

Mythical 281

Chapter 281: The Matter in Youzhou is Settled!

Gan Ning covered his face while Taishi Ci, holding a cup of wine, spilled it all over himself without even noticing. "Is this really a battle? This is too pathetic!" Gan Ning muttered in disbelief at the incompetence of the forces outside the city.

"The strategist probably foresaw just how incompetent the Governor of Youzhou's men would be," Gan Ning mumbled, unable to bear the sight of the chaos outside the city gates.

"Should we take the Governor of Youzhou away now?" Taishi Ci asked, his face twitching in disbelief. "One incompetent general can bring down an entire army!"

"They're utterly useless," Gan Ning scoffed as he looked disdainfully at the Youzhou troops who had already broken through the city gates and were trampling over each other. "If these were my men, I'd kill a tenth of them before starting their training. It's a disgrace to waste the country's money on such trash!"

"But we should start thinking about how we'll leave. Your ships have been sent off to gather the rest of your fleet, and I can't guarantee a safe exit by land," Taishi Ci said, equally frustrated. Although his mission of rescuing Liu Yu seemed easier than saving Gongsun Zan from an entire army, the real challenge would be getting Liu Yu out safely.

"Let's take it one step at a time. It might turn out easier than we think," Gan Ning, ever the optimist, said nonchalantly. "When the time comes, we'll grab a few horses, tie up the Governor of Youzhou, and make a swift exit. Gongsun Bogui won't be able to find us easily."

As Taishi Ci listened to the chaotic sounds of footsteps and shouts from outside, he realized that Liu Yu was indeed beyond saving. His forces were so weak that they didn't even qualify as common soldiers—they were more like lambs to the slaughter.

Meanwhile, Liu Yu, who had been resting in the governor's mansion, suddenly sat up when he heard the noise outside.

"Husband, what's the matter?" his wife asked.

"It sounds like there's fighting outside," Liu Yu said as he quickly put on his shoes and stepped out of the room without even grabbing his coat.

"Master, something terrible has happened!" his old servant cried out as soon as Liu Yu stepped through the door.

"What is it?" Liu Yu asked, slightly annoyed by the panic in his servant's voice.

"Master, Gongsun Zan's subordinate, Zou Dan, has led his troops into the city!" the servant shouted in fear.

"He's courting death! How dare he challenge me with barely a thousand men under my army's watchful eyes? Has Gongsun Bogui lost his mind?" Liu Yu sneered, his contempt for Gongsun Zan growing even stronger.

"Master, Zou Dan has already routed most of General Yan's forces!" the servant exclaimed in terror.
"You must flee immediately!"

"What? How is that possible?" Liu Yu was shocked. How could his force of over ten thousand men, led by General Yan Rou, be defeated by an unknown commander like Zou Dan? "Where is Yan Rou?" Liu Yu demanded furiously.

"Master, I'm afraid General Yan has already met his end. You must leave this place at once!" The servant's face was filled with panic as the sound of battle drew closer. "Zou Dan's forces are only a few hundred meters away!"

"A few hundred?" Liu Yu paused, then smiled in relief. "Only a few hundred soldiers? There's no need for such panic. Fetch my armor! I'll show Gongsun Zan that a mere scheme can't topple me!"

"Master, you mustn't!" the old servant pleaded. As Liu Yu's servant, he knew all too well the vast difference between Liu Yu's pampered guards and the battle-hardened soldiers under Gongsun Zan.

"Out of my way!" Liu Yu snapped, shoving the servant aside as he strode toward the main hall. He ordered his guards to defend the gates, confident that the citizens of Zhuo County would soon rise against Gongsun Zan and deliver him to Liu Yu in chains.

"General, the entrance to Liu Yu's residence is heavily guarded. Shall I lead our troops to eliminate them?" a subordinate asked Zou Dan.

Zou Dan sneered as he looked at the five or six hundred guards blocking the entrance. "Attack the front gate? Ridiculous! Break down the courtyard walls and capture Liu Yu alive!"

"Yes, General!" The subordinate bowed and quickly led his men to tear down the outer wall. In no time, they broke through the flimsy barrier and stormed into the residence. A simple wall was no match for an army, and Zou Dan wasn't foolish enough to waste time on a frontal assault.

The guards at the gate had no time to react before they were caught in a pincer attack, and Liu Yu, born into royalty and never needing to prove himself on the battlefield, found himself in the center of the chaos. His guards, packed tightly around him, were quickly overwhelmed by Zou Dan's forces, leaving them defenseless.

Zou Dan mercilessly cut down the guards, indifferent to their cries of agony. Within moments, the hundreds of guards had been slaughtered, leaving only Liu Yu, drenched in blood, standing alone among the bodies.

"You can't kill me!" Liu Yu shouted in terror as he locked eyes with Zou Dan's crazed gaze. The blood that had splattered on him snapped him back to reality, and he began to tremble uncontrollably. "You can't kill me! This is treason! I am a member of the Han royal family! I am the Emperor's uncle! You can't kill me!"

Just as Zou Dan's blade was about to strike, Gan Ning casually deflected the attack with a flick of his hand.

"Taishi Ci..." Zou Dan's eyes burned with anger as he glared at Taishi Ci. "I thought you were my allies! Why are you stopping me from killing Liu Yu? And you, Gan Xingba, how dare you interfere like this! Form up! Capture these three, dead or alive!"

Zou Dan, having just led a few hundred men to defeat thousands, seemed to have reached a new level of power, and his commanding presence inspired awe among his troops.

Gan Ning raised an eyebrow, a hint of admiration in his expression. Regardless of their previous relationship, anyone who could stand their ground and face him without flinching deserved respect.

What Gan Ning didn't know was that Zou Dan had already let go of his attachment to life the moment he stepped forward to confront Yan Rou while others cowered in fear. If Zou Dan had reached the peak of his martial arts, he might have become a master of internal energy at that very moment.

"Quickly, seize the traitor Zou Dan!" Liu Yu finally snapped back to his senses, glancing at Gan Ning and Taishi Ci, who had suddenly appeared by his side, and angrily shouted orders. The contrast between his previous demeanor as a benevolent gentleman and his current state made even his allies cringe.

"Ziyi, can I kill this guy?" Gan Ning glanced at Liu Yu, and the murderous intent in his eyes made Liu Yu shiver with fear. Faced with the threat to his life, Liu Yu fell silent.

"Zou, tell General Gongsun that I've completed my mission," Taishi Ci said before grabbing one of Liu Yu's arms. Gan Ning grabbed the other, and together they leaped into the air, dragging Liu Yu along with them. Whether Liu Yu could survive such a reckless escape without throwing up his guts was another matter entirely.

Chapter 282: There's Always a Higher Mountain

Two days ago, the city of Fenggao began a period of fasting in preparation for a memorial ceremony. Liu Bei believed that since this was a sacred ritual, fasting was necessary. To ensure proper respect for the deceased, Liu Bei ordered the entire city to fast, and those capable of offering incense were instructed to begin praying three days in advance. On the third day, they would pay their respects to the soldiers who had fallen on the battlefield.

Zhuge Liang, dressed in white, knelt calmly in his room, offering incense in prayer. He had no complaints about Liu Bei's order and deeply appreciated Liu Bei's benevolence. Since he had come to Fenggao and was temporarily under Liu Bei's rule, following Liu Bei's orders seemed only right. Furthermore, honoring the fallen soldiers was something that should be done.

However, Sima Yi next door had a different perspective. While he had no objections to Liu Bei's honoring of the fallen soldiers, he saw it as a clever way to win over the troops. What really bothered him was the city-wide fast, which had even deprived the restaurants of meat, something he found intolerable.

To Sima Yi, if Liu Bei wanted to win over the hearts of his soldiers, that was his business. Dragging the merchants and travelers in Fenggao into it seemed unnecessary.

"I can't take this!" Sima Yi muttered, slamming his hands on the table. Being skilled in music, he effortlessly drummed out a rousing battlefield rhythm on the table, expressing his frustration. To the untrained ear, it might sound like a soldier mourning a fallen comrade, quite fitting for the occasion. Soon enough, others began to join in, tapping along to the rhythm.

Hearing the rhythmic tapping from next door, Zhuge Liang frowned. As the tune continued, and more people below joined in, disrupting the solemn atmosphere of Fenggao, Zhuge Liang's displeasure grew. This guy was ruining the city's hard-earned sense of reverence.

Both Zhuge Jin and Sima Lang had made sure to remind their younger brothers to behave before they left. Their brothers had agreed to stay put in the inn, which put Zhuge Jin and Sima Lang at ease. But who would have thought that both Zhuge Liang and Sima Yi were far from ordinary?

Zhuce Liang felt irritated. He had already crossed paths with the brothers next door, and just the sight of the one around his age annoyed him. In fact, seeing that awkwardly proportioned guy made Zhuge Liang want to hit him.

Trying to ignore the rhythm, Zhuge Liang finished his prayer, but then he grabbed a chessboard and headed next door, determined to take him down a notch.

After knocking three times on the door, Zhuge Liang stood outside Sima Yi's room, waiting.

Sima Yi, who had been disrupting the solemn atmosphere of Fenggao with his tapping, felt irritated when his groove was interrupted just as he was getting into it.

Calming himself, Sima Yi opened the door and found that the visitor was none other than Zhuge Liang, with whom he had crossed paths a few times. He frowned slightly. Being naturally mature for his age, Sima Yi rarely interacted with peers his own age, and seeing Zhuge Liang made him feel like he was dealing with a child. Noticing the chessboard in Zhuge Liang's hand, Sima Yi smirked inwardly.

Though Sima Yi scoffed internally, he didn't let it show. Instead, he spoke condescendingly, "To what do I owe the pleasure, young friend?"

"I heard you were bored and disturbing the peace, so I came to play a game of chess with you to ease everyone's mind," Zhuge Liang responded coolly. He hadn't yet learned the art of polite restraint, so he made no effort to be cordial to someone who annoyed him. In truth, he was here to humble Sima Yi. Just because you understand a bit of music doesn't mean you can toy with the public. I'm here to put you in your place!

Sima Yi was taken aback. He had been very discreet—how could this boy have figured out his intentions? Despite being exposed, Sima Yi didn't blush but instead felt even more annoyed.

If Sima Yi had encountered Zhou Yu, things would have been different. Zhou Yu would have seen through him after just one beat and mocked him mercilessly. But this was Zhuge Liang, and Sima Yi still had some pride left.

"My surname is Sima, and my given name is Yi, with the courtesy name of Zhongda. May I ask your name, young friend?" Sima Yi asked, unsure of Zhuge Liang's exact age.

"I am Zhuge Liang from the Zhuge clan of Langya, courtesy name Kongming," Zhuge Liang replied calmly, placing the chessboard on the table and taking a seat.

Zhuce Liang wasn't interested in small talk with Sima Yi. He was here to defeat him and didn't want to waste any time. He opened the chessboard, and the two sat down facing each other.

"Since you're younger, why don't you take the black pieces and go first?" Sima Yi suggested graciously after some brief conversation. He was already planning how to deal with Zhuge Liang.

"Very well," Zhuge Liang replied with a smile.

In the opening, Zhuge Liang knew Sima Yi would underestimate him, so he pretended to be a novice who studied chess but lacked his own style. He played along, leading Sima Yi into a false sense of superiority during the middle game.

As Sima Yi began to grow sleepy from boredom, he couldn't help but reevaluate Zhuge Liang. Despite his young age, Zhuge Liang had seen through the hidden meaning in his tune and understood chess. Sima Yi felt a sense of admiration, but that didn't mean he would go easy on this audacious boy.

However, as the game progressed into the mid-game, Sima Yi began to realize something was off. After quickly recalculating, he found that Zhuge Liang had not fallen behind. Frowning, he looked deeply at the boy across from him, who was now playing with a folding fan, wearing a serene expression. It turned out that not only had he not been fully invested in the game, but his opponent had been toying with him all along.

From that point on, the game unfolded in a completely unexpected way. What had initially seemed like an even match turned into a lopsided affair, with Zhuge Liang taking control after the mid-game and cornering Sima Yi's white pieces.

Sima Yi looked up at Zhuge Liang's calm demeanor, and his anger flared. When had he ever been toyed with by someone his own age?

"A remarkable game! Shall we play again?" Sima Yi said with a smile, though this time he viewed Zhuge Liang as an equal.

"Very well. I was worried you might be too bored," Zhuge Liang replied casually.

"This time, I'll take the black pieces and go first," Sima Yi said as he confidently placed his first piece in the center of the board.

Zhuce Liang glanced at Sima Yi. "Such strong momentum, starting with that move. Very well," he commented, but made no effort to dissuade him. Instead, he picked up a piece and placed it in the upper right corner, just as he had done in the previous game.

The two began exchanging moves rapidly, almost without thinking. Within the time it took for a stick of incense to burn, the board was filled.

Sima Yi looked up, his eyes flashing with shock. He had still fallen behind!

Desperate, he activated his mental abilities, probing Zhuge Liang. In Sima Yi's mind, skills like music and chess were merely decorative; governing and stabilizing the nation were true talents!

But when Sima Yi activated his mental abilities, Zhuge Liang's mind suddenly cleared. His previously weakened spirit quickly revived, and his immense mental energy swept through the room.

Chapter 283: Sima Yi Fully Unleashed!

After being defeated by Zhuge Liang, Sima Yi immediately activated his mental talent. To him, skills like music, chess, and painting were mere decorations. What truly mattered were the abilities to govern a nation and bring peace to the world. The pinnacle of a strategist's capabilities was their mental talent. Chess masters and artists paled in comparison to true statesmanship. Sima Yi's frustration triggered the full release of his talent, and within Fenggao, other mental talents within a radius of hundreds of miles were almost completely suppressed.

Zhuce Liang was the first to be affected. His strategic-level, incomplete mental talent, named "Unification," was directly sealed by Sima Yi. The overwhelming mental energy that Zhuge Liang could no longer suppress spilled out, forcefully repelling everything around him, including Sima Yi, who had just unleashed his talent.

Had Sima Yi's own mental energy not been substantial, the sudden, unguarded impact could have left him mentally incapacitated.

Cold sweat dripping from his forehead, Sima Yi stared at Zhuge Liang in shock. He realized that the youth before him was a monster. If an ordinary adult strategist had a mental energy level of one, then Zhuge Liang's current display had already surpassed that. And Zhuge Liang still had half of his mental growth ahead of him!

"I didn't expect you, Sima Yi, to possess a mental talent that could nullify mine," Zhuge Liang remarked, his eyes gleaming with interest as he observed Sima Yi.

"You also have a mental talent!" Sima Yi exclaimed, horrified. He had thought himself an extraordinary genius, only to encounter someone younger and even more terrifying. However, instead of despair, Sima Yi felt a surge of fighting spirit. The emptiness and loneliness he had once felt vanished—life needed rivals to be truly fulfilling.

"You are impressive as well, sealing my mental talent. But it's just as well. My talent is so vast that even when it's not active, I struggle to handle the excess mental energy. I have to spend a lot of time asleep because of it. In this sense, your sealing my talent might be a good thing," Zhuge Liang said calmly.

Zhuce Liang's mental energy had been constantly supporting his talent, and with that talent now sealed, the energy overflowed. Fortunately, Zhuge Liang quickly regained control, reining in the excess energy, and sat down, his brilliance concealed.

Sima Yi adjusted his posture and knelt respectfully before Zhuge Liang. "Sima Yi of Henei greets Zhuge Kongming," he said with newfound humility. "Shall we play another game?"

"Very well!" Zhuge Liang replied serenely. He had won the previous two games with some clever tricks, but now that both of them were fully engaged, it was time for a true test of skill.

An hour later, Zhuge Liang, smiling, bowed to Sima Yi and then slowly walked out.

"Crack!" Zhuge Liang smiled and bowed to Sima Lang and Zhuge Jin, who were standing by the door, before following Zhuge Jin out.

"Zhongda! Why did you activate your talent again, and for such a long time and on such a large scale?" Sima Lang asked angrily after Zhuge Jin and Zhuge Liang had left. But when he saw Sima Yi, he noticed that the previous arrogance and emptiness had vanished, replaced by a burning determination.

"Brother, the world truly needs rivals to keep things interesting. I will remember Zhuge Kongming," Sima Yi said as he placed the final piece on the chessboard, decisively ending the once evenly-matched game.

"What happened, Zhongda?" Sima Lang asked curiously.

Sima Yi calmly recounted the events to Sima Lang. "That's how it went. I have a feeling that one day, I will meet him again on the battlefield. Only then will life no longer be lonely!"

Following behind Zhuge Jin, Zhuge Liang remained silent. After only a few steps, he suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion and cursed Sima Yi for being a sore loser, shutting down his talent after losing.

As for the moment when Sima Yi unleashed his full mental talent, it caused a ripple effect that startled many in Taishan.

When Sima Yi activated his talent, Sima Lang, who had been walking with Zhuge Jin, felt his "Spring Breeze" talent suddenly vanish. His once-trustworthy presence disappeared, returning him to normal. Similarly, Zhuge Jin lost the eloquence that had made him so persuasive. The two exchanged glances, instantly realizing that both had been using their mental talents—though Sima Lang knew exactly what had caused this.

Meanwhile, Jia Xu, who was analyzing the situation in Xiliang, suddenly paused and looked up, while Liu Ye, who had been modeling the thought processes of Xiliang's generals, stared blankly at Jia Xu.

"Can you still use your mental talent?" Liu Ye asked anxiously.

Jia Xu frowned but remained calm. "It seems there's someone out there whose talent counteracts ours."

"How could such an overpowered talent exist? And how long can it last?" Liu Ye muttered, frowning. "Without our mental talents, things just got a lot more complicated."

"It's not a big deal," Jia Xu said nonchalantly, picking up the intelligence reports and continuing his analysis. Although his mental talent was gone, he was still the incomparable Jia Wenhe. It would just take a little longer.

Elsewhere, Lu Su, who had been working in the administrative office, suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Zijing, what's wrong with you? Why the fuss?" Chen Xi asked in confusion.

Lu Su quickly performed a few hand gestures, and a cloud appeared in the sky, followed by a sudden rain shower over the office.

"Hey, why are you making it rain all of a sudden?" Chen Xi asked, perplexed.

"I was trying to make it snow! My mental talent has disappeared! Just now, a wave of mental energy swept through, and my talent vanished," Lu Su said, a bit panicked. "Zichuan, didn't you feel anything?"

Chen Xi scratched his head. "Not really. My talent is still the same. It just felt like someone was tickling me a bit."

"..." Lu Su stared at Chen Xi in disbelief, then calmly sat back down to continue his work. Since Chen Xi wasn't affected, it meant that the talent nullifying others' talents had its limits. Whether or not his talent returned didn't really matter to Lu Su, who had never relied on it much anyway.

"Hey, Zijing, how can you stay here working when your talent disappearing is such a big deal? We need to find out what's going on!" Chen Xi, clearly more worried than Lu Su, exclaimed.

On the other side, Fa Zheng was practically losing his mind. He had just awakened his talent and hadn't even had time to fully enjoy it before it was gone. He anxiously paced around Li You. "What's going on? My mental talent suddenly disappeared!"

"Mine too," Li You replied calmly, glancing at Fa Zheng. Although he remained composed, Li You had also stopped working. Compared to others, Sima Yi's talent affected him the most. It was enough to knock a peak-level strategist down to merely competent, a significant drop indeed.

Chapter 284: The Times Have Changed

Zuo Ci sat cross-legged in the Jingling Hall, silently burning incense and offering prayers. Yu Ji and Zi Xu had only sent their disciples, which clearly hinted at some unspeakable stories behind the scenes.

As Zuo Ci was deep in prayer, an inexplicable wave swept over him. A divine glow, like precious jade, appeared around him, but it couldn't stop the wave from passing through.

"Sigh," Zuo Ci sighed, opening his eyes and reaching out from his wide sleeves to start calculating with his fingers. "Indeed, chaotic times produce heroes. Another mental talent of this level has emerged, strong enough to affect even us. But after all, we are still human, not immortals."

"Master!" A young Taoist in green robes bowed to Zuo Ci. "Why do you stay in such a place? With your abilities, who in the world can compare? Why bother accepting Liu Yan's invitation to come to Taishan?"

"We are human, not immortals. Zhang Jiao thought himself immortal, but wasn't he ultimately slain? We should stick to what we're supposed to do," Zuo Ci calmly replied with his eyes closed. "Our magic may seem powerful, but who can we really act against? Heroes in this world fight for themselves, for others, or for the people. Each is entangled in great karma, and we can only observe, not interfere. Just do what needs to be done."

Zuo Ci's disciple seemed dissatisfied, hesitating before eventually retreating.

"Sigh, we seem the most free in this world, yet we are the least free. Our magic seems unrivaled, but who can we actually strike down?" Zuo Ci murmured as he gazed at the massive blank stone monument. They could foresee many things, but what difference did it make? Could they really stop the events from unfolding? Could they dare to try?

Having voiced his thoughts, Zuo Ci closed his eyes again. He understood Yu Ji and Zi Xu's intentions but didn't pay them much mind. Back when the divine stones had not yet fallen to the mortal world, when these Taoists were far more powerful than ordinary people, none of them had succeeded in interfering with the world. And now, Zuo Ci knew that if he were to face a general like Lu Bu head-on, the outcome would be dire. The times had indeed changed!

Although the heavens had loosened their restrictions on them, people capable of killing them had also appeared. Before the divine stones fell to the mortal realm, a Taoist who had achieved great cultivation transformed into a giant serpent to mock the Qin general Bai Qi, only to be slain. What hope did they have now?

Zuo Ci reminisced about Zhang Jiao, who had wielded the Taiping Qingling Shu. Even a master like Zuo Ci had struggled against Zhang Jiao's power. Thousands of Yellow Turban warriors were summoned, and such a force should have easily overturned the world. Yet, they were all slaughtered, and Zhang Jiao was beheaded. It didn't matter how great your magic was—under the clouded sky of an army of three hundred thousand, no magic could save you.

As chaos spread and the world entered its tumultuous period, Zuo Ci had seen many talents emerge, some of which even affected him. Whether it was the start of a new era or the beginning of a star-studded age, people like him were destined to be overshadowed, their power fading into obscurity.

Zuo Ci didn't share these thoughts with his fellow Taoists because he knew they wouldn't listen. Many believed Zhang Jiao had acted too hastily, thinking that if he had been more patient, the world would have been theirs.

Because of this, Zuo Ci gradually distanced himself from that group, choosing to wander the land, seeking out a hidden dragon to guide like a traditional Taoist rather than plot to overthrow the government.

After withdrawing from the ranks of the so-called immortals and returning to Lujiang, Zuo Ci realized the world had indeed changed. It was no longer a place where a few spells could control everything. They no longer held absolute power.

In Yuzhou, he had merely glimpsed Lu Bu from afar, yet the general had sensed his presence. In Lujiang, the moment Zhou Yu activated his talent, Zuo Ci knew he could no longer stay there. The mortals he had once looked down upon had grown so powerful that it shook him. Zuo Ci had a feeling that if he were to face Zhou Yu and Lu Bu head-on, Zhou Yu's fully unleashed talent would limit his abilities, and he'd be left with no defense against Lu Bu's blade.

And that would truly be the end—no illusions, no magic, just death. Lu Bu was fully capable of reaching that level. His divine weapon, already imbued with a spirit, would claim Zuo Ci's life if it struck him.

When the mental wave had just passed over him, Zuo Ci realized that his greatest reliance, his magical foresight, had been sealed. Indeed, this era no longer suited people like him. Mortals might still be frail, but working together, they could easily slay beings like him. In the past, countless so-called immortals were cut down by mortals even before they gained their extraordinary powers.

With that thought, Zuo Ci resumed chanting sutras in front of the massive stone monument.

Meanwhile, in a carriage near Taishan in eastern Yanzhou, Xi Zhicai and Chen Qun were idly chatting. Although both served under Cao Cao, they didn't interact much.

When Sima Yi's wave of mental energy swept across them, Chen Qun suddenly stood up in alarm, while Xi Zhicai's eyes flashed with excitement.

Xi Zhicai immediately copied the wave of mental energy as it passed over him.

Xi Zhicai was overjoyed to find that his talent remained intact. He could still use his ability, though the copied talent from Xun Yu had been sealed.

"Zhicai! Is your mental talent still working?" Chen Qun asked anxiously.

"Relax, it's just someone's active mental talent that seals other talents within its range when activated. No need to worry," Xi Zhicai replied with a mysterious smile.

"How do you know that, Zhicai?" Chen Qun asked, puzzled.

"I have my ways. Don't worry about it," Xi Zhicai said, still smiling mysteriously. He could already imagine a vast array of powerful mental talents appearing before him, ready for selection.

Chen Qun gave Xi Zhicai a deep look but said nothing more. He had never fully understood Xi Zhicai's talent, though he often felt it was somewhat similar to his own—yet sometimes, it seemed to involve other things. Now, hearing Xi Zhicai explain an unknown talent so clearly only deepened Chen Qun's suspicions.

Chapter 285: This Is Too Dangerous, Better to Harmonize It

Regardless of Lu Su's calm demeanor, Chen Xi found himself quite interested in the mental talent that had erased Lu Su's abilities. Even though it merely felt like a tickle to him, with the end of the recent tasks in sight, Chen Xi wasn't worried about failing to meet deadlines and had lost interest in finishing his current work. So, he decided to seek out the person who had nullified Lu Su's talent.

"Zijing, how about we go find them?" Chen Xi suggested with a grin.

"How do we find them?" Lu Su asked with a smile.

"By checking one person at a time?" Chen Xi replied awkwardly.

"And how do we check?" Lu Su pressed further.

"..." Chen Xi was left speechless, staring at Lu Su. "Aren't you at all interested in the person who nullified your talent? What if it's permanent?"

Chen Xi noticed that when he mentioned "permanent," Lu Su's hand, which was holding a pen, visibly trembled. Despite his earlier nonchalance, it was clear that Lu Su valued his mental talent more than he let on. For someone of Lu Su's caliber, losing such a defining trait would certainly be unsettling.

Lu Su looked at Chen Xi for a long moment before finally saying, "Alright, let's go. Can you at least pinpoint a rough location?"

"The person is definitely in Fenggao. Last time, I felt a slight tickle, and this time the sensation was the same. It seems they can't completely suppress my mental talent," Chen Xi replied excitedly.

"But how do we conduct our search? Once the person conceals their talent, we won't be able to distinguish them from anyone else. Simply asking around won't reveal anything," Lu Su raised an important point.

"We'll take it one step at a time," Chen Xi laughed. His suggestion to find the person who had nullified Lu Su's talent was primarily driven by his desire to avoid finishing his current work, so he hadn't really thought through the plan.

"Sigh, fine. It might be good to figure this out anyway. If only my talent was nullified, it wouldn't be a big deal. But if it affects everyone on our side, it could be a serious problem. We should meet with everyone and confirm the situation. If it's a group-wide nullification, we need to consider how to handle it if we

encounter this on the battlefield. Thankfully, this first encounter didn't happen in a critical combat situation, or..." Lu Su trailed off, glancing at Chen Xi.

Unlike Chen Xi's carefree attitude, Lu Su was always the steady one, not shaken by the loss of his talent. Instead, he immediately began analyzing the potential problems this mental talent could cause for Taishan and how they might address them.

"Now that you mention it," Chen Xi said, furrowing his brow as he realized the gravity of the situation. He hadn't thought much of it because his own talent hadn't been affected. But now, after Lu Su's warning, he saw the danger.

Chen Xi had long understood how vital mental talents were for top strategists. A fully powered Jia Xu, with his future prediction ability, could easily outmatch two opponents if they lacked their talents. If this talent could suppress everyone's abilities in Fenggao, the implications were serious.

"Could such an overpowered talent really exist? It seems more likely that it only affected your talent. My talent is still functioning, even though I'm not entirely sure what it is," Chen Xi said after some thought, feeling more at ease. Since his own talent was unaffected, he figured it must be limited to one person.

"Let's not take any chances. I've always suspected your talent is unusual. Anyway, let's ask the others and find out for sure," Lu Su conceded after a brief reflection, agreeing that Chen Xi's point made sense. However, he remained curious about Chen Xi's talent.

As Lu Su and Chen Xi stepped out of the room, they were met by two messengers rushing toward them. The sight gave them pause, and they exchanged uneasy glances, feeling a bad omen settle in.

"Report! Adviser Jia requests that you both wait in the administration hall for him and Adviser Liu to arrive shortly," one messenger relayed.

"Report! Magistrate Li requests that you both wait for him and the Duke of Qi; they have urgent matters to discuss," the other messenger said.

Chen Xi and Lu Su exchanged a shocked look, both feeling an ominous foreboding but suppressing their reactions.

After returning to the administration hall, Jia Xu and the others arrived in less than the time it takes to burn an incense stick, all wearing grave expressions.

"It seems confirmed. Aside from my talent, everyone's mental talents in Fenggao have been suppressed," Chen Xi said with a frown. "Let's set aside who the culprit is for now and focus on how much combat strength we have left under these conditions."

"I'm out," Li You said with a bitter smile. "With my talent suppressed, all my abilities have significantly weakened. I can't contend with top-tier opponents anymore. Even with experience, I'll make mistakes."

"I'm managing," Fa Zheng said with a wry smile. His talent had only recently awakened, so losing it felt like losing a handy tool, but it wasn't yet indispensable.

"My capabilities remain unchanged, just slower," Jia Xu said calmly. Even without his talent, he was still the cunning Jia Wenhe, only now he'd take a bit longer to work.

"It's disorienting. I'm coming up with fewer strategies," Liu Ye said with a bitter smile. He had always found his endless mental calculations frustrating, but now that they were gone, he felt like he was missing something vital. Before, he could come up with numerous plans whenever he wanted; now...

"I won't be affected as long as I'm not on the battlefield," Lu Su said with a wry smile. "Overall, the impact is significant, but it hasn't completely destroyed our advantage. As long as Zichuan still has his grasp of fate, we retain a strong position. Let's find this person."

"That's the plan. This talent clearly suppresses us. Let me and Ziyang handle finding the culprit. Although it will be difficult, someone with such a powerful talent is bound to have a reputation. I'll start the search," Jia Xu said calmly, though inwardly he was seething with the desire to strangle the person responsible for suppressing his talent.

"Leave it to us. The person behind this won't remain anonymous for long," Liu Ye added with a smile.

Chapter 286: Copy, Paste, Delete—Zhicai, Kongming, Zhongda

An hour passed quickly. Once everyone's mental talents had returned, they couldn't help but calm down. Seeing the relieved expressions on each other's faces, they all burst into laughter. It turned out the suppression was only temporary.

"It seems our opponent isn't as strong as we feared," Chen Xi said, noticing that everyone had shuddered briefly as their talents returned. In the grand scheme of a major battle, an hour wouldn't make much difference if the plan was already in motion.

"Not necessarily, Zichuan. How can we be sure the opponent isn't trying to mislead us?" Jia Xu countered with a smile. But despite his cautious words, his expression indicated that he didn't truly believe the situation was that dire. His usual prudent mindset simply led him to consider all possibilities.

"Alright, Ziyang, Wenhe, this task falls to you," Chen Xi said, clapping his hands to gather everyone's attention. "As for your current duties, leave them to Wenru and Xiaozhi. Let's find this troublemaker first—either we bring them in, or..." A flash of ruthlessness appeared in Chen Xi's eyes.

"Don't worry, I'll handle it," Liu Ye said with a smile, though his usually gentle gaze held a glint of killing intent. To Liu Ye, allowing such a dangerous individual into their ranks would be like placing his own life in someone else's hands. If the person ever betrayed them, they could suppress everyone's talents and leave them defenseless—an unacceptable risk.

Liu Ye and Jia Xu exchanged glances, both understanding the other's thoughts. They smiled slightly, feeling a growing sense of camaraderie. After all, nothing bonds people like conspiring together for a shared goal.

Jia Xu shared Liu Ye's concerns. As someone who preferred not to put himself in danger, he wouldn't allow someone capable of rendering him helpless to join their ranks without a way to counter them. Trusting his safety to another person was not in Jia Xu's nature.

"The city patrol is at your disposal. Just don't venture too far," Chen Xi told Liu Ye. "I'll have the necessary paperwork prepared for you shortly."

Having finished his arrangements, Chen Xi quickly slipped away while Lu Su wasn't paying attention. Ever since a group of battle-hardened veterans, led by a hundred-man commander, had formed the city

patrol unit—wearing armor, carrying large swords, and armed with crossbows—the security and living conditions in Fenggao had greatly improved.

These soldiers, each of whom had survived dozens of battles without serious injury, were easily recognizable by the blood-red clouds of qi that seemed to hover above their heads as they patrolled the streets. These elite troops, strictly enforcing the rules, discouraged anyone from causing trouble—doing so would be tantamount to courting death.

These veterans, who had killed so many that they had forgotten how to farm, exuded an aura of lethal intent. Just a glare from them was enough to make others back away. Their mere presence on the streets gave Man Chong a great sense of satisfaction—who would dare argue with the law when faced with such intimidating enforcers?

Meanwhile, Xi Zhicai patiently waited for the ten-day cooldown period to end, ready to switch back to the talent he had previously captured, in order to determine its exact nature. After all, the talent had erased his stored Xun Yu's abilities, so Xi Zhicai knew it had to be a deletion-type talent. However, to fully understand its properties, he needed to activate it and test it himself.

Xi Zhicai didn't sense any particularly dangerous aura from this talent—just a feeling of mild rejection, similar to that of Xun Yu's and others' talents. It wasn't like Guo Jia's talent, which had felt like a death sentence if used.

When the time came, Xi Zhicai immediately switched to Sima Yi's mental talent. Instantly, Xun Yu's stored talent was erased. Then, in the next moment, Xi Zhicai's own talent, which housed Sima Yi's ability, began to self-delete.

Within just three seconds, Sima Yi's talent, along with Xun Yu's, disappeared. Moreover, Xi Zhicai's own talent was consuming his mental energy as it continued to erase itself. It was as if his talent was simultaneously generating and deleting itself...

Xi Zhicai's face twitched. After using his talent for so many years, this was the first time he'd encountered such a situation. He could understand why Guo Jia's talent was unusable, but this talent had erased itself right after being activated, leaving him with nothing—and even erased the talents he'd stored. Thankfully, Xun Yu was still alive; otherwise, the loss would have been severe...

Xi Zhicai was baffled.

Closing his eyes, Xi Zhicai quietly analyzed the situation. After a long moment, he opened his eyes with a wry smile.

In simple terms, Xi Zhicai's talent functioned like a system's copy function, while Sima Yi's talent acted like a delete function. For Xi Zhicai, there was no risk of Sima Yi deleting him. However, if Xi Zhicai copied Sima Yi's talent, it would be akin to copying a blank slate—blank data that, once pasted, would delete itself. Poor Xi Zhicai had inadvertently deleted his stored content.

Similarly, Zhuge Liang's talent could be seen as a paste function, capable of applying anything. In theory, as long as he pasted quickly enough, the delete function wouldn't have time to activate. In practice, if Zhuge Liang and Sima Yi were both at full strength, it would be a race between mental energies—could Zhuge Liang activate his talent faster than Sima Yi could erase it? If Zhuge Liang's activation speed exceeded Sima Yi's deletion speed, he could theoretically override Sima Yi's talent.

Unfortunately, Zhuge Liang's paste ability was incomplete due to prematurely awakening his talent. He couldn't even manage what Xi Zhicai had done—erase his own active mental talent while still being able to use his copy function.

Similarly, if Xi Zhicai's copy ability had been strong enough to withstand the erasure effect of Sima Yi's talent, he could have continued to use it.

Xi Zhicai chuckled bitterly. He now understood that his inability to activate this mental talent was a problem with his own abilities.

Xi Zhicai's talent was resilient, but it still couldn't withstand the self-destructive program he had inadvertently created. A stick of incense later, Xi Zhicai suddenly felt a wave of dizziness, and a faint flush of red appeared on his face.

Just as this thought crossed his mind, a severe bout of vertigo hit him, and Xi Zhicai's vision darkened as he collapsed in the direction of where Chen Qun was seated.

Chapter 287: The Transformation of Sima Yi

Xi Zhicai suddenly collapsing shocked Chen Qun. If Xi Zhicai were to die inexplicably, how could Chen Qun possibly explain this to Cao Cao? Regardless of any explanation, it would be difficult for Chen Qun to clear himself of suspicion. Even though Cao Cao was known for his broad-mindedness, this incident would undoubtedly leave a thorn in his side. After all, Xi Zhicai was one of Cao Cao's most trusted strategists, and though Chen Qun had also earned Cao Cao's approval, he was still new and everyone knew who Cao Cao favored more.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Chen Qun shouted in alarm, grabbing Xi Zhicai's arm. "Physician! Get a physician, quick!"

Unaware of the trouble his collapse had caused Chen Qun, Xi Zhicai's sudden condition led to an immediate halt in their journey. Prioritizing Xi Zhicai's treatment became the most important matter, and being the cautious person he was, Chen Qun immediately sent someone to notify Cao Cao, seeking instructions on whether to send Xi Zhicai back. No matter what, Chen Qun needed to distance himself from any potential blame.

Back in Fenggao, both Zhuge Liang and Sima Yi had been taken by their respective older brothers for a stern talking-to. They both learned that the other's family wasn't to be underestimated. Sima Lang was shocked that Zhuge Liang, who was even younger than his own brother, already possessed a mental talent, while Zhuge Jin was equally shocked to find out that Sima Yi was the one who had nullified his talent.

"So, that Sima Zhongda can nullify our talents? Based on your interaction with him, is there any flaw in his mental talent?" Zhuge Jin asked with a frown. Such a large-scale talent suppression seemed to have affected everyone in Fenggao not long ago.

"It seems that his ability likely affects both friend and foe," Zhuge Liang responded calmly. "Even his brother's talent was suppressed, so it's reasonable to assume that this power affects everyone indiscriminately. But even if our talents are nullified, I'm not afraid to match wits with him."

Zhuce Jin frowned slightly. For Zhuge Liang to say he wasn't afraid meant that the boy had felt significant pressure. The last person Zhuge Liang had spoken of in this way was Pang Tong.

The thought of a young man who could rival Pang Tong in wisdom gave Zhuge Jin a headache. Though he could currently outmaneuver Pang Tong due to his age and experience, Zhuge Jin knew that it was only a matter of two or three years before both his brother and Pang Tong would surpass him.

Zhuge Jin sighed inwardly, acknowledging that a new era of talent was rising.

"Indeed, Brother Da also possesses a mental talent. Now that I think about it, it's amazing that I could converse so easily with a stranger," Zhuge Jin said, sighing. "Kongming, you must surpass your elder brother."

Meanwhile, in the Sima brothers' room, a similar conversation was taking place. However, Sima Lang's shock was even greater.

"Kongming is truly formidable. I've never met anyone my age who could rival him—let alone someone stronger. I played three games of chess with him, and apart from the last one which ended in a draw after much thought, I lost the other two," Sima Yi said with a melancholic tone. Losing to Zhuge Liang didn't bother him much, but he felt regretful that he hadn't met Zhuge Liang sooner. Finding a worthy opponent had been such a rare and lonely journey for him.

"You lost both games?" Sima Lang was taken aback. Zhuge Liang was two years younger than Sima Yi, who had never lost so decisively before. Sima Lang knew that Sima Yi's chess skills were formidable, yet here was a younger boy who had bested him twice, with the third match only ending in a draw after Zhuge Liang had left.

"Brother, do you know why I activated my mental talent?" Sima Yi asked, his face showing a hint of excitement. Zhuge Liang's appearance had made him realize there was more to life than being hailed as a genius. He had found a lifelong rival!

Before Sima Lang could respond, Sima Yi continued, "It was because I lost twice in a row and became so frustrated that I couldn't control my jealousy. I became furious and stopped playing games of wit with him. Instead, I wanted to compete in governance and strategy—to use my brilliance to make him submit. But even then, I still lost." Sima Yi's face twisted into an odd smile. "Kongming also possesses a mental talent, and his mental capacity is already on par with yours, Brother. He truly is a genius!"

As Sima Yi spoke, there wasn't a trace of jealousy in his tone—only the thrill of having found a worthy opponent. "Meeting him showed me that the world is full of surprises. You never know what you'll encounter next, and it's a great feeling. When faced with unforeseen challenges beyond your ability to handle, I've realized the best response is patience!"

"Patience to curb my jealousy, patience to suppress my arrogance, patience to restrain my desires, and patience to temper my ambitions. I'll quietly observe my opponent until the perfect opportunity for a fatal strike arises. And if that opportunity never comes, then, just like in that last chess game, I'll wait until they leave!" Sima Yi seemed to have had an epiphany. The sharpness in his demeanor softened, his previously haughty aura became more reserved, and he took on a calmer, more composed presence—he had found his path.

Sima Lang gradually calmed down from his initial shock. It was one thing to learn that Zhuge Liang had bested Sima Yi in two games and drawn the third, and another to hear that both boys had mental talents. But to witness Sima Yi's transformation after these losses—an awakening of sorts—filled Sima Lang with joy. Sometimes, defeat teaches more than victory.

Seeing his younger brother mature before his eyes, Sima Lang laughed heartily. "I once heard Chen Zichuan say, 'Reading ten thousand books is not as good as traveling ten thousand miles; traveling ten thousand miles is not as good as meeting countless people; meeting countless people is not as good as having a master to guide you; and having a master to guide you is not as good as finding your own path.' Indeed, indeed! One loss led to Zhongda's growth—this was worth it!"

Sima Yi looked calmly at his ecstatic brother without saying a word. In the past, if Sima Lang had praised someone else in front of him like this, Sima Yi would have reacted with scorn. But now, his heart was as still as a deep well. He could accept these words with serenity, knowing that losing to Zhuge Liang had been a blessing in disguise.

Chapter 288: The Ideal Son-in-Law in Fan Liang's Eyes

"Zhongda, the commotion you caused earlier was quite significant. For safety's sake, we should leave," Sima Lang said, satisfied with the calm demeanor of Sima Yi. The fact that his younger brother had grown to such a level was a great joy for him. Things like running away from home were now trivial.

"Leaving would be even more dangerous. Chen Zichuan and his people will undoubtedly scrutinize everyone leaving Fenggao after what happened. The Sima family of Henei is a noble clan, so it's not unusual for one or two prodigies to emerge. If we were to draw attention by leaving, there would be no way to conceal ourselves," Sima Yi replied calmly.

"Staying in the city isn't safe either. We travelers will certainly be the first to be investigated," Sima Lang agreed with Sima Yi's assessment but still expressed concern.

"No need to worry. The Fan family has already indicated that Chen Zichuan hails from the Chen family of Yingchuan, and the Chen and Sima families are related by marriage. If we buy a gift and present it to him as equals, there should be no issues," Sima Yi said confidently.

"Is the head of the Fan family here as well? I met him once several years ago. If we're going to do this, we might as well do it thoroughly," Sima Lang said with a smile, agreeing with Sima Yi's approach. After all, they were from noble families—why hide?

"We'll find out when we ask," Sima Yi replied with a composed demeanor.

In another room, Zhuge Jin gazed out the window at the patrols of the city guard. "These Fenggao troops are not to be underestimated. Even without a leader, they remain disciplined. Every one of them is likely a battle-hardened veteran. I wonder how Chen Zichuan managed to keep so many old soldiers alive."

"It seems Fenggao is gearing up to investigate Zhongda. His mental talent is too dangerous for any top-tier figure to ignore," Zhuge Liang said with a slight smile. While others might only see an unusually large number of city guards, Zhuge Liang could tell that Sima Yi had caused quite a stir. "The scale of this is not small."

"It won't be easy. If Fenggao had a complete household registration system in place, finding him would just be a matter of time. But since it's only just being implemented and many people aren't registered yet, catching him will be difficult," Zhuge Jin said, his long face twitching slightly.

"In an effort not to disturb the people, they likely chose this voluntary registration method. Once most people are registered, it will become mandatory. But for now, it's not feasible," Zhuge Liang observed as another patrol passed by. "Compared to the Danyang elite troops, I find these city guards more impressive."

"Indeed, they are a strong force," Zhuge Jin nodded in agreement.

"Uncle, how are you finding your stay here?" Chen Xi asked casually as he walked through a few streets to reach a secluded estate where Fan Liang and his family resided.

"It's quite comfortable, thanks to your arrangements, Zichuan. You've done well," Fan Liang said with satisfaction. "With things as they are, I'm relieved to entrust Jian'er to you."

Two years ago, when Fan Liang visited the bedridden Chen Xi, he hesitated to honor his promise to marry his daughter to Chen Xi. After all, Chen Xi looked like he could die at any moment, and Fan Liang didn't want his daughter to be branded a widow so early. He recalled the story of Cai Yan—a woman far more talented than Fan Jian, whose reputation was tarnished by the death of her husband. No one dared to marry her despite her beauty and virtue, fearing misfortune.

Now, however, Fan Liang had no such concerns. After Chen Xi recovered and met with him again, Fan Liang felt much more at ease. Though Chen Xi hadn't achieved great fame at that point, his appearance and demeanor reassured Fan Liang that his daughter would be well cared for. He didn't expect Chen Xi to be a towering figure—just stable enough to ensure his daughter's happiness.

As time passed, Chen Xi's rise surprised Fan Liang. What had been a frail, sickly young man transformed into someone with a radiant aura, indicating divine favor. When Fan Liang looked at Chen Xi now, he saw someone with an unshakable fortune—a man whose prosperity was destined, regardless of who ruled the land. Such a match made Fan Liang ecstatic. His daughter would not only be safe but also enjoy wealth and honor throughout her life.

Because of this, Fan Liang became increasingly satisfied with Chen Xi as a son-in-law. He handed over the leadership of the Fan family to another member and moved to Mount Tai with his concubines, trusting that Chen Xi would take care of everything. After all, if anything went wrong, his daughter was there to handle it.

Chen Xi could only accept Fan Liang's attitude with a wry smile. His father-in-law seemed to care only about doting on Fan Jian and making sure she was well-provided for. In other words, Chen Xi had been relegated to the role of an ideal provider.

Chapter 289: The Standards of the Era

The relationship between a father-in-law and son-in-law is rarely harmonious, unless one side is overwhelmingly dominant, creating a false sense of harmony that hides underlying tension.

Li You, along with Fa Zheng, had begun issuing household registrations to scholars willing to become teachers. Watching them eagerly accept their registrations and then follow Fa Zheng to the library to borrow books brought great satisfaction to Li You. In his eyes, each of these scholars, who had now become elementary teachers, represented dozens of literate children in three years, and symbolized the gradual decline of the aristocratic families from their eternal pedestal.

"Miss Cai, Miss Cai (Second)," Fa Zheng greeted Cai Yan and her sister with a respectful bow.

Cai Yan had successfully transitioned to the role of a librarian. After all, idly staying in Mount Tai was not a long-term solution. When Li Ru recruited female officials for Chen Xi, Cai Yan was brought into the fold as the sole librarian in charge of the library.

In this era, the position of librarian, unlike in later generations, was a highly coveted job. As a librarian, Cai Yan could borrow books at any time, take home the ones she wanted to read after work, and was provided with plenty of paper for transcription. Once this position was made public, countless scholars and elites lined up for the chance to secure it.

Among those vying for the position were some fierce contenders, including individuals who left their mark in history. Had the initial selection process proceeded as originally planned, Cai Yan might not have stood a chance.

Now, with only Cai Yan as his protégé, Li You had asked her if she was interested in this position before Chen Xi even finalized the selection process. Given her love for literature, music, and art, Cai Yan naturally expressed her interest.

By the time Li You informed Chen Xi of Cai Yan's interest, Chen Xi had already issued the recruitment notice. The position's perks and prestige, comparable to a high-ranking official role, attracted a flood of scholars, creating quite a stir.

Chen Xi was amazed by the number of renowned individuals who applied. Among them were figures like Chen Chi, Chen Hua, Zheng Zha, and Xu Qin, all from the prestigious Yingchuan Academy, known for producing top-tier talents.

Chen Chi had once been recommended as the Grand General of the Wu Kingdom, though he died soon after assuming the position. Chen Hua had served as the Secretary-General of Wu, equivalent to Xun

Yu's position in Wei. Zheng Zha had helped establish Wu's ceremonial protocols during its founding, and Xu Qin was another well-known figure Chen Xi recalled from historical records.

Seeing such impressive names among the applicants, Chen Xi felt that bringing back the scholars from Yu Province had been a worthwhile endeavor.

From Qing Province, there were also two formidable figures—Xu Gan and Wang Xiu. Though few in number, their capabilities were top-notch. Xu Gan, one of the Seven Masters of Jian'an, was only second to Cai Yan in musical talent. And when it came to statecraft and practical matters, Wang Xiu was more than capable of assisting even the likes of Lu Su.

However, with such stiff competition, no matter the subject of the exam, Cai Yan's chances of coming out on top were slim.

Yet, with Li You's prior arrangements, the so-called first public recruitment became a bit of a black box operation. Female candidates such as Mi Zhen, Zhen Rong, Zhen Jiang, and Cai's younger sister were brought in to take the exam. After the first round, only Cai Yan, her sister, and Mi Zhen remained.

The process continued until ten candidates were left for the final interview. Surprisingly, Cai Yan's younger sister, with no prior preparation, proved to be as formidable as her elder sister—another testament to the Cai family's talents.

During the interview, Liu Bei himself made an appearance. His regal presence, combined with the promise of official positions and benefits, easily secured eight of the candidates, leaving only Cai Yan and her sister. Naturally, Cai Yan took the librarian position, and her sister gained unlimited borrowing rights as well.

While it was a bit of a black box operation, everyone involved was satisfied. Only Li You felt somewhat embarrassed by the process, but others seemed unconcerned, apart from feeling the exams were somewhat excessive.

Liu Bei, on the other hand, was quite pleased to have recruited eight capable individuals. After testing their abilities, Chen Chi was placed under Liu Xie, Wang Xiu under Lu Su, and then Lu Su handed Wang Xiu over to Man Chong. The remaining individuals were assigned to newly occupied counties in Qing Province.

When the recent event of spiritual talents being sealed occurred, Cai Yan, who had been focused on her studies, did not pay much attention. Even after her abilities were restored, she had not yet had a chance to play her zither before Fa Zheng summoned her to handle library matters. Li You, concerned about unidentified individuals causing further disruptions in Fenggao, had decided to expedite the registration process.

This led to the scene where Li You and Fa Zheng, braving the cold weather, worked outdoors on registrations. Li You filled out the registrations and stamped them, Fa Zheng escorted the individuals to the library, where Cai Yan quickly found the requested books, and the city guards then escorted the newly registered scholars to the assigned academies.

As for the potential loss or damage of books, Li You was unconcerned. The cost was negligible, and the registrations themselves created mutual accountability. One or two missing books would bind dozens of scholars to Qing Province, which Li You deemed worthwhile.

For scholars, abandoning a thousand books for the sake of one would be foolish. And risking their reputation and future prospects for a single book, no matter how valuable, was not worth it—especially for these well-fed and well-clothed elites who valued their reputation more than anything.

Li You and Liu Xie had a deep understanding of the mentality of scholars, particularly those from humble backgrounds. Integrity and reputation were often more important than wealth, and for many, these principles were seen as sacred.

Chapter 290: My Advantage, and Our Advantage

As Chen Xi left Fan Liang, he began to carefully contemplate the recent events. A spiritual talent capable of sealing everyone else's abilities must belong to a top-level strategist. As for generals, from what Chen Xi had gathered, their talents mostly affected their own armies, quite different from the varied offensive and defensive auxiliary talents that strategists possessed.

Chen Xi, somewhat lost in thought, followed a team of city guards. As he turned a corner, two young scholars, one tall and one short, passed by him without either side noticing.

He started thinking about the possibility that the culprit might be one of the still-unknown young talents.

Chen Xi shrugged off the thought.

Chen Xi then began to suspect Chen Qun. After all, from what he had learned, the range of that talent clearly extended beyond the city of Fenggao. Even Zhao Yun, who was outside the city, had sensed it...

Chen Xi's thoughts wandered,

This realization frustrated him. If the culprit wasn't in Fenggao, how could they conduct a search?

Chen Xi cleared his mind and began thinking of who might have such a talent. After all, compared to others, Chen Xi had some insight into the unknown individuals of this era who had yet to make a name for themselves, as history had already proven their abilities.

As he pondered this, Chen Xi's gaze sharpened. Chen Gong's abilities were difficult to assess. After all, he was a figure who single-handedly outmaneuvered Cao Cao's team of strategists, making his historical performance quite different from the low-profile and reserved persona described in current intelligence reports. This suggested that Chen Gong might be pretending to be dead.

Chen Xi then added his distant relative from 500 years ago to the list of suspects.

He also considered the future Wu Kingdom, which boasted four generals and three generations of civil officials, all top-notch talents. However, aside from Zhou Yu and Lu Su, the other two generals were unlikely candidates.

Much like Xu Shu, Lu Meng started off unfocused in his youth but later underwent a rapid transformation. In terms of talent, he might not match Xu Shu's apparent abnormality, but his diligence likely surpassed Xu Shu's.

Because of this, both Lu Meng and Xu Shu would likely awaken their talents after reaching maturity. It was impossible for them to have developed their talents at such a young age, so Chen Xi excluded Lu Meng from consideration. Naturally, Lu Xun, who wasn't even ten years old, also didn't factor in, despite his later prominence.

Chen Xi's thoughts then turned to Jingxiang and suddenly recalled someone whom Zhuge Liang had once ranked alongside Pang Tong. However, this person was known to be even more arrogant than Pang Tong.

Chen Xi frowned at the thought.

After surveying the map in his mind, Chen Xi realized that after ruling out those who hadn't yet matured, as well as figures like Cui Zhouping, Hua Xin, Zhong Yao, and the strategists who hadn't yet joined Yuan Shao or Cao Cao, there weren't many people left who fit the profile. Besides those currently with Yuan Shao or Cao Cao, there were figures like Liao Li, Sima Lang, Chen Gong, Hu Zhao, and Dong Zhao who might be involved.

Chen Xi considered Cao Cao's team and felt overwhelmed. Although Cao Cao's generals might not be able to rival Liu Bei's in raw strength, they could at least hold their own. Meanwhile, in terms of strategists, Cao Cao's side seemed to have the upper hand.

Cao Cao had over a hundred well-known strategists, with nine top-tier ones, including Sima Yi. Even though three had been poached, he still had six left. The strength of Wei was no joke!

Chen Xi estimated that Cao's and Xiahou's families had a good number of second- and third-tier generals, as well as some capable leaders. In terms of military tactics, they might only have a slight edge over Cao Cao's forces.

However, after comparing Liu Bei's and Cao Cao's resources, Chen Xi felt reassured. Lu Su had been right— as long as Chen Xi was still around, even if everyone's talents were sealed, they still had the foundation to continue the fight!

With this realization, Chen Xi regained his confidence. Indeed, sealing everyone's talents was terrifying, but so what? Even without talents, wars aren't won solely through spiritual abilities. He acknowledged that his opponent had an advantage, but in the end, it was pure strength, well-trained soldiers, and ample supplies that would decide the outcome, not petty tricks!

A smile crossed Chen Xi's lips as he figured out his next steps. If they could find the culprit, great; if not, it didn't really matter. He realized that he and the people of Mount Tai had been overthinking the

situation. When strategy falls short, they could simply crush their enemies with the overwhelming force of a well-prepared army!