelts in Youzhou as gifts for our lord and the strategist, but now my good mood is ruined!"

Taishi Ci was about to say that he had other tasks when Gan Ning changed his expression and asked with a smile, "Ziyi, do you know when the strategist is getting married? The exact date? I thought I missed it last time, but now it's been postponed. No one told me when it is."

"On the 28th of the intercalary eleventh month," Taishi Ci replied after thinking for a moment.

"Oh, there's still plenty of time. How about you come with me to catch a kun fish as a wedding gift for the strategist? Last time, the kun I killed didn't produce the Bright Moon Pearl because a bunch of damned fish ate it. How about it this time?" Gan Ning proposed a crazy idea—he wanted to hunt a mythical beast!

"..." Taishi Ci smiled wryly. This man was indeed bold, daring to challenge anything. But that was a mythical creature. If they encountered a strong one, even the two of them might not survive.

"Xingba, I have other tasks. I need to stay in Zhuo County and find an opportunity to take Liu Bo'an away!" Taishi Ci said helplessly. "I came to Youzhou with two missions: one was to protect General Gongsun, and the other was to take Liu Bo'an away if Gongsun Zan tried to kill him. My mission isn't finished yet."

"I see. I'll stay with you then," Gan Ning said after thinking for a moment. "That kun fish is really tough. If I go alone, half my fleet might sink again. With you, I'll have more confidence. The Bright Moon Pearl is a pair; we can each have one and give them as gifts. How about it?" It seemed that Gan Ning was determined to deal with the kun.

"Alright, we're already at odds with General Gongsun. With you around, it'll be easier to escape when the time comes. Let's just hope Gongsun Zan doesn't station too many crossbowmen on the city walls. If the clouds of arrows connect, it'll be troublesome for us to break out," Taishi Ci sighed.

"Don't worry. Gongsun Bogui doesn't have many men left. If he's going to kill Liu Bo'an, he won't mobilize a large force. There won't be that many archers. When the time comes, we'll each grab one of Liu Bo'an's arms and jump out of the city. But we need to be careful when Gongsun Zan makes his move, so I can position my navy," Gan Ning said with practiced ease.

Taishi Ci looked at Gan Ning, who awkwardly waved his hand. "I'm just used to it. After all, this was my main line of work before—stalking wealthy households and such. Just a professional habit."

Chapter 278: Using Violence to Control Violence and the Return to Civilization

Gan Ning, along with Taishi Ci, bought a few items and quickly disguised themselves. With ease, Gan Ning led them to a restaurant and secured a private room on the second floor that provided a clear view of the governor's mansion. They sat down comfortably.

"See, it's that simple. Just sit here, and we can keep an eye on the governor's mansion. With our eyesight, we can see everything clearly. So relax, if there's any chaos inside, we'll know and can go in," Gan Ning said proudly, tapping the window. This kind of task was something he'd done countless times.

Taishi Ci looked at Gan Ning and sighed. Perhaps even petty theft required professional talent.

"Waiter, bring us some wine, lamb, and venison. Whatever you have, bring it up!" Gan Ning shouted loudly. "The wine should be warm, and the meat tender."

"Right away!" The waiter's voice came from outside the door, and soon, the food and rice were brought up. After setting everything down, the waiter asked, "Is there anything else you need? Our broth is quite good, perfect for a cold day like this."

"Rice? This stuff isn't satisfying. Do you have any steamed buns? Bring me ten or so," Gan Ning said as he eyed the large bowl of rice.

"I'm sorry, we're out of steamed buns. Ever since Chen Xi introduced steamed buns, they've become popular all over the country. Unfortunately, wheat isn't widely grown, so the steamed buns made purely from millet flour aren't that good."

"Oh, then bring some hot soup. It's really cold here," Gan Ning said, a bit uncomfortable with the weather.

"Right away." The waiter took the tray and left.

After eating and drinking to their heart's content, Gan Ning asked, "Do you have any rooms here? Your food is pretty good, and I don't want to move. If you have rooms, I'll stay here. Make sure to reserve this spot for us during meal times. If not, recommend me a good inn."

As he spoke, Gan Ning tossed a gold bead to the waiter. Although gold beads weren't standard currency, all merchants recognized their value.

"We do have rooms, and good ones too. I'll take care of everything for you," the waiter replied eagerly. Customers like this often tipped generously.

"Give us two good rooms. By the way, which fur shop around here is the best? I have a friend getting married, and I want to buy a gift. Do any of the shops have something special?" Gan Ning asked.

"Well, there are quite a few fur shops around here, but the best is probably the Tian family's fur shop. As for something special, I'm not sure," the waiter replied after thinking for a moment.

"Alright, then. Let your manager prepare some roasted meat and strong liquor for us tonight," Gan Ning instructed, sounding like a typical food lover.

"Of course, right away." The waiter nodded and left.

"See, Ziyi, it's that simple. Spend a little money, and everything gets done. There's no need for you to come all the way to Youzhou—this place is really cold. I bet the river will freeze over in a month. We need to hurry up," Gan Ning said smugly, though a gust of cold wind made him shiver.

"We'll see in the coming days. From what I've observed, General Gongsun's current temperament won't allow him to tolerate Liu Yuzhou much longer," Taishi Ci said with a sigh, feeling disheartened by Gongsun Zan's behavior.

"Who cares? We just need to focus on our own tasks. The rest has nothing to do with us," Gan Ning said dismissively. He had completely lost faith in Gongsun Zan and no longer admired the once-renowned White Horse General who had terrorized the northern frontier.

Liu Yu, upon learning of Gongsun Zan's defeat at the hands of Yuan Shao, couldn't have been more pleased. He had never agreed with Gongsun Zan's aggressive approach toward Yuan Shao. Of course, he didn't approve of Yuan Shao's annexation of Han Fu either. Despite the claims of Yuan Shao's loyalists, anyone with a keen eye could see what was really going on.

Compared to Yuan Shao, who came from a noble family and still maintained some semblance of propriety, Liu Yu found Gongsun Zan utterly distasteful. To him, Gongsun Zan was nothing more than a brute who used violence to solve everything.

Liu Yu wasn't against using violence to control violence, but in his view, if you could intimidate your enemy into submission, there was no need to wipe them out completely. As for the so-called virtue of heaven in preserving life—that was just a convenient excuse. Letting the enemy live was a way to demonstrate one's own strength, to have them sing praises of your greatness. Even when the Zhou dynasty defeated the Shang, they didn't eradicate all traces of the Shang people. So why should he?

In this respect, Liu Yu had no kind intentions toward the foreign tribes either. He wanted to slowly assimilate them into Han culture, subtly erasing their distinct identities. But Gongsun Zan's quick and

brutal methods disrupted Liu Yu's more gradual approach, making it seem as if Liu Yu was overly lenient toward the Hu people.

Liu Yu's strategy required stability. He wanted to integrate the Hu people into Han society, have them envy the Han way of life, marry Han women, and leave their men single. This plan needed a peaceful and harmonious environment, which is why Liu Yu's governance of Youzhou was actually quite effective.

However, when Gongsun Zan appeared on the scene, whole tribes of Hu people began disappearing—one today, another tomorrow, and the day after that, yet another. Liu Yu's plans to civilize and assimilate the foreign tribes were completely thwarted. Under Gongsun Zan's reign of terror, how could the Hu people settle down and marry into Han families?

This was the root of their conflict. As Gongsun Zan became more ruthless in his campaigns, achieving kill ratios of one to twenty, the Hu people became so terrified that they would avoid even the mention of Gongsun Zan, let alone face him. The areas where Han and Hu people had once lived together became deserted—no Hu people, and no Han people either.

Gongsun Zan had no tolerance for grey areas. In his eyes, mixed Han-Hu communities were just as much a target for extermination, which led to a complete break with Liu Yu. Their goals were fundamentally incompatible—Liu Yu wanted to gradually assimilate the Hu people, while Gongsun Zan saw even the Han people in these communities as traitors and eliminated them. How could Liu Yu accept this?

From that point on, Liu Yu began to actively sabotage Gongsun Zan. Gongsun Zan might have had popular support, but so did Liu Yu. In terms of public opinion, they were evenly matched.

Gongsun Zan's troops, after fighting in the northern frontier, often became unruly upon returning, causing trouble for the local populace. While Liu Yu understood that this was normal behavior for soldiers, the feud between them meant he was no longer willing to turn a blind eye. Instead, he seized every opportunity to attack Gongsun Zan.

When Gongsun Zan returned victorious one day, news would soon follow of his soldiers causing havoc somewhere, and these reports were always verifiable. Naturally, the rift between them deepened, until it seemed like a fight to the death was inevitable.

Chapter 279: Finally, It Has Come to This...

This time, Liu Yu could have pretended that Gongsun Zan never existed. After all, the supplies Gongsun Zan was using were from his own reserves. By logic, Liu Yu had no right to withhold anything from him. However, as the Governor of Youzhou, Liu Yu held the greatest authority in the region!

Now, Gongsun Zan found himself in a pitiful situation. Liu Yu weighed his own strength against the battered and bruised Gongsun Zan, who had been thoroughly beaten by Yuan Shao. Realizing that Gongsun Zan was in no position to retaliate, Liu Yu decided it was time to teach him a lesson in humility.

This showed that Liu Yu was not without his own cunning. Gongsun Zan had never given Liu Yu the opportunity to show this side of him before.

"My lord, General Gongsun has come to visit," Wei You said as he slowly walked in, addressing Liu Yu. Wei You had always been a proponent of peace and felt helpless in the ongoing conflict between Gongsun Zan and Liu Yu. He had long hoped to mediate between them, but some things are beyond a person's will.

"Let him in," Liu Yu said calmly.

Though Liu Yu found Wei You's ideals a bit naive, he was moved by the man's sincerity. Moreover, Wei You was one of the few competent officials under him, skilled in governance. So, while Liu Yu wasn't pleased with Wei You's constant pleas for peace, he never punished him. Instead, he often used Wei You to showcase his own benevolence.

"Yes, my lord." Wei You bowed and retreated, while Yan Rou, who had been standing nearby, stepped forward.

"Huiwen, what is it?" Liu Yu asked as Yan Rou approached.

"My lord, Gongsun Bogui is merely a brute. He is here in Zhuo County with only a thousand soldiers. I am willing to eliminate him for you!" Yan Rou knelt on one knee and spoke earnestly. He greatly respected Liu Yu and was eager to rid him of this trouble.

"Absolutely not!" Liu Yu immediately stopped Yan Rou. In his eyes, both he and Gongsun Zan were loyal subjects of the Han Dynasty. Although they had different political views, they could not be slain lightly.

Even if he was displeased, the most he could do was capture Gongsun Bogui and send him to Chang'an for the emperor's judgment. Killing a minister without authorization was treasonous!

"If that's the case, my lord, may I capture Gongsun Bogui for you instead? We can list his crimes and send him bound to Chang'an. Although Zhuo County's forces are not vast, we still have over ten thousand troops. How could Gongsun Bogui's mere thousand remnants escape?" Yan Rou, understanding Liu Yu's intentions, suggested a compromise. His confidence was palpable.

"No, no, it's not time for that yet. If we act now and Gongsun Bogui somehow escapes, Youzhou will be thrown into chaos," Liu Yu waved his hand dismissively. To him, Gongsun Zan was already a defeated man, so why take unnecessary risks?

Yan Rou stepped back, visibly reluctant but saying nothing more. His respect for Liu Yu stemmed from such noble conduct.

Gongsun Zan, his face dark with anger, pushed past Wei You and entered with his men. Seeing Liu Yu seated at the head of the room, Gongsun Zan's fury flared, but his years of experience as an official allowed him to maintain a semblance of control.

"Greetings, Governor," Gongsun Zan said with a bow, acknowledging that, at least in name, he was still under Liu Yu's authority.

Liu Yu inwardly sneered but outwardly maintained a warm, elder-like demeanor. "General Gongsun, you've worked hard. Please, have a seat. So, which Hu tribe did you exterminate this time?" He spoke as if inviting Gongsun Zan to sit, but there were no seats to be found.

Before Gongsun Zan could respond, Liu Yu, feigning forgetfulness, tapped his head. "Oh, my memory isn't what it used to be. There are no Hu people left in Youzhou, are there? I suppose you've started counting Han heads for merit now. Whose family did you destroy this time to claim your achievements?" Liu Yu's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"Hmph! Why did you withhold my provisions, Governor?" Gongsun Zan took a deep breath to quell his anger, glaring at Liu Yu as he got straight to the point.

"Youzhou is a harsh and desolate place, with many displaced people. I wonder who caused their homes to be destroyed? I had no choice but to open the granaries and reduce military spending," Liu Yu replied, meeting Gongsun Zan's fiery gaze without flinching.

"My provisions were gathered by my own efforts. When did they become the property of the Governor?" Gongsun Zan roared in anger.

"I govern Youzhou. When did provisions become your private property? And when did the people of the Han Dynasty become your personal assets?" Liu Yu slammed his hand on the table and stood up. "What right do you have to recruit so many soldiers? Just because of a fake decree from Dong Zhuo, you dare act this way? Do you think the Han Dynasty is without men?"

"Liu Yu, you scoundrel! How dare you!" Gongsun Zan, enraged, took a step forward as if he intended to strike Liu Yu. How dare he seize this opportunity to strip him of his power?

"Gongsun Bogui, prepare to die!" Yan Rou shouted, drawing his sword. "Guards, arrest these traitors!"

"Cut down Yan Rou!" Gongsun Zan, his rage reaching its peak, drew his sword and lunged at Yan Rou, but was held back by Tian Chou. He roared his orders to his men.

The guards outside, hearing the commotion, rushed in and surrounded Gongsun Zan and his soldiers.

"Stop, stop!" Wei You shouted as he burst in, while Liu Yu, his face dark with anger, also ordered a halt.

"Huiwen, stand down!" Liu Yu glared at Yan Rou.

Gongsun Zan's generals and Liu Yu's guards stood off against each other, but thanks to Wei You's mediation, the tension gradually eased.

"Gongsun Bogui, there will be no provisions for you! Because of your campaign in Jizhou, countless people in Youzhou have been displaced. Every grain of rice must go to aid the people!" Liu Yu shouted sternly. He knew that after today's confrontation, reconciliation was impossible.

"Liu Yu, mark my words!" Gongsun Zan glared at Liu Yu before turning to his generals and issuing his orders.

"My lord, how could you come to direct confrontation with Gongsun Bogui?" Wei You asked bitterly after Gongsun Zan had left.

"Hmph! My lord, please allow me to mobilize the troops! After today, Gongsun Bogui will not rest until he takes revenge. We must prepare!" Yan Rou knelt before Liu Yu, his face filled with cold determination, clearly disdainful of Wei You.

"Go ahead." Liu Yu said little, merely waving Yan Rou away. A hint of satisfaction flashed in Yan Rou's eyes. He had long been displeased with Gongsun Zan's constant troublemaking, and with Liu Yu no longer holding him back, he was ready to act. But before Yan Rou could leave, Liu Yu added, "Do not disturb the people. Spare Gongsun Zan's life and send him to Chang'an. As for his generals, those who surrender will be spared."

"My lord, you are truly benevolent," Yan Rou remarked before slowly exiting.

"My lord, must it come to this?" Wei You asked, despondent.

"Gongsun Bogui has gone too far!" Liu Yu shouted, throwing his cup in anger.

Chapter 280: Liu Yu, Could You Be Any More Useless?

After leaving Liu Yu's residence and returning to his own place, Gongsun Zan looked at the ruins that had once been his home. His face twisted in rage. The little bit of rationality he had left was gone, replaced by pure anger. The fire of fury blazed in his chest, fueling his reckless resolve.

"Let's go! To the military camp!" Gongsun Zan stood in front of his collapsed courtyard, took a deep breath, and then mounted his horse, heading straight for the camp outside the city.

"Gongsun Bogui went to the camp?" Yan Rou was stunned at first, then overjoyed. This was the perfect excuse for him to act! Now he could strike first, and with Gongsun Zan outside the city, there would be no need to worry about civilian casualties. Surrounding Gongsun Zan with an army of over ten thousand would make victory certain.

With this thought, Yan Rou decided not to report to Liu Yu. In his view, Liu Yu was too merciful and would undoubtedly leave Gongsun Zan a way out, which would do nothing to truly punish a man as unrepentant as Gongsun Zan. No, only by eliminating Gongsun Zan once and for all could the threat be removed.

"If you don't kill the snake, it'll bite you back," Yan Rou thought, a cruel gleam flashing in his eyes. Since Liu Yu couldn't make the tough decision, he would do it for him. If the Han court blamed him, he'd flee north to the Hu people. Better that than allowing Gongsun Zan to escape again.

【That's it! I'll take this opportunity to rid my lord of this scourge today!】 Yan Rou made up his mind and began issuing orders to prepare for the assault.

"Greetings, my lord!" Zou Dan saluted Gongsun Zan with a bow.

Gongsun Zan glanced at Zou Dan without a word and proceeded to the main tent with his subordinates.

"Sherqi, what's going on?" Zou Dan asked quietly after getting up, pulling Guan Jing aside.

Guan Jing sighed and recounted everything that had happened earlier. By the time he finished, Zou Dan's hair stood on end, his eyes bloodshot with fury. A loyal servant must stand by his lord in times of humiliation, and Zou Dan was enraged beyond measure.

As soon as Gongsun Zan sat down in the tent, Zou Dan knelt before him, his forehead touching the ground, and spoke with tearful eyes, "My lord, I request to fight to the death! I have always believed that when the lord is anxious, the servant must work; when the lord is humiliated, the servant must die. Now that you have been insulted, I feel it deeply and am willing to fight to the death!"

Zou Dan's sincerity was unmistakable. Every lord had his die-hard loyalists, and Zou Dan was one of Gongsun Zan's. The insults from Gan Ning and Liu Yu had driven Zou Dan to a boiling point, and he was consumed with a desire for vengeance.

After Zou Dan spoke, the others could not remain silent. They all rose and shouted, "We request to fight!"

Though Gongsun Zan was seething with rage, he had not lost his senses. They were in Zhuo County, Liu Yu's stronghold, where the local forces numbered over ten thousand, while he had barely a thousand veterans. How could they win such a battle?

"Stand down! We'll deal with this matter later!" Gongsun Zan immediately rejected their proposal. Despite his earlier confusion, he still retained a shred of his former White Horse General dignity.

"My lord!" Zou Dan cried, kneeling and weeping.

Guan Jing helped Zou Dan to his feet and led him out of the camp, fearing that Zou Dan might face punishment from Gongsun Zan. After all, it was clear to anyone with eyes that Gongsun Zan was no match for Liu Yu at the moment—the disparity in their forces was simply too great.

Once outside, Zou Dan said nothing more. He quietly strapped on his sword and walked toward the rear of the camp.

That night, Yan Rou, defying Liu Yu's orders, led his troops to surround Gongsun Zan's camp. Upon hearing the news, Gan Ning and Taishi Ci were stunned.

"Ziyi, what should we do now?" Gan Ning asked as he sat in the restaurant, looking out at the large group of torches in the distance. "Gongsun Bogui wanted to kill Liu Bo'an, and we were supposed to save Liu Bo'an. But now, Liu Bo'an is clearly stronger than Gongsun Bogui. If he's trying to kill Gongsun Bogui, what should we do?"

"This..." Taishi Ci was equally dumbfounded. Liu Bei's orders were to prevent Gongsun Zan from making any mistakes and to take Liu Yu back when the opportunity arose. But now, the situation was reversed—Liu Yu was about to kill Gongsun Zan?

"It seems even the strategist isn't infallible. Gongsun Bogui didn't manage to kill Liu Bo'an, and now he's about to be killed by Liu Bo'an instead," Gan Ning said with a helpless shrug, mimicking Chen Xi's nonchalant attitude. This was beyond his responsibility, so he could only sit back and watch the spectacle. After all, Gongsun Zan's life or death had nothing to do with him.

"Let's wait and see. They've already formed ranks. I can't just charge in alone," Taishi Ci said, resigned. "We'll have to hope that General Gongsun is lucky. If he survives, I might help him out." Taishi Ci was clearly opting for self-preservation.

"Smart!" Gan Ning gave him a thumbs-up.

"Gongsun Zan, surrender quickly! I will spare your life and escort you to the capital to face the emperor. But if you resist, you will be killed without mercy!" Yan Rou, mounted on his horse, rode up to Gongsun Zan's camp and shouted. As for sparing Gongsun Zan's life—what a joke. If Gongsun Zan surrendered, Yan Rou would immediately break his promise to eliminate the threat for good.

"Let Liu Bo'an come out and meet me! I don't trust your words!" Gongsun Zan, though starting to waver, still retained enough sense to know that he couldn't surrender to Yan Rou. If he were to surrender, it should be to Liu Yu.

"Hahaha, my lord is busy with the affairs of the state. Do you think a traitor like you can demand to see him whenever you please? Gongsun Zan, I ask you one more time—will you surrender or not?" Yan Rou taunted, showing no mercy.

"Let Liu Bo'an come out and meet me!" Gongsun Zan, despite being in a position of weakness, still clung to a shred of pride. Even someone as proud as he had to bow in such circumstances.

"It seems you refuse to surrender. All troops, charge!" Yan Rou sneered and, with no real battle experience, foolishly gave the order for an all-out assault.

"Yan Rou, prepare to die!" At that moment, Zou Dan, who had been planning to assassinate Liu Yu that night, hurled a spear with all his might at Yan Rou.

Yan Rou, seeing the spear flying directly at him, was terrified. Having never experienced battle, he didn't think to deflect it with his sword. Instead, he instinctively used a technique he'd learned from the Hu people—he dismounted his horse with a swift roll!

While Yan Rou dodged the spear, the banner behind him wasn't so lucky. The spear pierced straight through it, snapping the banner in two.

For a well-trained army, a banner would be as strong as steel after extensive care and maintenance. But Liu Yu's troops had hardly trained at all, so their banner was as brittle as rotting wood, easily shattered by Zou Dan's spear.

This sight stunned everyone into silence. Then, with a mighty roar, Zou Dan shouted, "Enemy general Yan Rou is dead! Follow me to kill the enemy!" He leaped out of the camp, his blade slicing through several soldiers, and Gongsun Zan's troops, seeing this, were suddenly emboldened. The few hundred men Zou Dan had gathered to assassinate Liu Yu tore through Liu Yu's army like tigers among sheep.

Within moments, Liu Yu's troops began to flee in panic. Before Yan Rou could react, a full-scale rout had begun. Cries of terror echoed through the night as Liu Yu's soldiers desperately tried to escape, some even wishing they had more legs to run with!

Gan Ning nearly spat out his drink at the sight. Could Liu Yu's army be any more pathetic? Could they be any more disgraceful? He exchanged a glance with Taishi Ci, and they both saw the wry smile in each other's eyes. At this rate, Liu Yu was doomed!