

Mythical 341

Chapter 341: The Qingzhou Campaign

When Chen Xi arrived at Liu Bei's residence, Liu Bei was sitting authoritatively in the main seat, with only Jia Xu, who was idly counting ants, seated below him. Chen Xi glanced around but didn't see the usual cauldron for cooking meat. He habitually asked, "Lord Xuande, hasn't the mutton finished cooking yet? It's perfect for a cold winter day."

Liu Bei was momentarily stunned, then burst into laughter. Pointing at Chen Xi, he asked, "You rascal, do you think I called you here just to eat? Go, take your seat. That cashmere blanket of yours is indeed warm."

"Something made from tens of thousands of sheepskins can't help but be warm," Chen Xi casually replied as he headed to his seat.

"Say that again?" Liu Bei asked, startled.

"Tens of thousands of sheepskins were used to produce the cashmere," Chen Xi repeated. "Why, is there a problem, Lord Xuande?"

Liu Bei's face twitched slightly. He had never known that what he was standing on was worth so much. How much could that be worth?

"Hahaha, Lord Xuande, don't believe Zichuan's words. This carpet didn't cost a single penny. The mention of tens of thousands of sheepskins refers to only taking a handful of wool from each skin. Zichuan's lies are always difficult to verify," Li You remarked as he entered with a smile, then froze momentarily. "Where's the cauldron?"

"Huh?" Liu Bei was taken aback.

Soon, the civil and military officials arrived one after another, but almost every one of them was puzzled by the absence of the cauldron that was usually in the center. Where was the mutton? Some asked about it, others found it odd that the cauldron was missing, and still others were momentarily stunned. In the end, even Liu Bei felt something was amiss about not cooking mutton today.

Liu Bei's gaze swept from left to right, passing over Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Gan Ning, Zhao Yun, Hua Xiong, Taishi Ci, Yu Jin, Zang Ba, Sun Guan, Wu Anguo, and Chen Dao—all of whom were mighty generals capable of conquering any territory. His gaze then moved on to Chen Xi, Lu Su, Guo Jia, Liu Ye, Jia Xu, Fa Zheng, Man Chong, Jian Yong, Sun Qian, Liu Yan, and Mi Zhu—a formidable assembly of civil officials that would be considered luxurious no matter where they were placed. Liu Bei couldn't help but feel a surge of pride.

"This year marks the third year since I took over Taishan. After so long, I finally have the opportunity to gather everyone together," Liu Bei said, reflecting on the scene before him. "The preliminary strategy that Zichuan formulated can finally be fully realized this year. I ask all of you to give your utmost support this year."

"Qingzhou is already within our grasp," Chen Xi said confidently as he stood up. "We've prepared for so long. How could we have missed anything?"

"Big Brother, please allow me to lead the charge in the Qingzhou campaign," Zhang Fei immediately shouted as he stood up.

"How could we do without my navy?" Gan Ning laughed. Though he seemed a bit carefree, everyone present was convinced by his battle achievements. Even the proud Guan Yu, after hearing about Gan Ning's audacious exploits, couldn't help but ponder for a long time, eventually shaking his head in silence. Such feats required not just opportunity but also courage and daring.

"Zhao Yun requests to fight. Although the White Horse was defeated, I am willing to restore its honor," Zhao Yun said as he quietly stood up.

"Hahaha, with such valiant generals, how fortunate I am!" Liu Bei laughed heartily. "This campaign in Qingzhou is about pacification, not extermination. Yide, you are too impetuous for the delicate work required. Xingba is in charge of the navy, so how could you take away his credit? The coastal defense of Qingzhou still needs you to hold the line."

Both Zhang Fei and Gan Ning looked visibly disappointed. Liu Bei then turned to Zhao Yun. "Zilong, your reputation for benevolence and love of the people has spread across several provinces. The people of Qingzhou also know of your virtuous name. Many refugees have sought refuge under my rule because of your reputation."

Liu Bei sighed as he spoke. Zhao Yun was clearly a mighty general, yet he had also shown remarkable talent in handling civil affairs. In fact, Lu Su and the others often entrusted Zhao Yun with important tasks related to agriculture and the survival of the people.

"It's all due to your virtue, my lord," Zhao Yun replied humbly.

The other generals couldn't help but feel a bit envious of Zhao Yun. Despite having maxed out his martial prowess, he was now excelling in civil administration as well, reaching a level high enough to blend seamlessly with the civil officials.

"Zilong, there's no need for modesty. I hope you'll continue to work for the welfare of the people as you have. The matter of setting up agricultural colonies will still rest on your shoulders," Liu Bei said, helping Zhao Yun to his feet.

"I will do my utmost!" Zhao Yun responded solemnly.

"For this Qingzhou campaign, you will be the vanguard until we thoroughly enter the eastern part of Qingzhou. After that, you will be responsible for pacifying the people and managing all agricultural affairs," Liu Bei said, handing the military order to Zhao Yun.

"Understood!" Zhao Yun accepted the order with a respectful bow.

"Yun Chang, Ziyang, you will lead the army to defend Licheng and guard against Yuan Shao. Be prepared at all times to rescue Wei. I'm concerned that Bo Gui might act recklessly again. If conditions permit, you may attack the nearby Yellow Turbans," Liu Bei continued, entrusting the north to Guan Yu, his most trusted general.

"Understood!" Guan Yu and Liu Ye stood up and bowed to Liu Bei.

To be honest, Liu Bei would have preferred to have Guo Jia stationed in Licheng, but with Guo Jia's health being a significant concern, he had to settle for a second option.

Guan Yu and Liu Ye exchanged glances. Guan Yu was clearly conflicted. Having experienced Guo Jia's lethal one-strike strategies, he found Liu Ye's multitude of plans, ready for the choosing, somewhat difficult to adapt to.

"Wen Ze, you will lead a reorganized army of 5,000 troops, following Zilong to eliminate the remaining Yellow Turbans," Liu Bei continued assigning tasks.

"Understood," Yu Jin replied, bowing. A hint of joy flashed in his eyes. Finally, he had been assigned a regiment to command. No longer would he be just a training officer without actual troops to lead. Watching others take command of regiments while he was left to train soldiers had not been a pleasant feeling, even though he did enjoy the training.

"Shuzi, Zichuan mentioned that you are skilled in training soldiers, so you will take over Wen Ze's duties, training troops in Fenggao," Liu Bei said, unconcerned by Yu Jin's joy. After all, every general aspired to battle.

Training soldiers was a way to build credentials. Throughout the entire year, Yu Jin hadn't made significant achievements, but now that he was in charge of a regiment, no one criticized him. All the generals had benefited from the well-trained recruits he provided. That was his contribution.

"Understood!" Chen Dao was delighted. He had initially thought he was just there as an observer, but it turned out there were military responsibilities for him. He thoroughly enjoyed the task of training soldiers.

"Anguo, since Wen Ju sent you to serve me, you will be my personal guard, just like Zhongkang," Liu Bei said, turning to Wu Anguo.

"I am honored, Lord Xuande," Wu Anguo replied with a bow, then moved to stand beside Liu Bei, joining Xu Chu. The two broad-shouldered warriors exchanged glances before standing like door gods beside Liu Bei.

Wu Anguo was very satisfied with the role Liu Bei assigned him. It demonstrated trust without making things difficult for him. In terms of leading troops into battle, he wasn't particularly skilled. Serving as Liu Bei's bodyguard was a perfect fit for him.

Chapter 342: The Aristocrats of Xuzhou

Chen Xi didn't have much to say about Liu Bei's division of labor, but he was puzzled by the fact that Liu Bei seemed ready to mobilize troops. The new year had just passed, and winter wasn't over yet. Was Liu Bei planning to act before the spring planting season?

He glanced at the group of advisors and noticed that, except for Jia Xu, who was sitting with his head lowered like a meek wife, the others appeared deep in thought. Chen Xi couldn't help but furrow his brow.

"Dare I ask, Lord Xuande, are we planning to wage war in winter?" Lu Su hesitated before speaking, shivering slightly. Despite the passage of time, Lu Su still couldn't tolerate the cold. Ironically, his talent was related to cold attributes—how unfortunate!

"Yes, I've decided to eliminate the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou before the spring planting begins. Delaying any longer might bring complications, and we currently have enough resources to support an army of fifty thousand in winter combat," Liu Bei explained, glancing at Chen Xi. Seeing Chen Xi deep in thought, Liu Bei felt reassured. As long as Chen Xi didn't outright refuse, it meant that Taishan had the necessary resources.

"Why the rush, Lord Xuande?" Chen Xi asked with a bitter smile. He had indeed prepared a substantial amount of supplies, so launching a winter campaign wouldn't be a significant problem—but it did feel wasteful.

"Wenhe," Liu Bei said with a wry smile, directly calling out Jia Xu.

"According to reports from Xuzhou, Cao Cao's father, Cao Song, has been killed. As of now, Tao Qianzhu in Xuzhou likely hasn't received the news, nor has Cao Cao. But within ten days at most, both will learn of it," Jia Xu explained with a bitter smile.

Jia Xu's intelligence was the first to arrive among the three factions, but even then, it was still late by over half a month since Cao Song's death. After all, Cao Song had died in a region that bordered both Yuzhou's Lu State and Xuzhou.

Ever since Liu Bei's campaign in Yuzhou last year, they had taken Lu State. When Yuan Shu returned, Liu Bei had withdrawn his forces and didn't occupy the territory, as it would have required a substantial

garrison. Yuan Shu, realizing the area couldn't be defended, also didn't bother retaking it. As a result, it had become a no-man's land.

Cao Cao didn't occupy it, Liu Bei didn't manage it, Tao Qian couldn't even manage his own territory, and Yuan Shu was preoccupied with relocating his base. This created an area where no one held authority.

With Cao Song dead in that area, Tao Qian had no information, and Cao Cao simply assumed his father was taking longer than expected—never suspecting that something had gone wrong on the journey. Only Liu Bei's faction, after noticing the undercurrents in Xuzhou, specifically investigated and discovered that Cao Song had been murdered.

Jia Xu hadn't originally planned to report this, but Liu Bei happened to visit Jia Xu's office and saw the intelligence report. Liu Bei immediately broke into a cold sweat. Knowing how he would react in Cao Cao's shoes, Liu Bei realized that this matter would not end well for either Cao Cao or Tao Qian. Eventually, Tao Qian would seek his help, and having received so many favors from Tao Qian in the past, Liu Bei knew he couldn't refuse.

Liu Bei considered Cao Cao's formidable combat prowess. If Cao Cao, fueled by rage over his father's death, went all out, Liu Bei would need to deploy nearly all his forces to stop him.

Liu Bei was no genius, but he was an excellent judge of character. In almost no time, he deduced that Tao Qian would appoint Cao Bao as a general. Liu Bei had only one comment on Cao Bao: "He truly lives up to his name."

And so, without further ado, Liu Bei decided not to let Tao Qian's plight derail Chen Xi's carefully planned strategy. The precision of Chen Xi's strategy had left Liu Bei in awe—making it clear that even a single misstep could unravel everything, leading to irrevocable consequences.

Abandoning the current situation for Tao Qian's sake was out of the question, but leaving Tao Qian to fend for himself? Liu Bei couldn't bring himself to do that either. He had relied on Tao Qian's resources during the toughest times. Now that they were self-sufficient, kicking him aside didn't sit right with Liu Bei.

After much deliberation, Liu Bei reviewed Chen Xi's strategic reserves and compared the inventory carefully. He ultimately concluded that if they moved swiftly, they could resolve the situation in Qingzhou before rushing to Xuzhou to aid Tao Qian.

"So, it has come to this," Chen Xi muttered, rubbing his temples. "This really is troublesome. But, Lord Xuande, you can put the Qingzhou campaign on hold. Cao Mengde won't wait until spring to take action. As soon as he hears the news, he'll move immediately."

"You mean Cao Mengde will launch an all-out assault without hesitation?" Liu Bei asked, shocked. "How is that possible? It's winter. He doesn't have enough supplies to outfit his soldiers for such harsh conditions. Even if he's driven by revenge, he still needs to consider his troops' well-being. They won't be effective in battle."

"Well, how should I put it? Lord Xuande, wait ten days and you'll see. Even if we plan to attack Qingzhou, there's no need to rush. If necessary, we can issue an ultimatum, then sweep through Qingzhou with thirty thousand cavalry, relocate the Yellow Turbans from the east to the west, and establish agricultural colonies in the east," Chen Xi replied, finding it difficult to explain fully.

When Chen Xi mentioned sweeping through Qingzhou, there was an unmistakable killing intent in his words. They had planned for Qingzhou for a long time, and in an emergency, they could achieve results within a month. Although this method would result in more casualties and less popular support, it would be quick. However, Chen Xi would only resort to such forceful measures as a last resort.

"Ten days? Very well, we'll wait ten days. If Cao Mengde attacks Xuzhou, we'll put the Qingzhou campaign on hold and resume it once the situation in Xuzhou is resolved," Liu Bei agreed after some thought. "Wenhe, please keep a close eye on the situation in Xuzhou and Yanzhou. Report any changes immediately."

"Understood," Jia Xu replied, rising to his feet and bowing.

"Lord Xuande, do we have any information from Xuzhou regarding the identity of those involved in Cao Song's murder? Are there any rumors about who ordered it or who might be connected?" Chen Xi asked as he stood up.

"Wenhe," Liu Bei said, signaling Jia Xu to answer.

"According to our intelligence from Taishan, Zhang Kai, who killed Cao Song, is currently heading south and hasn't encountered any resistance along the way. This suggests that the perpetrators are indeed from within Xuzhou, likely locals," Jia Xu explained, making his meaning clear.

"A classic case of using a borrowed knife to kill, while achieving multiple goals," Guo Jia sneered. "I didn't expect there to be such a brilliant mind in Xuzhou."

"Chen Yuanlong?" Liu Ye frowned, thinking of Chen Deng, who had previously tipped them off. He couldn't help but speak his name.

"It's likely not him, but he won't be able to wash his hands of it. Regardless of who wins or loses this battle, Tao Qianzhu will lose power," Fa Zheng said with a mocking tone. "When that happens, whoever takes power will need to heavily rely on the Chen family of Xuzhou, which is a far cry from the current situation where Tao Qianzhu distrusts them."

Chapter 343: Merely Third Rate

"It wasn't his doing," Jia Xu said, shaking his head. "At most, he just went along with the flow. That man is calm and extraordinarily wise—he wouldn't act so rashly."

"So, it was a case of using a borrowed knife to kill," Guo Jia remarked disdainfully. "Going with the flow, leveraging a chain of events—if Chen Yuanlong couldn't see through this, it would be surprising."

"Some families are just like that," Chen Xi chimed in casually. "But let's not concern ourselves with them. This was clearly orchestrated by someone within Xuzhou. Their goal is probably just to sideline Tao Qianzhu and expand their family's influence."

Chen Xi didn't think much of these petty schemes. If one were to divide the noble families of the world into three tiers and do the same with the wise men, the likes of Xun Yu, Xun You, Jia Xu, Tian Feng, and Ju Shou from the north would always be in the top tier because their focus was always on the grand scheme of things.

In the second tier, you would find historical figures like Lu Su, Zhou Yu, Lu Xun, Liao Li, and Liu Ba. Despite their wisdom, they were primarily concerned with carving out their own territories. This difference in vision led to very different outcomes, even though their intellects were on par with those in the top tier.

Finally, in the lowest tier, you had figures like Chen Deng, Yang Xiu, Zhang Zhao, and Gu Yong. Although not lacking in intelligence, their focus was limited to the short-term gains of their own families, and they could never break free from that narrow perspective. As a result, despite their talents, they often lived mediocre lives, unable to leave a lasting impact.

This is why those in the top tier, whether due to slightly weaker family backgrounds or slightly less talent, still managed to outshine the others. Their vision was not limited to a city or a region; they saw the world as their stage. Even in defeat, they lost in a way that commanded respect.

If one cannot break free from the shackles of their own mind, even extraordinary intelligence will lead only to limited results. This is why Chen Xi wasn't too concerned about the likes of Chen Deng—despite his exceptional intellect, he would ultimately be confined to Xuzhou because of his family ties.

"That's right, these are just minor tricks that don't matter much," Lu Su agreed, dropping the topic as well.

Having been thoroughly impressed by Chen Xi's strategic thinking, which encompassed the entire world, Lu Su no longer feared any local noble family. They were insignificant threats—at most, minor nuisances. What could a small regional power, unable to openly recruit troops, really do?

Liu Bei was taken aback. He had heard of Chen Deng's reputation and had interacted with him as a representative of Tao Qian at Chen Xi's wedding. Chen Deng was reputed to be a renowned statesman—surely, he couldn't be so insignificant?

Perhaps noticing Liu Bei's confusion, Liu Ye stood up and explained, "My lord may not know this, but while Chen Deng's abilities are on par with ours, he has a fatal flaw—his single-minded focus on expanding his family's power."

"That's normal, isn't it? Everyone has their own goals, and striving for family prosperity isn't wrong," Liu Bei replied, puzzled.

“But Chen Yuanlong is too short-sighted—he focuses solely on strengthening his family,” Liu Ye said with a wry smile. “As a result, despite his considerable talent, he is confined to mediocrity.”

Liu Bei glanced at the gathered officials and noticed that they all nodded slightly in agreement, confirming Liu Ye’s assessment.

“Lord Xuande, do you know why a player who calculates every move in a game of Go often loses to one who sees the bigger picture?” Chen Xi offered an analogy, knowing that Liu Bei still didn’t fully grasp the importance of vision.

“Why?” Liu Bei pondered for a moment and realized it was true—between two equally skilled players, the one with a broader perspective usually won.

“Because no matter how carefully you calculate, there will always be details you miss. And when those details accumulate, even short-term goals become problematic. On the other hand, someone who sees the bigger picture can always make up for any mistakes by shifting resources as needed. In the end, the overall strategy remains intact,” Chen Xi explained with a smile.

As Chen Xi spoke, Lu Su also smiled. He had seen Chen Xi shift resources around countless times, balancing the grand strategy with small adjustments. While much of this was due to Chen Xi’s foresight, his ability to adapt and patch things up also played a crucial role—though he often did this in advance.

“In that case, Chen Yuanlong is indeed a bit of a waste of talent,” Liu Bei acknowledged. With Chen Xi by his side, he understood all too well that grand strategy was far more important than minor details.

“It’s all about vision. A ruler who can see the bigger picture doesn’t need to know much else—they can still govern the world well,” Chen Xi sighed. “But unfortunately, more than ninety percent of people lack that vision. Perhaps it’s a matter of perspective?”

As he said this, Chen Xi couldn’t help but glance at Li Ru and Guo Jia. These two were true men of humble origins, yet their vision was terrifyingly broad.

The other advisors also nodded in agreement. They might not have fully realized it before, but as Taishan and Qingzhou rapidly expanded like a snowball rolling downhill, they had noticed that vision often outperformed raw intelligence. Problems that seemed insurmountable could often be resolved with a far-sighted perspective—something Chen Xi excelled at.

“In that case, we’ll put the Qingzhou campaign on hold. If Cao Cao attacks Xuzhou in a fit of rage, Zilong will still lead the vanguard,” Liu Bei amended his orders, relieved that he hadn’t yet set a fixed date for the campaign. Once military orders were issued, there was no going back.

“Understood,” Zhao Yun replied calmly. He didn’t care whether he was fighting in Qingzhou or against Cao Cao—he simply wanted to hone his skills on the battlefield.

“Hmm, should we inform Xizhi of Cao Song’s death?” Liu Ye suggested with a wicked grin. “I’ve heard that a long journey could leave him bedridden. Should we give it a try? Given his loyalty to Cao Mengde, he’d surely rush back to Yanzhou. A journey like that, tsk tsk...”

“There’s no need to expose our strong intelligence network,” Guo Jia interjected calmly, glancing at Liu Ye.

“That’s true. No need to reveal our intelligence capabilities,” Chen Xi agreed. “Let’s wait and see for now.”

“Ten days should be enough. By then, even if Xizhi finds out, it’ll be too late for him to make it back,” Guo Jia added.

It couldn’t be denied that Guo Jia had a personal vendetta. If Xizhi were to die on the road due to the long journey, that would be too mundane an ending. After suffering so much at his hands over the years, Guo Jia wasn’t content to let it end that way. He wouldn’t be satisfied until he had defeated Xizhi fair and square on the battlefield.

“By the way, Zilong, I’ve been meaning to ask—what’s going on with your troops? After activating your Yun Qi, the army feels a bit... strange,” Chen Xi said, uninterested in Guo Jia’s personal vendetta. He knew Guo Jia could separate personal and public matters well.

"It seems that after activating Yun Qi, the commander's will and personality influence the soldiers. According to my master, Yun Qi connects everyone, centering around the commander. The stronger the commander, or rather, the stronger the will, the more evident the commander's influence on the soldiers," Zhao Yun explained, though he sounded uncertain.

Chapter 344: Will? Military Spirit?

Chen Xi and the others began to ponder deeply, and even the military officers, who were encountering this concept for the first time, furrowed their brows.

"Generally speaking, the stronger a general's command ability, the greater their control over their soldiers. Under equal conditions, the fighting power they can unleash is stronger, and the soldiers' acceptance of the general's will is higher. The flow of Yun Qi is also faster," Zhao Yun shared what his master had taught him.

It may seem like a simple statement, but if Zhao Yun hadn't shared it, half of the people here might never have figured it out on their own. This shows just how terrifying some monopolized knowledge can be.

"So, the general is the backbone of the army," Chen Xi said thoughtfully, "but this also ties into how many troops a general can command, right?"

"Yes, a general's own strength and command ability greatly affect the performance of their soldiers. The general's will influences the soldiers' combat capabilities. If two generals are equally matched in strength and command, the deciding factor would be their will," Zhao Yun continued to explain, leaving the others somewhat stunned. It was clear how valuable having a good teacher was.

Chen Xi rubbed his temples. From what Zhao Yun had described, it seemed like the battles between generals weren't much different from before, but something felt off.

"Zilong, explain more clearly. The concept of will shouldn't be so vague. Since you've brought it up, you might as well share the most important details. I don't think your master forbade you from passing it on," Chen Xi said after thinking for a while, noticing that a large piece of the puzzle seemed to be missing.

“The will of a general is crucial. Disregarding other factors, a general's will alone can change many things. Even without Yun Qi, and even if the formation is scattered, as long as the general instills a strong, unyielding will in the soldiers, and they share a unified will, the unit can remain formidable—even without weapons...” Zhao Yun trailed off, but everyone understood his meaning.

“So, when a general's image becomes deeply ingrained in the soldiers, the special abilities of a unit actually reflect the general's will?” Chen Xi pondered this, recalling many historical examples of elite troops that triumphed against the odds—troops that remained resilient and strong even in the toughest situations.

The thought filled Chen Xi with a sense of awe.

“Yes, it's the general's will, but it's not just that—it's also the military spirit. While the general is crucial, they're not the absolute factor. If a previous general leaves a strong imprint on a unit, the next general might even be influenced by it,” Zhao Yun added, though he seemed unsure. Even his master hadn't fully explained this aspect.

“What if a unit already has a complete military spirit? A spirit so intact that even if the previous general dies, the military spirit remains, and the unit is still as strong as before. How does the next general handle that?” Chen Xi asked curiously.

“That's impossible. If the general dies, the military spirit is essentially gone. The soldiers won't be able to maintain the same iron will for long,” Zhao Yun replied, thinking Chen Xi was just speculating. He answered without much thought.

As Zhao Yun gave this response, Chen Xi immediately saw the distinction between elite units like the Xian Deng Dead Soldiers, the Da Ji Shi, and the Xian Zhen Ying.

For example, after Ju Yi's death, the Xian Deng Dead Soldiers and Da Ji Shi fell under Chunyu Qiong's command. By the time of the Battle of Guandu, it hadn't been long, yet they had lost their once-peerless spirit. In contrast, after Gao Shun's death, the Xian Zhen Ying remained under Zhang Liao as his personal guards, and ten years later, they were still formidable, smashing through enemies at Xiaoyao Ford like before.

This highlighted the difference between elite units: some retained their indomitable spirit even after losing their general, while others quickly declined.

Recalling Ju Yi leading the Xian Deng Dead Soldiers, Chen Xi could almost feel the chilling aura in the intelligence reports. The fact that the Xian Zhen Ying was even stronger than that must mean they were on another level. No wonder the Xian Zhen Ying, even with only a few hundred soldiers, could beat down the troops led by Guan Yu and Zhang Fei as if they were children. Such a powerful unit was clearly one of the finest in history.

“Lord Xuande, when we march on Xuzhou, please take Chen Shuzhi along. Also, if the opportunity arises, recruit more Danyang soldiers,” Chen Xi stood up and suggested to Liu Bei. Special units needed to be built, and among those present, only Chen Dao had historically trained the White Feather Soldiers using Danyang troops as a foundation.

“Very well,” Liu Bei agreed, even though he didn’t fully understand why Chen Dao was needed. Since Chen Xi requested it, there had to be a good reason. “Shuzhi, you’ll delay taking over the Taishan garrison and serve as Zijian’s deputy for now. We’ll make further arrangements after the Xuzhou campaign.”

“Yes!” Chen Dao replied, thrilled. Every capable general wanted to prove themselves on the battlefield, and Chen Dao was no exception. Although he had remained low-key since arriving, not wanting to make a bad impression, Chen Xi had unexpectedly spoken up for him.

“Zhongtai, you and Meng Kang will take over the Taishan garrison for now. Continue the daily drills without interruption,” Liu Bei instructed, glancing at the others. His gaze lingered on Wei Yan, who stood behind Guan Yu, but he ultimately decided not to give him a new assignment. It was clear that Guan Yu had taken a deep liking to Wei Yan, treating him like a son and wanting to keep him close.

“Yes, my lord,” Sun Guan, who had been managing the garrison in western Qingzhou and recruiting refugees, responded calmly. He knew his limits; he was competent at maintaining order, but participating in high-level battles could easily lead to failure.

“Xuanguo, you’ll take over Zhongtai’s duties, and the Licheng front will be handled by Yunchang,” Liu Bei ordered Zang Ba.

"Yes," Zang Ba replied, rising to accept his orders.

"The rest of you, be ready for action at any time!" Liu Bei concluded, noticing that Zhang Fei seemed eager to speak but holding back.

"Yes, my lord!" Taishi Ci, Hua Xiong, and the others saluted in unison, knowing they would know the results within ten days.

Chapter 345: This Education Method...

Chen Xi was casually chatting with Fan Jian, feeling somewhat aimless. Although the New Year celebrations were over, there wasn't much work for the people of Fenggao. Most of their days were spent gathering for drinks, watching plays, and listening to music. Recently, the theater at Manxiang Pavilion had been packed to capacity for every show.

"Zichuan, let's go drink!" Zhang Fei's booming voice echoed from outside the courtyard. His powerful shout made Chen Xi, who was inside the house, feel a tremor in his ears. Naturally, the maids within the inner courtyard started chattering away after hearing the loud voice.

One must say, Chen Xi was too good to his maids. Before the New Year, he had given them all generous allowances, similar to those of wealthy young ladies, and hadn't required them to do much work. As a result, after the holidays, the maids had become bolder.

"Every day it's drinking. Can't you come up with a new line? Who are you drinking with today?" Chen Xi sighed as he pushed open the door. "Just don't go drinking with Gan Ning—that drunkard is impossible to keep up with."

"There's a new play at Manxiang Pavilion today. You're not going to watch? It's performed by the famous actress Chen Yun, and she's fantastic," Zhang Fei said, slapping Chen Xi on the shoulder. The impact made Chen Xi involuntarily bend down slightly.

Zhang Fei was behaving like a complete fanboy. Well, in a time with limited entertainment options, a good play was the ultimate treat for those who were otherwise idle. Recently, Manxiang Pavilion had been making a fortune, and several "famous" performers had emerged.

"Oh, that's my maid. All the actresses at Manxiang Pavilion with the surname Chen are my maids who went there for fun," Chen Xi replied disinterestedly. He had enjoyed the first couple of shows, but after seeing them several times, his interest had waned.

During the New Year festivities, Chen Xi had allowed his maids to take time off and enjoy themselves. Some of them had gone back to Manxiang Pavilion to visit their former madam, Liu Luo, who had given them to Chen Xi when the establishment had ceased its previous business model.

It was during this time that Chen Xi learned that Liu Luo had personally raised the maids she gave him. It seemed clear she hoped to establish a connection with Chen Xi through them.

Chen Xi didn't blame Liu Luo for her actions. After all, without her care, these girls might not have survived.

When Manxiang Pavilion was short-staffed, Liu Luo had recruited her daughters to perform in the plays. Some did well, some didn't, but they all earned generous tips. The audiences, composed mostly of wealthy merchants experiencing such entertainment for the first time, were eager to reward the performances.

As a result, Chen Xi's maids had been drawn into the theater scene, and at that time, Manxiang Pavilion had been desperate for performers. So, Liu Luo, as the boss, didn't care about the qualifications of the actresses—newcomers were welcome, and the audience simply wanted to be entertained. Before long, several talented actresses emerged.

Now, five so-called famous actresses had risen to prominence, and aside from Chen Yun, two of them were currently in Chen Xi's household, studying poetry. During the New Year, these maids had earned enough to support themselves for life, yet none of them had left. Chen Xi knew why—survival in this world was too difficult, and being a maid in his household offered them security that was hard to find elsewhere.

"Ah, why aren't my maids as capable as yours?" Zhang Fei sighed. He was still single and hadn't shown any intention of marrying.

"You could try cultivating their talents," Chen Xi suggested as he stepped out the door. "I need to meet with Fengxiao and deliver some news to Zhicai. You should go to the theater with Xingba instead. I've had enough of it. If I want to watch a play, I can just arrange one in my garden. I don't need to go out."

"Such a waste—hogging three famous actresses all for yourself," Zhang Fei grumbled. However, he didn't suggest that Chen Xi send any of the maids to him. Almost everyone in Taishan knew about Chen Xi's peculiar hobby of keeping dozens of maids around.

People didn't criticize Chen Xi for this; after all, maids were just maids, and what their master did with them was none of the authorities' concern. Given that Chen Xi seemed to buy them simply for the pleasure of having them around, there was nothing wrong with it. Chen Xi didn't bother explaining either—his actions did indeed resemble someone collecting maids for fun.

At least Chen Xi had managed to establish a legitimate venue for cultural entertainment in Taishan. As for fostering a literary culture, that would take time. But those weren't pressing matters.

After finally getting Zhang Fei to leave, Chen Xi approached another courtyard and called out, "Kongming, how about I take you out for a bit?"

After a long pause, Zhuge Liang appeared with a book in his hands and shook his head. "I'm currently studying formations. Lord Li gave me a book on formation basics and said that once I've mastered it, he'll teach me a new formation. I'm deep into my studies, so maybe tomorrow."

With that, Zhuge Liang ignored Chen Xi and locked the gate. Chen Xi was just too much trouble—this was Zhuge Liang's biggest realization since living with him. Chen Xi would occasionally drop knowledge on him that was so overwhelming it made Zhuge Liang's head spin. The most frustrating part was that Chen Xi's books often contained flaws, forcing Zhuge Liang to figure them out himself.

Over time, Zhuge Liang had started to avoid asking Chen Xi questions, turning instead to the other scholars.

As time passed, Zhuge Liang realized that Guo Jia's carefree personality wasn't conducive to learning, Jia Xu was elusive, Lu Su was always busy, Liu Ye seemed a bit neurotic, Man Chong always looked like someone owed him money, and Fa Zheng exuded malice. Only Li You, the elder statesman, appeared

kind and knowledgeable, always willing to answer Zhuge Liang's questions without causing him stress. Zhuge Liang felt as though he had finally found his mentor.

To be honest, Zhuge Liang no longer believed that his intelligence was unmatched. After all, Chen Xi, who wandered around aimlessly, would occasionally drop pearls of wisdom that left Zhuge Liang shocked and enlightened. Over time, he had become numb to these surprises, accepting them as part of everyday life.

"It's strange. Why doesn't Kongming stick to me?" Chen Xi muttered to himself as he stared at the locked door. He had taught Zhuge Liang so many things that didn't exist in this era, yet the more he taught, the more Zhuge Liang seemed to avoid him. What was going on?

If Zhuge Liang knew what Chen Xi was thinking, he would have burst into tears. Chen Xi's teaching style wasn't education—it was force-feeding! Whether the information was toxic or not, suitable or not, Chen Xi would shove it into Zhuge Liang's brain without a second thought. Fortunately, Zhuge Liang had a superior intellect, otherwise, Chen Xi's methods might have stifled his creativity.

Even so, Zhuge Liang was terrified by Chen Xi's overwhelming knowledge. He wasn't opposed to learning; he just couldn't handle Chen Xi's intense teaching style. Desperate, Zhuge Liang had resorted to locking himself away to process what he had already learned before taking on any more. Otherwise, he feared he might not survive the onslaught of information!

Chapter 346: This Vengeance Must Be Avenged!

Chen Xi didn't pay much attention to Zhuge Liang's behavior. The young man was simply engrossed in something he was passionate about. Speaking of military formations, Chen Xi's current level of expertise was limited to the basic wedge formation. As for the more advanced formations, after reviewing them, Chen Xi realized that mastering them would require a significant investment of time and effort.

Chen Xi had asked others about formations, and it turned out that most generals only knew a few standard ones. As for the high-level formations, like the Eight Gates Golden Lock Formation, even Liu Ye only had a rudimentary understanding. Of course, this didn't apply to people like Guo Jia, who had specialized knowledge in such areas.

Learning these formations was no easy task. First, you needed a teacher, and that alone eliminated over 99% of people. Very few knew these formations, and even fewer were willing to teach them since these were often their ultimate secrets. Unless someone was foolish enough to show off right after learning a new formation, most people would keep such knowledge well-guarded.

That's why Chen Xi found it so surprising that Li You was willing to teach Zhuge Liang the Eight Gates Golden Lock Formation, including all its variations and subsequent deductions. It was almost as if Li You was passing down his entire legacy to Zhuge Liang.

With all this material, along with the Qimen Dunjia techniques Chen Xi had obtained from Guo Jia, Zhuge Liang would likely be able to deduce the Eight Formations Diagram on his own eventually. So, Chen Xi decided it was best not to disturb him.

After walking a few steps toward Guo Jia's residence, Chen Xi was informed by the steward that Guo Jia had gone to see off Xi Zhicai. Finding this odd, Chen Xi borrowed a carriage and headed toward the western gate of Fenggao. By the time he arrived, Guo Jia was already on his way back.

"Hey, why are you drinking again?" Chen Xi jumped off the carriage, snatched the wine jug from Guo Jia's hand, and scolded him as he saw Guo Jia slouching and sipping wine while leading his horse.

"Zhicai has left," Guo Jia said with a sigh.

"What? Wasn't he fine just a few days ago?" Chen Xi was puzzled.

"..." Guo Jia stared at Chen Xi in silence.

"You should have been clearer," Chen Xi replied awkwardly. "Why didn't you bring me along to see him off? After all, I should have at least thanked Chen Changwen for his help in getting us so many capable mid-level civil officials."

"He wrote in his letter that he didn't need me to see him off. I realized he had already left by the time I received it. I chased after him for more than ten miles but couldn't catch up with his carriage. He really didn't want to see me one last time, huh?" Guo Jia muttered bitterly, feeling dejected that Xi Zhicai hadn't even wanted to meet with him.

"He probably didn't want you to see him as he was leaving. You two were close friends, after all," Chen Xi said, handing the wine jug back to Guo Jia.

Meanwhile, in another carriage, Xi Zhicai was casually chatting with Chen Qun and Sima Lang. After recovering enough to get out of bed, Xi Zhicai had found the letter he had written to Cao Cao before his collapse but decided not to have Chen Qun send it to Yanzhou. Instead, he entrusted it to a guard to deliver.

Once he was certain that his health wasn't in immediate danger, Xi Zhicai visited Hua Tuo for further treatment. After confirming that he only needed to rest and avoid overexertion, Xi Zhicai decided it was time to leave Taishan. Staying any longer without being able to acquire the spiritual talents of Taishan's people would be a waste of time, especially when there was still much to do in Yanzhou. Moreover, he didn't want Guo Jia's ominous remarks hanging over him any longer—if something truly happened, he would die feeling deeply wronged.

Having secured Sima Lang's loyalty and identified two potential talents, as well as gaining access to an extensive collection of books through Cai Yan, Xi Zhicai felt that his trip had been highly successful. Although he had coughed up blood twice, Cao Cao's ambitions had advanced, and that made it all worthwhile.

As for intelligence gathering, Chen Qun had already collected all the information they could. Taishan had been relatively open about many things.

In short, Xi Zhicai's objectives for his visit, aside from copying the spiritual talents of Taishan's people, had been achieved, and then some. Though it wasn't a perfect outcome, Xi Zhicai felt satisfied with what he had accomplished. There was nothing more to regret.

"Changwen, you've collected all the intelligence on Taishan. Compared to Yanzhou, what are we lacking?" Sima Lang asked, steering the conversation back to serious matters after some lighthearted banter. Sima Lang had recently been persuaded by Chen Qun to join Cao Cao's forces.

"Our biggest gap with Taishan is in reserves. Chen Zichuan has stockpiled every resource he could think of. Taishan's reserves are vast enough to handle a drought, snow disaster, or plague across their entire territory," Chen Qun said with a bitter smile. "It's no exaggeration to call him the master of foresight."

"Natural disasters can be ignored. Chen Zichuan's spiritual talent allows him to alter the weather across Liu Bei's domain. Talk about something else," Xi Zhicai said, dismissing the advantage Chen Xi had in this area due to his spiritual talent.

"Altering the weather across the entire domain?" Chen Qun was stunned but quickly adjusted. "What we need now is money and grain—a lot of it—to expand our army, train soldiers, maintain stability, and establish a new household registration system. We also need to build a library and improve the treatment of our soldiers."

"All of that requires money and grain," Xi Zhicai said with some frustration. Although Cao Cao had some savings, they were still far short of what Chen Qun was proposing.

"While you were unconscious, I sent intelligence back to Yanzhou and recommended that our lord absorb the Wei family of Hedong. Just because we lack money and grain doesn't mean some families don't have plenty," Chen Qun said with a smile. He had already made contact with the Wei family of Hedong during his time in Fenggao. This family had been ranked second among the top five wealthy merchant families for over two hundred years and had been battling the Zhen family constantly.

"That would be helpful," Xi Zhicai nodded. He had witnessed the wealth of top-tier merchant families in Taishan. The Wei family of Hedong, being one of the most powerful, would have more than enough resources to support Cao Cao's ambitions.

In response to Chen Qun's letter, Cao Cao had been actively engaging with the Wei family in Chenliu, who had strong ties with their cousins in Hedong. Thanks to the efforts of Wei Zi, who had survived unexpectedly, the Wei family of Hedong had decided during their New Year gathering to fully support Cao Cao. Among the leading figures of the time, only Yuan Shao, Yuan Shu, Liu Bei, and Cao Cao had the power and momentum that made them worth considering.

Yuan Shao was out of the question due to the deep-seated feud between the Wei and Zhen families. Joining Liu Bei's faction was also unappealing, as Mi Zhu's brilliant financial maneuvers had nearly crushed the Zhen family. The Wei family wasn't confident they could withstand Mi Zhu's strategies, especially since they had clashed with him in the past.

That left Cao Cao and Yuan Shu. Given the strong connection between the Chenliu and Hedong branches of the Wei family and the relentless efforts of Wei Zi, the Wei family quickly decided to align with Cao Cao.

On the day of the banquet celebrating the Wei family's alliance with Cao Cao, a messenger burst in with urgent news.

"My lord, terrible news!"

Cao Cao's face darkened as he glared at the messenger. Today was supposed to be a joyous occasion, welcoming the Wei family into his ranks, and this interruption was highly unwelcome.

"Speak!" Cao Cao's eyes flashed with cold fury.

"My lord, your father was killed a month ago near the border of the state of Lu and Xu Province by Zhang Kai, a general under Tao Qian!" the messenger reported swiftly, keeping his head down.

The room fell silent. Cao Cao's vision darkened, and he collapsed onto the table. Xun Yu and the others rushed to his side, desperately trying to revive him.

After a while, Cao Cao regained consciousness. His eyes were bloodshot, and he roared, "Tao Qian let his soldiers kill my father—this is a grudge that cannot be forgiven! I will mobilize my entire army and drown Xu Province in blood! If I do not avenge this, I am no longer human, no longer human!"

All the military officers in attendance immediately knelt before Cao Cao. With bloodshot eyes, Xiahou Dun, Xiahou Yuan, Cao Ren, and the others shouted, "We volunteer to lead the vanguard and annihilate Xu Province!"

Chapter 347: Support from Chenliu Wei and Hedong Wei

Xun Yu lowered his head, filled with helplessness. It wasn't that he didn't want to persuade Cao Cao, but he simply couldn't. Not long ago, regarding Bian Rang's matter, he had already used the argument, "A wise ruler does not harm his kin, nor does he sever the sacrifices to their ancestors. If my lord acts this way today, how will others in the world act tomorrow?" This had convinced Cao Cao to spare Bian Rang's family.

But now, the situation was different. Tao Qian had caused the death of Cao Cao's father, whether intentionally or not, and the fact remained that Cao Cao's father was dead. In such a scenario, Xun Yu found himself unable to speak out. In the Han Dynasty, an era where it was deemed reasonable to kill for a friend, a teacher, or a relative, avenging one's father was even more justifiable.

Xun Yu exchanged a glance with Xun You, both seeing the helplessness in each other's eyes. Xun You gestured to Xun Yu, and the latter nodded in agreement. They both understood that it was best to let Cao Cao vent his anger for now. Trying to persuade him at this moment would only lead to irrational decisions. They remained silent, believing that Cao Cao's previous behavior indicated that his threat to "bathe Xu Province in blood" was likely just a proclamation born of grief.

Cheng Yu, on the other hand, felt little emotion regarding the death of Cao Song. As for Cao Cao's desire to slaughter Xu Province, Cheng Yu had no strong opinions—if they were enemies, they should be treated as such.

When Chen Gong heard Cao Cao's enraged declaration, he immediately stepped forward. "Lord Cao, there are many unknowns surrounding your father's death. Given the harsh winter, it would be wise to first send emissaries to question Tao Qian about this matter, lest we fall into someone's trap. Moreover, while Lord Cao speaks of bathing Xu Province in blood, I cannot agree with such actions. Even if Tao Qian is guilty, what does that have to do with the people of Xu Province? Are they not also citizens of the Han Empire? Should we divide people by provinces and counties? I humbly request that Lord Cao retract his statement."

Cao Cao, already consumed by rage, found himself at a loss for words after Chen Gong's speech. His fury surged, and he glared at Chen Gong with eyes ablaze. "Gongtai, are you saying that a common man can shed blood for his ruler, teacher, and kin, but I, Cao Mengde, am not even a common man?"

"Lord Cao, Confucius said, 'A gentleman does not vent his anger on others, nor does he make the same mistake twice.' If even a gentleman should act thus, how much more so should a ruler? A ruler possesses nine virtues: being magnanimous yet solemn, gentle yet decisive, humble yet dignified, capable yet meticulous, open to advice yet steadfast, just yet compassionate, straightforward yet considerate, righteous yet practical, and strong yet honorable!" Chen Gong argued passionately, reciting Confucian teachings.

Cao Cao trembled with rage, his eyes wide as he glared at Chen Gong, seemingly ready to leap down and challenge him to a duel.

"If Tao Qian dared to act so, why shouldn't we? Confucius spoke of repaying wrongs with righteousness. How is avenging one's father wrong? Shouldn't subordinates avenge the wrongs done to their ruler, teacher, or kin?" Cheng Yu, seeing Cao Cao trembling with anger, quickly stood up to assist, rebuking Chen Gong.

Chen Gong took a deep breath, flung his sleeves, and left the hall. It wasn't that he couldn't out-argue Cheng Yu, but he knew that even if he won the argument, Cao Cao wouldn't listen. Realizing this, he lost the will to continue.

Cao Cao watched Chen Gong's departing figure with some shame but did not order his arrest. Though he was inclined to lash out, he wouldn't take it out on Chen Gong.

"Xiahou Dun, Xiahou Yuan, each of you will lead five thousand troops. March through the State of Lu and attack Xu Province. Anyone who blocks your path, kill them!" Cao Cao commanded, his eyes cold and filled with murderous intent.

"Yes!" The Xiahou brothers roared in response, receiving their orders before leaving.

"Zixiao, return to Wancheng and hold the city! Maintain relations with Liu Biao! If Yuan Shu makes any moves, kill him!" Cao Cao's orders were now filled with undisguised hostility and determination.

"Ziyou, you will stay in Chenliu and temporarily assume the duties of Yanzhou Inspector." Cao Cao handed over his seals and emblems to Xun Yu, signaling his complete trust.

"Understood." Xun Yu sighed, accepting the responsibility. From this moment on, he held the full authority of the Yanzhou Inspector, a testament to Cao Cao's faith in him.

"The rest of you, prepare the army. We march on Xu Province immediately!" Cao Cao roared, his eyes red with grief and fury.

"Understood." Xun Yu, Cheng Yu, and other advisors, including Zhao Yan, Cui Yan, Mao Jie, and Lu Qian, all nodded in agreement.

"Lord Cao, please leave me in Chenliu. While I may not excel in military strategy, I can assist Ziyong with the logistics and rear operations." Fan Qin sighed.

"If that is your wish, how could I refuse?" Cao Cao forced a smile, despite the pain he felt.

"Lord Cao, I request to serve as a military advisor to Zixiao," Du Xi volunteered after seeing Zhao Yan and Fan Qin make their decisions.

"Very well. If Zixiao encounters difficulties, remind him to consult you. With you by his side, Yuan Shu will not be able to threaten Wancheng." Cao Cao instructed Cao Ren, barely managing to smile at the news of these three talents joining him. However, the grief of losing his father overshadowed any joy he might have felt.

"We, the Wei family of Chenliu, are willing to provide 300,000 dan of grain, 10,000 sets of winter clothing, and 3,000 tents," said Wei Zi, one of Cao Cao's staunchest supporters, as he stood up and made his contribution. These supplies were only what the Wei family currently had on hand. With more time, Wei Zi could have provided even more.

"The Wei family of Hedong is willing to provide three billion coins, one million dan of grain, and three thousand horses," Wei Ji calmly announced. These supplies had already been transported and were intended as a donation to Cao Cao. Unfortunately, the news of Cao Song's death disrupted the banquet, prompting Wei Ji to present them immediately.

Though these resources seemed vast, they were but a drop in the bucket for the Wei family—a mere greeting gift. When Cao Cao first raised an army, Wei Zi, as his wealthy and supportive friend, had personally funded the purchase of 5,000 strong men, outfitted them with armor and weapons, provided grain, and even donated several hundred horses. This generous backing gave Cao Cao the means to participate in the coalition against Dong Zhuo.

In the original timeline, Wei Zi should have died in the Battle of Xingyang. However, due to Chen Xi's influence, Cao Cao never participated in that battle, allowing Wei Zi to avoid his fate. As a result, the Wei family of Chenliu remained close to Cao Cao.

Despite the financial strain of the coalition against Dong Zhuo, Wei Zi's continued support allowed Cao Cao to recover. Even when Cao Cao faced hardships last year, Wei Zi's unwavering support in the form of money and grain enabled Cao Cao to persevere.

After quickly finalizing military and administrative matters, Xun Yu, accompanied by Fan Qin, arrived at the Chenliu government office, curious about Fan Qin's intentions.

"From today onward, we are colleagues, Fan Qin. Please don't use poetry and songs to deceive us anymore. The Franks of Yingchuan have poured three generations of effort into nurturing you. Surely, you are more than just a poet. Zhao Boren and Du Zixu are both outstanding talents, yet they both look to you as their leader. Don't disappoint me, Fan Qin." Xun Yu said with a gentle smile as he poured Fan Qin a cup of tea.

Chapter 348: Campaign Against Xuzhou

"Truly worthy of the name Xun Wenruo," Fan Qin said with a bitter smile. "Nothing escapes your eyes. While I long for a life of leisure, filled with music and poetry, power has nothing to do with me. But alas, the family always needs someone to step forward."

"You can enjoy those things later, but for now, you must help me manage all of Yanzhou. I need to build a solid foundation for our lord," Xun Yu said, fixing Fan Qin with a determined gaze.

"I won't cause any trouble," Fan Qin sighed after a long pause. "I'll handle Chen Changwen's previous duties. I'll make sure you're satisfied."

"Good. Once Changwen returns, you can go back to doing what you love. But until then, you must fulfill your responsibilities," Xun Yu nodded. He knew that Zhao Yan, Du Xi, and Xin Bi were all on par with Chen Qun in terms of talent, and Fan Qin's abilities even slightly exceeded theirs.

"Moving pieces from one place to another, seizing Guanzhong, allying with Xiliang, building cavalry, serving the emperor, and enforcing royal commands in Xiliang; soldiers pressing down on Hanzhong, forging alliances with Liu Zhang, and uniting forces to break through Hanzhong," Fan Qin said with resignation. "That's the most suitable strategy. If we act quickly, there's no reason we can't unify the land."

"The strategy of Western Qin, is it?" Xun Yu lightly tapped his teacup. "But are you sure you can move faster than Yuan Benchu or Liu Xuande?"

"No, I'm not certain. I don't think highly of Yuan Benchu; I believe Liu Xuande has a better chance. After all, my brother-in-law and cousin are both in Taishan," Fan Qin shook his head. "But even if we can't, do you have any other choice? At least if we follow this strategy step by step, we'll end up in a position as strong as Dong Zhuo once held. With 30,000 troops securing Hangu Pass, we'll have plenty of time to develop and expand."

"Tiger Prison Pass and Hangu Pass, indeed a good plan. It's almost identical to the strategy I never mentioned before. But sometimes, things aren't as simple as making a decisive choice," Xun Yu sighed. Despite Fan Qin's current demeanor, Xun Yu knew that carrying out this strategy was only a matter of time. The earlier they executed it, the greater the danger, but also the greater the benefits. After all, Dong Zhuo's remnants in Chang'an were still incredibly strong. If they could successfully absorb them, it would significantly strengthen their position.

Cao Cao was never one to hesitate once he made a decision, especially when avenging his father. He mobilized his troops that very day.

Chen Gong sat quietly at home, reflecting on his actions. He realized that he had gone too far in front of Cao Cao. After all, Cao Cao was avenging his father, and Chen Gong's demands had been too stringent. Yet, as he watched Cao Cao's troops stretch out in a long line from the city walls, a sense of detachment settled over him. It felt as if Cao Cao was drifting further and further away.

Meanwhile, in Xuzhou, Tao Qian had also received the news that Cao Song had been killed by Zhang Kai.

"Find Zhang Kai! He took a large amount of supplies; he can't possibly leave Xuzhou!" Tao Qian shouted in a fit of rage. He could already imagine Cao Cao's fury upon receiving this news.

"Governor Tao, Cao Jugao has been dead for over a month. By now, Zhang Kai has had plenty of time to leave Xuzhou," Chen Deng said, lowering his head. "We should focus on explaining this matter to Cao Mengde."

Tao Qian paused, his age showing in his slower thinking. "Bring me silk. I will write to Cao Mengde to clarify the situation. Hopefully, he can understand. Even if it requires spending a lot of money and grain, it must be done."

Chen Deng sneered and quietly withdrew. Based on his understanding of Cao Cao, there was no way Cao Cao would retreat. Even if they handed over all of Xuzhou, the entire Tao family would still have to accompany Cao Song to the grave.

However, he wouldn't say this out loud. Tao Qian would only realize the truth when it was too late. In this brutal era, only military power could uphold justice. To prove their righteousness, they would first have to defeat Cao Cao in battle; otherwise, everything would be meaningless.

By this time, Zhang Kai was already on the Yangtze River. Contrary to his earlier plan of heading south to eastern Yangzhou, he had veered off course and was now heading towards Huainan to seek refuge with Yuan Shu.

"Brother, look!" One of Zhang Kai's men pointed ahead, spotting two young women playing on a nearby boat.

Zhang Kai, feeling seasick from the journey, followed the direction indicated by his subordinate. He saw two beautiful women, one older and one younger, on a boat not far away. Having been away from women for nearly a month, Zhang Kai's lust surged instantly.

After observing for a moment and noting the lack of guards on the boat, Zhang Kai ordered his men to steer towards it. How could he pass up such a prize?

"Sister, that boat seems to be heading towards us," the younger girl, around fifteen or sixteen, said to her older sister.

The older sister stared at the approaching boat, her suspicions growing. As it drew closer, she caught sight of Zhang Kai's lecherous grin.

"Quick, turn back to Shouchun!" the older sister immediately understood the situation. Their beauty had always attracted trouble, so they usually stayed home, playing music and reading. She never expected to encounter such danger during this outing on the river.

"Row harder, men!" Zhang Kai laughed loudly as he noticed the panic on the other boat. From this distance, he could clearly see the exquisite faces of the two sisters.

"Bo Fu, you're recovered?" Zhou Yu marveled at Sun Ce's rapid recovery. "I thought it would take much longer. How do you feel about your current strength?"

"I've found my path. Even You Ping can only surpass me by a slight margin now. In a year, I'll completely outmatch him," Sun Ce stretched, feeling revitalized after two months of reflection and training. He had far surpassed his previous self.

"Let me show you," Sun Ce said, loosening up. "But this place isn't suitable. Come on, I'll take you to the Yangtze to see my strength!"

Without waiting for a response, Sun Ce grabbed Zhou Yu and, with a powerful leap, flew over a hundred meters. Several more leaps took them outside Shouchun City. In mid-air, Sun Ce twisted, kicked off the air, and arced gracefully before crashing down into a small forest outside the city.

"Ugh! Are you trying to kill me?" Zhou Yu grumbled as he crawled off Sun Ce, covered in dirt and leaves.

Chapter 349: The Meeting of Two Heroes and Two Beauties

"An accident, an accident," Sun Ce explained awkwardly. "Carrying you threw off my balance. When I'm alone, I can jump dozens of times in the air at high speed. I wanted to show you a good time, but... well, you know." If it hadn't been for his quick reflexes, using himself as a cushion and Zhou Yu softening the impact with his spiritual shield, Zhou Yu might have been hurt just now.

"Bo Fu, can't you be a little more mature?" Zhou Yu chuckled helplessly. Although Sun Ce was his sworn brother and acted like an elder sibling in front of Sun Quan and Sun Yi, he sometimes behaved quite foolishly around Zhou Yu.

"It really was an accident. It won't happen again," Sun Ce said, embarrassed. He then picked Zhou Yu up again and dashed towards the Yangtze River at high speed. This time, he refrained from performing any high-difficulty aerial maneuvers, knowing that unless he held Zhou Yu firmly, those tricks could easily go wrong.

With a powerful stomp on the riverbank, Sun Ce shot forward over a hundred meters and, seeing the surging waters of the Yangtze River ahead, he stabilized his body and gently descended onto the water as lightly as a feather.

"How about that? I can do it too!" Sun Ce exclaimed, bouncing on the water a few times like a child showing off a perfect score on a test to his best friend.

"Oh, Bo Fu, you don't have to carry me," Zhou Yu replied casually. Then, under Sun Ce's shocked gaze, he too stood on the surface of the water. "It's quite simple, really. But I prefer to travel by boat."

"..." Sun Ce stared dumbfounded at Zhou Yu.

"It's just spiritual power. When you have enough of it, you can do things like this. If you can move clouds, you can certainly move yourself," Zhou Yu explained with a smile. "Though your technique is more difficult, congratulations, Bo Fu. You've made progress again."

"Hahaha," Sun Ce scratched his head. He had thought using spiritual power to levitate oneself would be simple.

"Aren't you supposed to show me your strength?" Zhou Yu reminded him with a smile.

"Oh, right! Watch this!" Sun Ce nodded firmly, then let out a powerful shout. Golden flames burst from his body, and the river water surged violently in response to his fierce aura.

"Hah!" Sun Ce roared as he unleashed his power. Soon, a set of golden armor appeared on his body, with golden light swirling around his hands and feet. Clenching his fist, a golden spear materialized in his grasp.

"Break!" Sun Ce shouted, thrusting the spear into the river with immense force.

With a thunderous boom, a massive wave, ten zhang high, erupted from the river.

"How was that?" Sun Ce asked proudly, turning to Zhou Yu.

"How confident are you against Changshan Zhao Zilong?" Zhou Yu asked curiously.

"Not at all. The more I improve, the more terrifying I realize he is," Sun Ce replied, his enthusiasm deflating instantly.

"Hahaha," Zhou Yu chuckled, quickly changing the subject. "Hey, what's that?"

"Miss, run!" The guards pushed the two young women onto a small boat, desperately trying to fend off Zhang Kai and his men.

The younger girl clumsily rowed the boat, trying to escape Zhang Kai's clutches.

"Where do you think you're going?!" Zhang Kai leaped onto the small boat, reaching out to grab the girl.

"Been a while since I've seen river pirates," Sun Ce remarked, descending from the sky like a divine warrior. He kicked Zhang Kai off the boat and into the river, though carrying Zhou Yu somewhat spoiled the effect.

While Zhou Yu could walk on water, he didn't have Sun Ce's speed. Upon spotting the river pirates, Sun Ce had instinctively picked Zhou Yu up and rushed toward the boats.

"Hey, Gongjin, we've got ourselves two beauties," Sun Ce joked after setting Zhou Yu down. Only then did he notice the two young women on the boat, both breathtakingly beautiful.

"Little girl Qiao Wei and my younger sister Qiao Ying thank you, heroes, for saving us," Qiao Wei said gracefully, bowing to Sun Ce without a trace of panic.

"Wow, never seen anyone so pretty," Sun Ce laughed, his eyes gleaming with interest. "These scoundrels dare to commit crimes in my territory? They clearly don't respect me. Hey, little lady, give me a smile."

Zhou Yu was taken aback. He had never seen Sun Ce speak to a woman like this before. He looked Qiao Wei up and down, realizing she was indeed a beauty beyond compare. He couldn't help but marvel at his brother's luck.

"Why tease a helpless girl, young master?" Qiao Wei's languid voice reached Sun Ce's ears, causing his heart to skip a beat.

"Sister, that's Zhou Gongjin," Qiao Ying tugged at Qiao Wei's sleeve, her behavior doing little to conceal her thoughts from Zhou Yu and Sun Ce.

"Looks like they know you, Gongjin," Sun Ce teased, causing Zhou Yu to blush and glance away. Seeing Zhang Kai and his men still fighting, Zhou Yu frowned and said, "Enough playing around. Finish those river bandits."

"Easy!" Sun Ce laughed, forming his left hand into a blade and slashing toward the boat. A hundred-meter-long arc of light split the vessel in two, obliterating it in an instant. For a warrior like Sun Ce, destroying an unprotected ship was child's play.

Qiao Wei was so captivated by Sun Ce's display of power that she didn't even notice his hand under her chin.

"Hey! My guards are still on that boat!" Qiao Ying protested, glaring at Sun Ce. "And all our belongings were on that ship too. Plus, this boat is sinking," she added, pointing to the hole Zhang Kai had made when he fell into the water.

"No problem," Sun Ce laughed, scooping Qiao Wei into his arms and leaping over a hundred meters. In just a few more jumps, he reached the larger ship nearby, quickly subduing the remaining river bandits. From a distance, his voice echoed back, "Gongjin, you can handle the rest."

Zhou Yu turned to look at Qiao Ying, who shyly avoided his gaze, clutching her clothes nervously. Seeing her sister leave in Sun Ce's arms had stirred her heart. After all, Zhou Yu was the famous "Zhou Lang," the dream of countless women in Jiangnan. The mixture of shyness and admiration overwhelmed her, and she barely noticed when Zhou Yu gently lifted her into his arms.

As Zhou Yu carried Qiao Ying across the water, taking his time, Sun Ce couldn't help but feel foolish for rushing earlier. He glanced over at Qiao Wei.

"Pfft," Qiao Wei giggled, perhaps amused by Sun Ce's expression. Her smile was so radiant it seemed to outshine the world.

Chapter 350: Diligence Can Compensate for Clumsiness, The Rise of the Phoenix

As they watched Da Qiao and Xiao Qiao leave, Sun Ce and Zhou Yu couldn't help but feel a sense of loss. Even the near ten billion in loot they had seized today didn't seem to matter. When they exchanged glances, both saw a faint hint of bewilderment in the other's eyes, and both were momentarily stunned.

"Let's go back and prepare the betrothal gifts. I want to marry her!" Zhou Yu said suddenly, turning to Sun Ce.

"But don't you already have a fiancée?" Sun Ce was taken aback.

"I haven't married her yet, have I?" Zhou Yu replied calmly. "A mere engagement can't stop me. Don't you want to marry Qiao Wei?"

"Aren't you afraid of offending the Zhang family?" Sun Ce asked, surprised.

"My Zhou family has produced three generations of Grand Chancellors. In terms of family background, I am not inferior to the Zhang family. As for talent, I, Zhou Yu, don't believe I am any less capable than

anyone from the Zhang family. What do I have to fear? I am determined to marry Qiao Ying," Zhou Yu stated confidently.

"Alright, then. I've decided to marry Qiao Wei as well," Sun Ce declared, recalling the smile that had dimmed the very brightness of the world. "Nothing in this world can stop the two of us when we join forces!"

"By the way, this loot feels a bit strange," Sun Ce said, scratching his head. "It feels more like a merchant ship than a group of river pirates."

"Who cares? What's ours is ours now," Zhou Yu replied nonchalantly. "Just have the ships towed to our dock and let Taishi Ci count the goods. As for what these people were up to, leave that to me."

Zhou Yu casually grabbed one of Zhang Kai's men and, with a glint in his eye, unleashed his spiritual power on the man. The soldier's intelligence plummeted to near-zero as he began spilling information uncontrollably.

"We seem to have stumbled onto something big," Sun Ce said after listening to the details. "But we'll gladly take the loot. How should we handle the situation?"

Zhou Yu let go of the soldier, who would be left mentally incapacitated for some time, and smiled. "This is actually good news. Inform Yuan Shu of this incident. Whether we aim for Jiangdong or Jingzhou, nothing will be able to stop us now. After all, this concerns Cao Mengde of Yanzhou, the linchpin of the Central Plains. Bo Fu, do you want to become the King of Chu?"

"No way!" Sun Ce shook his head vigorously. "Yuan Shu has treated me well. I won't betray him."

"Then there's nothing more to say. Just inform Yuan Shu of this matter. Then, suggest that this is the right time to attack Jiangdong. If all goes well, this responsibility will fall to you. And if Yuan Shu feels incapable, you can tell him that you need no financial support—just a decree, and you will take Jiangdong."

Zhou Yu respected Sun Ce's unwavering loyalty and didn't push him further. Instead, he decided to take things step by step. He believed that as long as he stayed by Sun Ce's side, no opponent, not even a

deity, could stand in their way. Although Zhou Yu dreamed of seeing Sun Ce become a mighty ruler, he valued Sun Ce's current spirit even more—his boldness and courage, even if it occasionally led to foolish actions. As long as Zhou Yu was there, he could manage any fallout.

"Good! My hands have been itching for action. The so-called heroes of Jiangdong, I'll show them who's boss!" Sun Ce said confidently.

"They're not to be underestimated," Zhou Yu sighed, though his words held little concern. Despite cautioning against overconfidence, Zhou Yu still viewed the talents of Jiangdong with contempt. In his eyes, anyone who didn't immediately submit to Sun Ce was simply blind to the heavens' decree, and those who dared oppose Sun Ce were mere fools.

While Sun Ce and Zhou Yu prepared to marry Da Qiao and Xiao Qiao and capitalize on the chaos in the Central Plains to seize Jiangdong and Jingzhou, in the west, Ma Teng and Han Sui led an army of 100,000 Qiang cavalry, sweeping across Yongzhou like locusts.

Fan Chou and Zhang Ji, with about 30,000 Xiliang cavalry, camped several miles west of Chang'an at Changping Pass.

"Uncle, why aren't we staying in Hongnong and expanding our forces? Why are we here fighting Xiliang's Qiang soldiers? Isn't this weakening our strength?" Zhang Xiu questioned, puzzled by his uncle's decision to involve them in this conflict rather than fortify their position in Hongnong.

"Ah, the Xiliang army is no longer unified, and our strategists have vanished. Relying solely on brute force may allow us to dominate for a time, but it won't guarantee our survival," Zhang Ji sighed, reminiscing about the days when Dong Zhuo's forces were at their peak. Comparing those days to the current fractured Xiliang army, he could only lament the inevitable decline.

Zhang Xiu lacked the political acumen to grasp the subtleties of his uncle's words, so he merely listened in confusion.

"Ah, you are my only nephew, and I have no sons of my own. I had hoped to bring Jia Xu to your side so that if anything happened to me, someone could look after you for the rest of your life. But during the chaos in Chang'an, both our military advisor and Jia Xu disappeared," Zhang Ji said, looking at his

nephew with a mix of regret and affection. "Focus on honing your martial skills and become a mighty general who doesn't need to think too much."

"Uncle, you're in good health. There's no need to speak such discouraging words," Zhang Xiu replied, displeased by his uncle's tone. He deeply respected Zhang Ji and didn't want to hear any talk of misfortune.

"Hahaha," Zhang Ji laughed heartily, though he couldn't hide the weariness in his eyes. He knew his own body well; he was already weakening from within. While he lived, the old bonds of camaraderie among the Xiliang generals might protect Zhang Xiu. But once he was gone, those ties would likely sever, leaving Zhang Xiu vulnerable to those coveting his command.

This was why Zhang Ji had brought Zhang Xiu into this battle. He wanted to give his nephew a stage to prove himself, a battle he was certain they would win. Zhang Ji hoped that Zhang Xiu would demonstrate enough value in this battle so that, when Zhang Ji was gone, Zhang Xiu could find a powerful and broad-minded lord to serve, ensuring his safety for the rest of his life.

After returning to his tent, Zhang Xiu quietly polished his Tiger Head Gold Spear. For over ten years since returning from his training, he had been holding back, even during the battles against the Qiang, where he never unleashed more than a fraction of his true strength. Now, finally allowed to fight with his full power, Zhang Xiu was eager to prove himself.

Mounted on his horse, Zhang Xiu slowly rode out of the camp. His uncle, Zhang Ji, had handed him the military seal, making him the commander of this force. With over 10,000 elite Xiliang cavalry under his command, Zhang Xiu led them in a formation that had been drilled to perfection over the past weeks.

"Isn't that Bo Yuan?" Fan Chou spotted Zhang Xiu, clad in golden armor, basking in the winter sun, and was momentarily stunned by the sight. It reminded him of the awe-inspiring presence of Lu Bu in his prime.

"I greet you, Uncle Fan," Zhang Xiu said from atop his horse, saluting Fan Chou with his spear. "My uncle asked me to request reinforcements from you."

"Reinforcements? How many do you need?" Fan Chou asked, surprised that Zhang Ji would request additional troops.

"I don't need cavalry, just some of your troops to guard our camp," Zhang Xiu replied calmly.

"You plan to empty your camp and engage the enemy in a field battle?" Fan Chou asked in disbelief.

"I'm just going to take Han Sui and Ma Teng's heads and their command flags," Zhang Xiu said, his voice calm and unwavering.

Fan Chou felt as though he were dreaming. Such a feat was something only Lu Bu could accomplish.

"Bo Yuan, wait a moment. I'll gather my troops and accompany you," Fan Chou said with a bitter smile. Zhang Xiu was Zhang Ji's only nephew. If something happened to him, Zhang Ji would be devastated.

"There's no need, Uncle Fan," Zhang Xiu replied calmly. As he spoke, a red aura surrounded his body, intertwined with a blue light. "I'm just retrieving what belongs to us."

"Internal Qi manifestation..." Fan Chou looked at Zhang Xiu in disbelief. Since when did Zhang Xiu possess such power?

"I reached this level ten years ago. Now, even my junior disciple is on par with Lu Bu. How could I be any weaker?" Zhang Xiu's words were filled with confidence. The red and blue energies around him swirled and merged into a tranquil purple hue.

"Uncle Fan, guard the camp and watch how I take down the enemy," Zhang Xiu saluted Fan Chou before leading his Xiliang cavalry towards Ma Teng and Han Sui's camp. Zhang Xiu's grand performance was about to begin.

Fan Chou watched in stunned silence as Zhang Xiu's forces departed. The sight of the tightly-packed wedge formations, with Zhang Xiu at the forefront, reminded him of Lu Bu's bold style—utterly convinced of his own invincibility.

The movement of over 10,000 Xiliang cavalry was felt by Ma Teng and Han Sui's forces miles away. However, they assumed it was merely a probing attack and ordered their forward camp to brace for the enemy's approach.

Zhang Xiu wasn't versed in many battle formations. During Li Ru's training of the Xiliang troops, only the simplest formations had been taught—the offensive Wedge Formation and the defensive Circle Formation. However, Zhang Xiu had spent ten years refining the Wedge Formation, and he believed in the words of his master, Tong Yuan: "Diligence can compensate for clumsiness."

From a distance, Zhang Xiu observed the deployment of Ma Teng's forward camp and sneered. The Xiliang cavalry's purple aura began to swirl violently as Zhang Xiu unleashed his ultimate technique, "Hundred Phoenixes Soaring Towards the Sun."

With the first thrust of his spear, a hundred spear shadows, accompanied by the cry of a phoenix, rapidly converged. Like the opening sequence of "Hundred Birds Facing the Phoenix," but even more powerful, a massive purple-red fireball quickly formed. Surrounding it were flames shaped like wings, creating a breathtaking yet deadly sight.

As Zhang Xiu continued to wield his spear, the Wedge Formation of the Xiliang cavalry split into countless serrated edges, resembling the teeth of a saw.

"Hundred Phoenixes Facing the Sun," Zhang Xiu muttered. With a final surge of internal energy, the fireball, now fueled by the aura of the entire army, grew even larger. The surrounding fiery wings expanded, transforming into fully-fledged phoenixes that hovered around the blazing sun.

"For the final step, reverse it!" Zhang Xiu channeled all his energy into his spear and thrust it into the artificial sun. The fireball, now unstable, began to leak energy unpredictably, causing the phoenixes around it to swell in size. One by one, the phoenixes attached themselves to the serrated edges of the formation.

"Hundred Phoenixes Soaring Towards the Sun—Destroy!" Zhang Xiu commanded. At his order, the hundred phoenixes, each carrying the force of Zhang Xiu's full power, shot towards Ma Teng's camp. The purple flames tore through the sky, raining destruction upon the enemy lines.

The attack consumed seventy percent of the Xiliang cavalry's aura, leaving only a faint purple glow behind. But Zhang Xiu paid no mind, charging forward with his troops. He was confident that the initial strike had already devastated most of the forward camp.

Master Tong Yuan's spear techniques were known for their cumulative power. Whether it was "Hundred Birds Facing the Phoenix" or "Hundred Phoenixes Facing the Sun," each move built up to a final, decisive strike. The previous moves served only to gather energy for the ultimate blow. However, Zhang Xiu had realized long ago that in a battle with thousands, or even tens of thousands, of soldiers, he didn't need to rely solely on his internal energy. The collective aura of his troops could amplify his power exponentially.

Zhang Xiu had spent ten years honing his spear skills and refining his understanding of military formations. His greatest insight came when he accidentally discovered that he could split the final, all-powerful strike of "Hundred Phoenixes Facing the Sun" into hundreds of smaller, yet still devastating attacks. While this approach deviated from Tong Yuan's original teachings, it allowed Zhang Xiu to conserve his strength while maximizing the damage dealt to the enemy.

As the phoenixes descended upon Ma Teng's forward camp, their overwhelming power shattered the enemy's aura. Chaos erupted within the camp as flames consumed everything in their path.

"Charge!" Zhang Xiu roared, leading his cavalry into the fray. The already disordered camp crumbled further under the onslaught of the Xiliang cavalry, who were invigorated by the sight of their leader's devastating attack.

"Don't get bogged down! Push straight to the central command!" Zhang Xiu ordered, dispatching any enemy that stood in his way. His troops followed suit, slicing through the chaos with unstoppable force.

In no time, Zhang Xiu's forces breached the heart of Ma Teng's camp. Both armies' auras clashed violently, turning the battlefield into a gruesome melee where only courage and tenacity mattered.

"Kill them all!" Ma Teng bellowed, leading his guards into the thick of battle. At the same time, Han Sui's elite Eight Knights also charged towards Zhang Xiu's forces, driven by the same relentless determination that had carried them through countless battles.

Zhang Xiu's spear danced through the enemy ranks, every thrust and sweep claiming lives in rapid succession. His prowess on the battlefield was unparalleled.

"Hundred Flowers Bloom!" Zhang Xiu shifted his stance, unleashing another powerful technique. The petals of destruction scattered across the battlefield, each strike felling multiple foes.

"Ma Teng!" Zhang Xiu spotted Ma Teng amidst the chaos and charged towards him with a thunderous shout.

Seeing Zhang Xiu approach, Ma Teng realized he was up against an internal energy master of unparalleled skill. Though he braced himself for the clash, the first exchange nearly cost him his life. Only the presence of his son, Ma Chao, saved him from certain death.

"Don't harm my father!" Ma Chao cried, intercepting Zhang Xiu's attack. However, Ma Chao soon found himself outmatched, barely able to fend off Zhang Xiu's ferocious strikes.

"Don't let harm come to our lord!" shouted Pang De as he rushed to Ma Chao's aid. Together, the two managed to hold off Zhang Xiu, though the strain was evident.

"Quick, help my sworn brother!" Han Sui commanded his Eight Knights. They abandoned their posts and joined the fray, attacking Zhang Xiu alongside Ma Chao and Pang De. For a moment, the combined efforts of ten warriors managed to suppress Zhang Xiu's rampage.

Despite his overwhelming skill, Zhang Xiu found himself struggling against the onslaught of ten elite warriors. His internal energy, already drained by the earlier techniques, was further weakened by the oppressive battlefield aura. Before long, Zhang Xiu was wounded—a spear thrust from Ma Chao leaving a deep gash in his side.

"You'll all pay for this!" Enraged, Zhang Xiu disregarded his master's teachings and activated the forbidden techniques. With a series of rapid strikes to his own pressure points, Zhang Xiu forcefully unleashed his internal energy, ignoring the pain and potential consequences. "Die!"

In an instant, Zhang Xiu's power surged to half its normal level, allowing him to momentarily regain control of the battle. He unleashed a flurry of attacks, forcing Ma Chao and Pang De back, though the strain on his body was immense.

"Open up!" Pang De roared, his blade enveloped in a black aura as he struck back with all his might. Ma Chao, also burning his internal energy, launched a ferocious counterattack, their combined efforts creating a deadly storm of strikes.

The battlefield trembled under the weight of their clash. Even the Eight Knights were caught in the crossfire, severely wounded by the residual force of the three-way battle.

"You cannot be allowed to live!" Zhang Xiu declared, his eyes blazing with killing intent. He focused all his attacks on Ma Chao and Pang De, determined to eliminate them.

But the battlefield's oppressive aura soon reasserted itself, draining the energy of all three combatants. Realizing their strength was fading, Pang De and Ma Chao exchanged a quick glance before executing a final, desperate strike. Then, without a word, they turned their horses and fled.

As they retreated, Zhang Xiu gave chase but was quickly overcome by exhaustion. Blood poured from his mouth as he struggled to remain upright on his horse.

Zhang Xiu spat blood as he tried to regain his composure. "Mission accomplished." He tossed Ma Teng's command flag and the banners of the Eight Knights at Fan Chou's feet. "Han Sui escaped, and I couldn't claim his flag. Worse, I missed the chance to take their heads. But they won't be able to fight again anytime soon."

Fan Chou stared at Zhang Xiu in disbelief. He had just witnessed a feat more impressive than any of Lu Bu's. Though Lu Bu had once faced 100,000 Xiliang cavalry, Zhang Xiu had triumphed over 100,000 Qiang cavalry. Despite the difference in the enemy's strength, Zhang Xiu had won—decisively.

No matter how one looked at it, Zhang Xiu had led a single force to victory against entrenched foes. His name would now be known across the land. At the same time, word spread of Ma Chao and Pang De both achieving internal energy mastery. From that day forward, Ma Teng became the most powerful force in Liangzhou.