

Mythical 351

Chapter 351: Time Will Reveal a Person's True Nature

The battle between Dong Zhuo's remnants and Ma Teng of Xiliang did not have much of an impact. At most, it made others slightly envious of the two newly ascended internal energy masters. As for Zhang Xiu's display of strength, it was enough to make all the warlords in the land take notice.

Cao Cao led his army directly from the Ru region of Yuzhou, passing through Fan County. Strategically, he ordered Yue Jin to station 3,000 troops there, guarding the city to prevent Liu Bei or Yuan Shu from cutting off their retreat.

When Cao Cao passed the border between Pengcheng and Ru regions, at the ruined temple where Cao Song had died, his expression became mournful, and he cried out loud. He then prepared offerings and, along with Cao Ren, Cao Hong, Cao Chun, and Cao Xiu, personally performed rituals before the graves of Cao Song and Cao De. Afterward, the entire army donned mourning attire.

Looking at the remains in front of the small temple, Cao Cao realized that Xiahou Yuan and Xiahou Dun had already paid their respects when they passed by. Their offerings, brutal yet sincere, had left a dozen corpses behind. Although Cao Cao felt a twinge of pity, the thought of his father's death quickly snuffed it out. His eyes turned blood-red as he gazed toward Xu Province. He was out for blood—Xu Province would be drenched in it!

After completing his father's rituals, envoys from Xu Province arrived outside Cao Cao's camp, requesting an audience.

"Envoys from Xu Province? Didn't Chen Yuanlong execute them already?" Cao Cao asked coldly, making no effort to hide his murderous intent. He issued a direct order to have them killed—his enmity with Xu Province was beyond washing away, even with the waters of the three rivers and five lakes.

"Spread my command: Blood will flood Xu Province. Does Tao Qian boast of his benevolence? Let him atone for his crimes in the underworld!" Cao Cao sneered as he looked at the severed head of Xu Province's envoy presented before him.

"My lord!" Xun You was stunned. He momentarily forgot to maintain his usual reserved demeanor and stood up abruptly.

"Gongda, what do you want to say?" Cao Cao's icy gaze fixed on Xun You.

At that moment, a cold sweat broke out on Xun You's back. "My lord, I am unwell and cannot accompany you."

For a brief moment, Xun You regretted ever joining Cao Cao. Following him now seemed like a mistake.

"Wenlie, escort Gongda to the rear camp and ensure his safety," Cao Cao ordered his kinsman, Cao Xiu.

Xun You sighed inwardly, bowed silently to Cao Cao, and followed Cao Xiu toward the rear camp, each step taking him farther from Cao Cao.

"My lord, Gongda is just momentarily confused," Cheng Yu said, standing up.

"I know," Cao Cao replied, though his anger was evident. He knew full well how important Xun Yu and Xun You were to him.

From that moment on, Cao Cao's army seemed to unleash the worst of human nature, with the most depraved acts on full display in Xu Province. They slaughtered, burned, looted, dug up graves, desecrated ancestral temples, and massacred city after city. In just over ten days, the northern part of Xu Province was emptied of its hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, leaving the earth stained with blood and rivers clogged with corpses.

When Tao Qian received word of the bloodbath in Xu Province, he spat out a mouthful of blood, aging a decade in an instant. Tears streamed down his face uncontrollably. "Why, why, Cao Cao, why are you doing this? I would have given you Xu Province! Cao Cao, I will haunt you even as a ghost!"

"Summon all the ministers of Xu Province immediately," Tao Qian ordered, wiping the blood from his mouth and discarding the blood-stained handkerchief. Given Cao Cao's nature, how could he possibly hand over Xu Province to him now?

Soon, all the ministers of Xu Province gathered, their faces grim. They, too, had heard the news of Cao Cao's atrocities.

"Where is Cao Bao?" Tao Qian demanded, showing no attempt to hide his weakened state. Everyone could see the bloodstains on the floor and at the corners of Tao Qian's mouth. The ministers of Xu Province, cowed by his fierce and icy gaze, fell silent.

"Here!" Cao Bao said, standing up in shock. The aura of authority emanating from Tao Qian reminded him of the resolute commander who once led campaigns in Xiliang. Cao Bao, sensing the gravity of the situation, quickly stifled any rebellious thoughts and cautiously replied.

"Lead 30,000 elite Danyang troops and annihilate Cao Cao!" Tao Qian ordered, his eyes bloodshot. He wanted to personally go to the battlefield, but after coughing up blood, he realized he was now in his twilight years. His current vigor was nothing more than a final burst of energy.

"Understood!" Cao Bao's eyes flickered with a brief, unreadable emotion before he accepted the command seal from Tao Qian. With this in hand, his earlier schemes had now become inevitable.

"Yuanlong, Bode, defend the cities. Do not let Cao Mengde find another opportunity!" Tao Qian commanded in fury.

"Understood!" Chen Deng and Zhao Yu replied, bowing their heads.

Chen Deng sighed deeply.

In Langya, Xu Province, Zhuge Jin struck the table in front of Zhuge Xuan with his sword. "Cao Mengde, you arrogant tyrant! You have slaughtered my homeland. Zhuge Jin will never share the same sky with you! I swear to oppose you until my dying breath!"

"Ziyu, what are you doing?!" Zhuge Xuan exclaimed in panic. Watching his usually obedient nephew slice through the letter of recommendation he had written for Cao Cao, Zhuge Xuan saw Zhuge Jin storm off with sword in hand. If Zhuge Jin decided to go to Liu Bei instead of Cao Cao, the Zhuge family's bet on Cao Cao would be a total failure!

"Xi Zhicai! I misjudged you!" Zhuge Jin shouted, his eyes red with fury. The armies that had slaughtered their way through Langya had already claimed countless lives at Cao Cao's command.

Returning to his room, Zhuge Jin furiously penned a letter, channeling all his anger onto the page.

"Deliver this letter to Cao Cao," Zhuge Jin ordered one of his family's loyal retainers. This was the first time in his life that he had been so enraged.

In Chenliu, Chen Gong slashed the incense burner Cao Cao had gifted him in half, his eyes blood-red as he stared towards Xu Province. "Cao Mengde, well, well, well... I hate that I once mistook you. If I had known it would come to this, I would never have allowed you to take control of Yanzhou. You slaughter the defenseless people of our Han Empire—I will make sure you have no home to return to!"

He plunged his sword into a wooden beam, then returned to his study and began writing a letter to Lu Bu. He would invite Lu Bu to take control of Yanzhou. He would see to it that Cao Cao had no home to return to and that he would repent for the lives lost in Xu Province.

Cai Yan wept as she read the report that Li You had handed her. For the first time, she realized how much Cao Mengde, once skilled in literature, learned, and ambitious, had changed. He had become someone entirely unrecognizable.

"Uncle, could you deliver a letter for me to Cao Cao?" Cai Yan asked, her eyes filled with sorrow as she looked at Li You.

"Of course," Li You sighed. "Cao Mengde has gone beyond even what Dong Zhuo once did."

"Thank you, Uncle." Cai Yan bowed gracefully to Li You, then turned to fetch paper and ink. She quietly began to write. For a rational woman like Cai Yan, the transformation from admiration to hatred took but a moment. She had seen the suffering of the common people with her own eyes.

Chapter 352: I Will Destroy Cao Mengde!

In a certain place in Xue County, Lu State, Cao Lie, who had lost his right arm, listened to the news from Xu Province that Cao Song had been murdered and that Cao Cao had angrily marched on Xu Province. He couldn't help but burst into tears.

On the day that Cao Song had ordered Cao Lie to deliver a letter, they were ambushed. After a bloody battle, only Cao Lie barely managed to escape. Fortunately, heavy snowfall deterred the pursuers, allowing him to survive, but not long after, he lost consciousness due to the cold and blood loss. A passing hunter found him and took him in.

Cao Lie's life was spared, as the hunter, with a mindset of helping if he could, fed him daily herbal soups. After more than ten days, Cao Lie woke up, though his injuries would take many more days to heal enough for him to ride a horse. He stayed with the hunter to recuperate, planning to deliver the letter to Cao Cao once he recovered.

As for Cao Song's safety, Cao Lie hadn't been too worried—after all, Zhang Kai had over 500 men, and capturing them wouldn't be easy. But now, receiving this news, it struck him like a bolt of lightning. Holding the letter that might be Cao Song's final words, Cao Lie wept bitterly. He silently took up his long knife, packed his belongings, and prepared to deliver Cao Song's last message to Cao Cao, regardless of whether it cost him his life.

"Ah Lie, your wounds haven't healed yet, and you're leaving already?" The hunter asked as he watched Cao Lie gather his things.

"Thank you, elder, for taking care of me these past days." Cao Lie bowed to the hunter. "I must deliver this letter to my lord."

Cao Lie set off on his journey, unaware of the immense pain that would strike Cao Cao when he finally received the letter—after he had already slaughtered half of Xu Province. Cao Cao would realize that the empire he could have seized had been handed over to someone else. Adding to this was Chen Gong's betrayal, with most of Yanzhou falling into Lu Bu's hands. Not only had Cao Cao failed to gain new territory, but he had also lost the hearts of the people and the land that once belonged to him. All of this because he had not received his father's letter in time.

Most devastatingly, after half of Xu Province had been massacred, Cao Cao could no longer turn back. He and Tao Qian had become mortal enemies. Any hopes of a peaceful transfer of power had become a joke. Even if Cao Cao knew the full truth, he could only swallow the bitter consequences. He had let go of a chance for success and instead created a lifelong enemy.

Meanwhile, Xi Zhicai's letter inviting Cao Cao to recruit talents arrived late in Chenliu by several days. The messenger, following Xi Zhicai's instructions, diverted to Xu Province to catch up with Cao Cao, intending to deliver the letter that mentioned the possibility of recruiting two top-tier strategists—the Zhuge brothers—and Cao Cao's potential ally, Cai Yan.

Of course, the messenger had no idea of the letter's contents; he only knew it was important. And so, he unwittingly marched toward his death in Xu Province.

Imagine receiving a long-awaited confession from the woman you love, alongside news that top strategists have expressed interest in joining your cause. Everything seems perfect, but in the next moment, reality strikes, and due to your own mistake, it all turns into a dream.

When Xi Zhicai's letter of recruitment, along with Cai Yan's letter of scorn and the Zhuge brothers' declaration of lifelong enmity, all arrived at the same time, what a blow it would be to Cao Cao!

On top of this, the land of Xu Province that should have been his and the solid foundation he could have built in Yanzhou—all of his long-fought efforts—would go up in smoke. The loss of beautiful women, the loss of land, and the departure of talented allies would all vanish before Cao Cao's eyes. How could any heart bear such a blow?

In Mount Tai, Fenggao, Liu Bei slashed apart the entire main hall with his sword, leaving it in ruins. Standing amidst the debris, he summoned his civil and military officials without caring about his appearance.

"Mobilize the troops!" Liu Bei roared. "I will kill Cao Mengde! I will kill him! That butcher—I once thought he was, like me, a loyal minister of the Han Dynasty. But what he has done—how can that be the act of a man?!"

"My lord, please calm your anger. Don't let the situation in Xu Province provoke you so much," Li You said calmly. Although Dong Zhuo had also committed massacres, none had gone so far as to wipe out an entire province. Was this really just for revenge?

"Calm my anger?" Liu Bei's bloodshot eyes glared at Li You. "Are the people of the Han Empire merely pigs and dogs to Cao Mengde? Tens of thousands of lives—the Si River is choked with bodies! Has Cao

Cao gone mad? If he wants revenge, he should go after Tao Gongzu. Win or lose, I would still respect him as a man. But this—what is this?"

"How many troops should we deploy?" Lu Su asked, his head lowered, trying to remain calm. Even he, usually gentle-natured, felt anger at Cao Mengde's actions. Attacking unarmed civilians—such behavior might be excusable as a rare mistake, but what was this?

"How many troops are needed to destroy Cao Mengde?" Liu Bei asked, his bloodshot eyes turning to Chen Xi. "Zichuan, tell me. How many men do we need to eliminate Cao Mengde? I will do it, even if it means delaying our campaign in Qingzhou! I, Liu Xuande, once swore to protect the people of the Han Dynasty in the name of the Han!"

"One hundred thousand," Chen Xi, his face slightly pale, replied. "And we would need to commit all our civil and military officials to the effort to ensure success."

Cao Cao had gone mad—that was Chen Xi's first thought when he received the news. Tens of thousands of innocent civilians had been slaughtered. As Liu Bei said, this was not the act of a human. If he had massacred hundreds of thousands of barbarians, people might call him brutal, but the border citizens would sing his praises. But to massacre Han people—there was no justifying it.

"Deploy 100,000 troops! Zhao Yun, Hua Xiong, each lead a corps as the vanguard. When you encounter Cao's forces, regardless of the banners they fly, leave no survivors. Kill them all to avenge Xu Province!" Liu Bei raged. He had resolved that it would be a fight to the death with Cao Cao. Cao Cao's actions had completely violated Liu Bei's principles!

"My lord, we cannot do this. We don't have enough winter clothing and linen for 100,000 soldiers. Even if we start collecting them now, it will take over ten days to acquire the necessary clothing from the major merchants," Lu Su stepped forward to stop Zhao Yun and Hua Xiong, calmly explaining.

"Then how many troops can we deploy right now?" Liu Bei asked, taking a deep breath to calm his anger. Though he wanted nothing more than to kill Cao Cao, he wasn't about to disregard the lives of his soldiers. In this cold winter, sending troops without proper clothing would be deadly.

"Fifty thousand. The remaining supplies, including military rations, medicinal herbs, spirits, and clean linen, will need to be collected. It will take about ten days to prepare. Unfortunately, Lady Zhang has

returned to Jizhou for the New Year, and we've already counted Zizhong's supplies," Lu Su replied helplessly.

Lady Zhang, who should have been under house arrest, had already come to terms with Liu Bei's rule, so restrictions on her had been eased. She had returned to Jizhou before the New Year and wouldn't be back for another month.

Chapter 353: On the Brink of Battle

"Zichuan, you will stay behind to gather supplies while I, along with Fengxiao, Ziyang, Yun Chang, Yide, and Zilong, will lead 50,000 men to rescue Tao Gongzu. Once you've gathered enough supplies, take Zijian and others and act as you see fit. Anguo, you will serve as Zichuan's protector," Liu Bei decided after a brief moment of thought. He had resolved to personally stop Cao Cao's massacre, no longer concerned about whether Tao Qian had asked for help.

"Very well, Lord Xuande. I will first gather the supplies and then lead my troops to Xuzhou," Chen Xi nodded. With 50,000 troops, and the likes of Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun by his side, along with strategists like Guo Jia and Liu Ye, they would surely be able to match Cao Cao.

"Then we march now! I can't bear this any longer!" Liu Bei, abandoning his usual composure, directly issued the order, clearly having developed an intense hatred for Cao Cao.

"Zilong, take 3,000 cavalry and head to Xuzhou immediately. Stop Cao Hong's forces from advancing further into Langya," Liu Bei ordered, pointing to the Langya region of Xuzhou. The only force that could reach the battlefield quickly enough was the world's fastest cavalry—the White Horse Cavalry.

"Yes!" Zhao Yun's normally graceful demeanor was tinged with a cold edge. To a general like Zhao Yun, who cherished the people, Cao Cao's actions were utterly incomprehensible. Their values were irreconcilable, making coexistence impossible. After saluting, Zhao Yun left the hall to prepare his troops.

"Yun Chang, Yide, Fengxiao, Ziyang," Liu Bei commanded as he rose, addressing the others. "There's no need for a rallying cry or declaration of war. We march on Xuzhou immediately. This time, I won't announce the battle—Cao Mengde must die! Let's go!"

"Yes!" The four men followed Liu Bei out of the hall, with Xu Chu and Li You trailing behind.

After Liu Bei's departure, the remaining civil and military officials turned their attention to Chen Xi. Liu Bei had left governance in Chen Xi's hands and granted him half the military power, a level of trust that made everyone present envious.

"Prepare the supplies. We are going to destroy Cao Mengde!" Chen Xi spoke with an icy tone for the first time. Cao Cao had crossed a line with his massacre, a line that even Chen Xi's usual tolerance couldn't overlook. He had thought Cao Cao would care about his reputation or consider the threats around him, but it turned out he had disregarded everything.

A fierce glint flashed in Chen Xi's eyes. "Wenhe, prepare to contact Chen Gongtai and Yuan Gonglu. Also, reach out to Yuan Benchu. At this point, if he isn't foolish, he won't assist Cao Mengde."

"Understood!" Jia Xu nodded without hesitation.

"Zizhong, you are responsible for gathering the supplies," Chen Xi instructed Mi Zhu.

"Yes," Mi Zhu replied, understanding the urgency.

"Weishuo, I'll need you to ensure that the world hears of this atrocity!" Chen Xi turned to Liu Yan. "Reach out to every reputable scholar and let everyone know what Cao Mengde has done!"

"This will take some time. I can contact several scholars skilled in this area, but only Chen Kongzhang and Mi Zhengping meet your requirements," Liu Yan replied, aware that the snow-blocked roads made widespread communication difficult. However, he could still gather a few powerful voices.

"Those two will do!" A faint smile appeared on Chen Xi's pale face. He was amazed by Liu Yan's extensive connections—money well spent indeed. The fact that Liu Yan could reach out to figures like Chen Lin and Mi Heng, two of the top literary talents of the era, was impressive.

"No problem. It will take about ten days to reach Jizhou and Qingzhou, but once they receive a good bottle of wine, they'll write whatever we need," Liu Yan confidently said. He now had a solid grasp of his standing among the literati—one of the elite few, comparable to Zheng Xuan. Anywhere he went, he would be warmly received.

"I'm counting on you for this. Make sure to mobilize the entire scholar class of the Han Dynasty to condemn Cao Mengde. Ensure that no capable official will ever want to serve him again!" Chen Xi ordered Liu Yan, planning to use the vast network Liu Yan had built to destroy Cao Cao's reputation.

"This will be challenging, and I'll need time to prepare. But from what you've said, it seems that Cao Mengde won't die in Xuzhou?" Liu Yan asked in surprise. Wouldn't Mount Tai's total mobilization be enough to defeat Cao Cao?

"It's just a precaution. If he dies, then let his family bear the weight of his sins," Chen Xi replied, a cold smile appearing on his pale face.

"Zijing, prepare food and supplies. Be ready at the Qingzhou-Xuzhou border to receive the refugees, and minimize casualties as much as possible," Chen Xi instructed Lu Su. "Make sure to handle the distribution of land and housing for the refugees, so they don't become resentful."

"Yes," Lu Su sighed in relief. Fortunately, they had previously stored large quantities of grain, or this would have been a disaster.

"Xianhe, you should personally handle the contact with Yuan Benchu. Although he's a powerful leader, he is indecisive. If you clearly lay out the pros and cons, he might still be unable to make up his mind even after this is over," Chen Xi called to Jian Yong, sending the diplomatic expert to stall the only potential ally Cao Cao might have left. The rest of their effort would go towards eliminating Cao Cao.

"Xiaozhi, gather all intelligence related to the situation in Xuzhou. List any movements from the Xuzhou officials, but focus only on finding the direct cause of Cao Song's death. We need to resolve this, but the people of Xuzhou still deserve an explanation," Chen Xi calmly directed. He was fully in command now.

"Yes," Fa Zheng replied with a respectful bow, his usual carefree demeanor replaced with seriousness. He understood the gravity of the situation.

"Zichuan, are you planning to take control of Xuzhou?" Jia Xu frowned. "This goes against our original strategy. Xuzhou's local forces are still very strong. Even if we take it, we would have to compromise with the local aristocracy."

"Compromise?" A fierce light flashed in Chen Xi's eyes. He had never advocated exterminating the aristocracy, but this time, if they dared to stand in his way, they wouldn't survive.

"Leave that to me. There's no need to damage our reputation. After all, we've worked hard to earn the trust of some aristocrats. There's no need to cut off our own arm. Even if we don't take Xuzhou, we can still reap the greatest benefits," Jia Xu said, recognizing Chen Xi's ruthlessness. He could tell that Chen Xi was prepared to take drastic measures to swiftly resolve the situation.

"Alright," Chen Xi agreed, intrigued by Jia Xu's confidence. He decided to see how Jia Xu would handle Xuzhou seamlessly.

By the time Chen Xi had finished issuing orders, Zhao Yun had already led the White Horse Cavalry, dressed in fur coats and carrying five days' worth of rations, on their way to Xuzhou. Meanwhile, Liu Bei was coordinating the transport of food and the mobilization of troops. In no more than three hours, they would depart, and the battle against Cao Cao would be inevitable.

Chapter 354: Ambush

After watching Liu Bei's army depart, under Chen Xi's coordination, the entire Mount Tai went into a frenzy of activity. Tens of thousands of idle workers who had been participating in public works projects during the winter now found new employment. Not only did they receive two meals a day, but they also earned a minimum wage of ten coins per day, along with a two-coin meal allowance.

Chen Xi sometimes wondered if his public works projects were overly generous. Normally, his wages for such projects were five coins a day, with two meals provided, plus free medical care.

In the late Han era, hired labor in the county typically earned about thirty coins a day. However, Chen Xi's public works only paid five coins. Despite this, Chen Xi was amazed that every time he posted a notice about hiring for public works, he could easily recruit tens of thousands of people in Qingzhou and Mount Tai. This left Chen Xi speechless. After a detailed investigation, he realized that while thirty coins was the standard rate, it required skills and wasn't available every day. Most of the common folk, during their idle times, resorted to gathering firewood on the mountains to make ends meet.

As for public works, people didn't care much about the pay. They appreciated not having to use their own grain and still earning five coins a day. This arrangement was already seen as very favorable. After

all, when idle at home, doing nothing, the opportunity to earn some extra money, no matter how little, was highly appealing. It was better to work for wages than to sit idle at home. The pay was daily, and there were no delays. There was nothing more appealing than that.

Thanks to this established work mode, a large recruitment drive quickly attracted over 100,000 volunteers. Chen Xi then instructed Wang Xiu to organize and coordinate them. The goal was to ensure the safe delivery of supplies to Liu Bei. Liu Bei had set out with only ten days of rations, aiming directly for Xuzhou. Chen Xi's task was to replenish the granaries at Feixian after Liu Bei exhausted his ten days of supplies, ensuring the continuation of the campaign.

Zhao Yun, galloping swiftly, soon entered the Langya region of Xuzhou and immediately detected the stench of blood in the air. He saw ruins, bodies that had died with their eyes wide open, and graves that had been dug up. The frost on Zhao Yun's face grew colder than the harsh winter itself.

"Spread the scouts thirty li out, the rest dismount," Zhao Yun ordered, his usual gentle tone replaced by cold severity.

Drawing his sword, a silver-blue glow flashed as Zhao Yun struck the ground outside the village, creating a large pit several meters wide. After a few more swings, he had dug out a pit large enough to bury the entire village.

After burying all the bodies, Zhao Yun stood silently in front of the gravestone. He regretted not killing Cao Cao during the battle at Hulao Pass when he had the chance. Instead, he had admired him!

"Mount up!" Zhao Yun shook off his troubled thoughts and led his men onward.

"Report! General, we've spotted Cao's forces fifty li ahead!" a scout returned with a report shortly after Zhao Yun's advance.

"Ready the crossbows, unsheathe your swords, leave no survivors," Zhao Yun's calm but chilling voice echoed in the ears of his soldiers. It wasn't loud, but the cold killing intent in it commanded respect from all.

Fifty li was merely the time it took to burn a stick of incense for the world's fastest cavalry—the White Horse Cavalry. By the time the wave of white crested over the horizon, hundreds of Cao's soldiers, who had been celebrating their plunder, had no time to react before they were met with a rain of arrows. Then the cavalry charged through, leaving only mud and blood on the snowy plains of Xuzhou.

Zhao Yun led his White Horse Cavalry in a relentless assault across the snow-covered plains of Xuzhou, slaughtering bandits and marauders. The more he killed, the clearer Zhao Yun saw the truth of Cao Cao's massacre. Perhaps, at first, it was driven by rage. But once the slaughter began, and with the vast wealth and treasures flowing into his hands, Cao Cao could no longer suppress his greed.

Everyone knew how wealthy Xuzhou was. After slaughtering tens of thousands of Xuzhou citizens and looting countless graves, the enormous wealth piled before Cao Cao was far beyond what he had ever imagined—enough to arm another hundred thousand troops. By then, it was too late to stop. The moment the sword was drawn, it could no longer be sheathed.

"General, we've advanced too deep into enemy territory," the military supervisor, Xue Shao, remarked, concerned. For three days, Zhao Yun hadn't turned back, cutting down every Cao soldier and bandit in their path. But this also allowed them to keep fighting.

"It doesn't matter. They're waiting to encircle us," Zhao Yun said, a strange glint in his eyes.

Somehow, through his relentless slaughter, Zhao Yun had entered a state of eerie calm. Many things that had previously seemed unclear to him were now painfully obvious. He had long since realized that they were being lured into a trap. After the first group of soldiers they killed, the rest were just rabble—bandits. The real Cao army was likely waiting ahead.

"General, do you mean they've set an ambush ahead?" Xue Shao frowned. "Should we avoid it?"

"No need. We'll charge through and destroy them," Zhao Yun responded calmly. "While I'm unsure which unit of Cao's army it is, an ambush only works if we're caught off guard. This path is all open plains, and Cao's army lacks cavalry. Even if they had some, no unit could match our speed. Their only option is to bog us down with infantry, then encircle us."

Xue Shao felt a pang of sorrow—White Horse Cavalry was truly at its end.

Cao Chun crouched on the snowy plains, silently waiting for Zhao Yun's arrival. After slaughtering so many civilians, his anger had subsided. So, he began restraining his troops from further killing and instead focused on plundering the bandits who fled under the banner of Cao's army. By now, their goal was simply to seize as much loot as possible.

However, when the first group sent to collect the bandits' loot disappeared, Cao Chun suspected that Liu Xuande had deployed his forces. After all, news had come that Tao Qian's troops were marching directly toward Cao Cao.

Cao Chun wasn't worried about his elder brother Cao Cao facing Xuzhou's troops with a smaller force. Having lived in Xuzhou himself, he knew that while the Danyang troops were powerful, it depended on who commanded them. If Tao Qian were in good health, Cao Chun might have been apprehensive. But with Cao Bao leading them, there was nothing to fear!

"General, Zhao Yun's forces are about thirty li away. Are you sure we'll be alright?" Military Supervisor Li Zheng asked, worried.

"Don't worry. The Battle of Jieqiao already exposed the weakness of White Horse Cavalry to the world. I'm surprised anyone still uses such a vulnerable unit—one that loses all combat effectiveness once its speed is lost," Cao Chun sneered. He had heard plenty about Zhao Yun's prowess. He had missed witnessing it at Hulao Pass due to his status, but this was his chance to prove himself by ambushing such a renowned warrior.

Chapter 355: The Correct Use of White Horse Cavalry

"General, the problem is that the White Horse Cavalry at that time wasn't led by Zhao Zilong! Now the commander is Zhao Zilong, and that's a completely different situation, just like how Bingzhou Wolf Riders are completely different with or without Lu Bu!" It was clear that this military supervisor named Li Zheng was a sensible person.

"Don't worry. If a few hundred of our heavy infantry could withstand the first charge of over ten thousand White Horse Cavalry, then my Cao family's three thousand elite soldiers, arranged in the Eight Gates Golden Lock formation, should have no problem stopping just three thousand ragtag White Horse Cavalry!" Cao Xiu said confidently.

The Eight Gates Golden Lock formation of the Cao family was indeed formidable, but unfortunately, no one had fully mastered it. It was still a dead formation, but it was intimidating enough to scare the enemy. Cao Chun's plan was to use the dead formation to hold off Zhao Yun.

In Cao Chun's view, Zhao Yun was just a martial fanatic, and such a person was only good for charging into battle. A small tactical maneuver should be enough to make him fall here. Even Lu Bu, if trapped by three thousand soldiers in the Eight Gates Golden Lock, would have no way out!

A general doesn't need to have unparalleled martial skills, but they must have a clear mind. No matter how brave, even a warrior like Xiang Yu was trapped at Gaixia. Brave as he was, without strategy, he would eventually be toyed with by others.

"Since the general is so confident, I will carry out the orders. I will lead a thousand men to hide in the snow-covered ditches on both sides," Li Zheng said expressionlessly. He had done his duty; whether Cao Chun listened or not was up to him.

Cao Chun glanced at Li Zheng. This man came from a prestigious family, and his father, Li Qian, was a veteran who had followed Cao Cao in battles across the land. It was because of this background that Li Zheng, at just twenty years old, could command a battalion. Of course, it couldn't be denied that the young man did have some ability; otherwise, Cao Cao wouldn't have entrusted five hundred men to him.

"In that case, you will lead your men to hide in the snow-covered ditches. When I intercept the White Horse Cavalry, you will seize the opportunity to attack and work with me to compress their maneuvering space, exposing their most vulnerable side. Then we will completely annihilate them," Cao Chun nodded and said.

Li Zheng didn't say anything more. He led his five hundred men to hide in a ditch beneath the snow and ordered another five hundred men to hide in another direction. To be honest, he didn't believe that Cao Chun could block Zhao Yun. Although he had heard that the Cao family had an ancient formation called the Eight Gates Golden Lock, he wasn't entirely convinced.

It was precisely because he knew the formation was called the Eight Gates Golden Lock that Li Zheng was uneasy. He had a cousin who, out of boredom, had once told him some secrets and even taught him about various mystical arts. From what he had learned from his cousin, the Eight Gates Golden Lock couldn't be truly mastered without a fundamental elevation of one's spiritual essence.

Of course, almost everyone in their family believed that his cousin was just boasting. After all, when his cousin returned from his travels, there was nothing particularly extraordinary about him; in fact, he seemed to have seen through the world and was more indifferent.

But others' disbelief was their business. Li Zheng and his younger brother Li Dian had witnessed their cousin Li Jin's miraculous abilities firsthand. Because of this, Li Zheng remembered everything his cousin had said, even if it sounded like idle chatter.

As Li Zheng reflected on his cousin's knowledge, he quietly settled into his hiding spot. He believed what his cousin had said, so he knew that the White Horse Cavalry wasn't as easy to defeat as it seemed. The fact that heavy infantry and assault troops had won before couldn't have been that simple.

Just as Li Zheng was lost in thought, a white line appeared on the horizon, moving smoothly like a wave.

"They're here!" Cao Chun watched the wave, focusing on the man leading the charge, squinting slightly. There was no mistake; it was indeed Zhao Yun.

"Form up!" Cao Chun shouted, his voice carrying to Zhao Yun, while his troops quickly moved into formation. A misty aura rose, enveloping Cao Chun and his men.

"Eight Gates Golden Lock?" Zhao Yun sneered. Those in Mount Tai had sparred countless times with Hua Xiong using this formation. Even though they hadn't fully understood its intricacies, Zhao Yun knew that the formation in front of him was a dead formation. He planned to probe it, find the death gate, and break through it quickly, just as he had done in practice over two hundred times.

The key to breaking this formation was to be fast. The death gate was the strongest defense, but also the hardest to maneuver. If he could strike before the gate closed, disrupting the formation, it would collapse.

"Ready the crossbows." Zhao Yun led his cavalry forward as if he didn't even see Cao Chun. When he was close enough, Cao Chun smirked. "What a reckless brute!"

As Zhao Yun charged with his White Horse Cavalry, a pure white cloud of energy mixed with a hint of silver-blue threads burst forth. Their speed surged, and in an instant, they were within fifty paces of Cao

Chun's formation. But instead of crashing into the formation, the cavalry veered off like a dance, circling around and releasing a volley of arrows into the mist-covered formation.

"Clang, clang, clang!" The arrows had minimal effect, but Zhao Yun remained undeterred. His cavalry split into two groups, circling the formation and unleashing wave after wave of arrows.

"Humph!" Cao Chun had to admit that Zhao Yun was an excellent cavalry commander. There was no intention of charging the formation; instead, he aimed to whittle them down with arrows. However, with the protection of the Eight Gates Golden Lock, only a few of his soldiers were falling to the barrage.

"Fire!" As Zhao Yun led another probing attack, Cao Chun saw his chance and ordered a volley of arrows in return. But Zhao Yun's troops deftly dodged the majority of the arrows with a smooth maneuver, showcasing the White Horse Cavalry's agility.

Seeing this, Cao Chun realized that relying on archers to counter Zhao Yun was futile.

Chapter 356: The Defeat of Cao Chun

Zhao Yun repeatedly tested Cao Chun's formation, but he never attempted a direct assault. Similarly, Cao Chun found himself helpless against the White Horse Cavalry's agility and swiftness. Even more frustrating, their arrows had a longer range than his own, leaving Cao Chun feeling incredulous.

Cao Chun finally understood the true strength of Gongsun Zan's White Horse Cavalry that had swept through the land. This realization struck him, especially as he considered the protection his formation provided. Without it, the White Horse Cavalry wouldn't even need to charge his formation; they could just circle and shoot arrows until his troops collapsed.

Watching the elegant and swift movements of the White Horse Cavalry, a troubling thought crept into Cao Chun's mind.

Meanwhile, hidden in a snowbank, Li Zheng dug a small hole and stared intently at Zhao Yun's every move. Zhao Yun was utilizing the White Horse Cavalry's strengths to their fullest potential. If this continued, even with the protection of the formation, Cao Chun's forces would be slowly worn down with minimal losses on Zhao Yun's side. After all, every formation had its limits, and it was clear that the White Horse Cavalry's consumption of resources was far less than Cao Chun's. This was a trap of his own making!

"I've found it." A faint smile appeared on Zhao Yun's face as he decisively broke away from the circling cavalry, leading about five hundred riders in a wedge formation. Their speed surged as they became a white blur, piercing straight through the misty fog of the enemy formation.

Li Zheng was initially stunned by this move, but his expression quickly turned to panic. Zhao Yun's earlier actions had marked him as a calm and rational commander, not the type to make reckless charges. This could only mean one thing—the Eight Gates Golden Lock formation's flaw had been exposed to Zhao Yun.

"Prepare for battle," Li Zheng signaled to his soldiers. He wasn't taking any chances. His cousin Li Jin had once said that every formation had a unique method of breaking it, and now Li Zheng feared such an unexpected turn of events.

As Zhao Yun plunged into Cao Chun's formation, Cao Chun's excitement surged. Li Zheng might not be able to see clearly from outside, but Cao Chun had a perfect view—Zhao Yun had charged directly into the Death Gate!

"Block them!" Cao Chun laughed triumphantly. Fortune had smiled upon him after all. He had expected Zhao Yun to retreat when unable to break the formation or outmaneuver him. Instead, Zhao Yun had thrown himself headlong into the trap. "Hahaha, not willing to give up? Then die here!"

Once Zhao Yun entered, his wedge formation elongated, increasing speed again. Ignoring the soldiers closing in on all sides, Zhao Yun focused solely on charging forward as if seeking death.

"Break!" Zhao Yun's spear twirled, flinging aside the few soldiers blocking his path. He led the charge into the heart of the formation, where, to Cao Chun's disbelief, Zhao Yun swiftly pivoted and headed for the Wound Gate. The Eight Gates Golden Lock formation, designed to defend against external threats, was thrown into chaos when attacked from within. In an instant, soldiers were knocked down and scattered before they could react, and Zhao Yun's forces tore through the formation.

"All units, charge!" Outside the formation, military supervisor Xue Shao had been waiting for this moment. Upon seeing the disruption in the enemy ranks, he ordered his men to attack, leading a detachment to follow Zhao Yun's breakthrough and further splinter the already fractured formation.

On the perimeter, the White Horse Cavalry unleashed a barrage of arrows at the disorganized enemy. Following up on the chaos they had created, they charged in groups of a hundred, weaving through the gaps in the enemy formation. In the span of a single incense stick, the White Horse Cavalry had used their superior speed and maneuverability to shatter Cao Chun's three-thousand-strong formation.

Cao Chun's mind reeled. In just a few minutes, his triumphant mood had turned to panic as his elite force was reduced to scattered fragments. Zhao Yun had clearly charged into the Death Gate, yet everything had turned upside down in the blink of an eye.

"Attack!" Li Zheng, hidden in the snowbank, had witnessed the terrifying scene and knew the situation was dire. He ordered his troops to launch their planned assault, charging directly at Zhao Yun's cavalry.

Although the situation was far from what Cao Chun had anticipated, with his forces unable to pin down Zhao Yun, Li Zheng saw a chance to at least rescue Cao Chun by executing their original plan. Even if they couldn't succeed in routing the White Horse Cavalry, they could at least extract Cao Chun from the chaos.

From both flanks, Li Zheng's troops attacked the White Horse Cavalry. As Cao Chun had predicted, many of Zhao Yun's riders were caught off guard and unseated. Others managed to swerve away just in time, avoiding the fate of their comrades but opening a path for Li Zheng to reach Cao Chun.

"General, retreat!" Li Zheng's charge caused further confusion, allowing him to link up with Cao Chun.

"Thank you, Duanfang!" Cao Chun regained his composure, quickly reorganizing his remaining forces into a defensive circle.

"General, you must retreat now! I'll hold them off. The plains of Xu Province provide too much of an advantage for the White Horse Cavalry. Without the protection of a city, we can't defeat Zhao Yun. You must retreat to Linyi and hold the city while waiting for reinforcements!" Li Zheng urged.

"Alright, Duanfang, take care!" Cao Chun decided quickly. Though nearly five hundred of his men had already fallen to the White Horse Cavalry's attacks, and fewer than a thousand remained with him, he knew any further delay would spell disaster.

Li Zheng nodded, leading his men into a tight circle, shields bracing against spears as archers concentrated their fire.

"Zhangming, take a thousand men and chase down the retreating force. Leave no survivors!" Zhao Yun ordered Xue Shao as he led another strike through the remnants of Cao Chun's forces.

As Zhao Yun's forces continued to press the attack, Li Zheng's attempts to retreat while fighting were swiftly thwarted. His troops were unable to fall back far before being overwhelmed by Zhao Yun's relentless cavalry. Sensing an opportunity, Zhao Yun charged again, shattering Li Zheng's formation into disarray.

Chapter 357: Rules and Regulations

"Not good!" Li Zheng, seeing Zhao Yun charging at him with a cold expression, wasted no time in pulling out a talisman—an item given to him by his elder cousin for protection. Before Zhao Yun's silver-blue sword energy could reach him, the talisman activated, and Li Zheng's form split into dozens of shadows, scattering in all directions at an incredible speed.

"A secret technique?" Zhao Yun hesitated for a moment, then his eyes flashed with anger. He grasped his Dragon Gallant Spear firmly, closed his eyes, and relied on his instincts. In one swift motion, he thrust his spear towards one of the fleeing shadows. As he withdrew his spear, droplets of blood dripped from the tip.

"Ugh!" Li Zheng, who was flying through the air at the speed of an internal energy master, suddenly found himself pierced through the chest by Zhao Yun's spear.

"Trash. I've mastered at least twenty of these kinds of techniques," Zhao Yun scoffed, sheathing his spear and drawing his sword to cut down the surrounding Cao soldiers like grass. Since entering Xu Province, Zhao Yun hadn't seen the Cao soldiers as anything more than scum.

Meanwhile, in the Shanyang County of Yanzhou, Li Jin was sipping tea and reading scripture with an air of tranquility. As he reached for the porcelain teapot, a sudden cracking sound rang out—his jade bracelet split, forming a visible crack before breaking into two pieces and shattering on the ground.

Li Jin stared at the scene in stunned silence, then picked up the broken pieces and began calculating silently.

"Endfang, sigh..." Li Jin muttered, shaking his head. He looked towards the east, then turned his gaze southeast. "Xu Province, huh? Such bloodshed... Cao Mengde truly has a ruthless heart."

"Bring Mancheng here," Li Jin instructed his maidservant as he left his room. A gust of cold wind blew in, causing the delicate, paper-like scroll on his desk to flip its pages before it finally closed. The cover bore four ancient seal characters.

Not long after, Li Dian, following the maidservant, arrived before Li Jin and bowed. "Greetings, elder cousin. What guidance do you have for me? Not long ago, I felt a deep unease. I seek your wisdom."

"Your brother died in Xu Province. It must have been Liu Xuande who sent troops," Li Jin said calmly.

Instantly, Li Dian's eyes filled with tears. "May I ask, cousin, who was the one that killed my brother?"

"The army came from the north, undefeated and swift. It should be the White Horse Cavalry, led by Zhao Zilong," Li Jin sighed. Although he couldn't predict everything with certainty, the available information allowed him to make an accurate deduction.

"Thank you, elder cousin!" Li Dian bowed deeply to Li Jin.

"You're no match for him. Due to certain reasons, I can't take action, and even if I were to face him on the battlefield, I'm afraid I wouldn't stand a chance. Starting today, Mancheng, I will personally teach you," Li Jin said, seeing the determination in Li Dian's eyes and understanding his intent.

"Thank you, elder cousin," Li Dian expressed his gratitude.

Li Jin sighed deeply. Although he wanted to help, he knew that without resorting to forbidden techniques, he wouldn't be able to kill Zhao Zilong. Master Tong Yuan had injected a stream of inner energy into each of his three disciples when they left the mountain.

Except for Zhang Ren, who couldn't break through to the next level, forcing Tong Yuan to use a special technique to elevate him from the peak of Qi Refinement to the Internal Energy Stage, the other two

were directly enhanced from entry-level Internal Energy to two-colored Internal Energy experts. Zhao Yun, as Tong Yuan's final disciple, had mastered countless secret techniques and survival methods, no fewer than eighty or a hundred. The title of "Spear God" wasn't just an exaggeration.

If Zhao Yun were an evil-doer, Li Jin might have considered using forbidden techniques to eliminate him. But given that Zhao Yun's actions aligned with justice, any attempt to kill him using underhanded methods would surely result in Tong Yuan seeking retribution—a confrontation that Li Jin wanted to avoid. In this era, disciples were treated like sons, and killing a beloved disciple unjustly would provoke a fierce response from their master.

Li Jin knew that Zhao Yun's lineage was strong, with Tong Yuan being a respected master with many connections. Attempting to kill Zhao Yun would bring not only Tong Yuan but also his brothers and friends into the fray. Even the most skilled martial artists of the time would struggle to face off against Tong Yuan, his brother Han Qiong, and their friend Wang Yue simultaneously.

Li Jin didn't know all the details about Tong Yuan, but he knew enough to understand that Zhao Yun was well-protected. Tong Yuan was known for creating Internal Energy experts, having already produced one ordinary Internal Energy warrior and two top-tier experts.

This made Tong Yuan a figure of concern even among the mystical "Immortals" of the time. After creating Zhang Xiu, a two-colored Internal Energy warrior, one curious Immortal couldn't resist testing him, only to end up skewered by Tong Yuan's spear.

Although two-colored Internal Energy wasn't inherently superior to single-colored, it still indicated a high level of mastery in one attribute, making it difficult for most single-colored experts to challenge.

After killing that Immortal, Tong Yuan went on to train Zhao Yun, another two-colored expert. Fortunately, Tong Yuan seemed to understand that he couldn't continue this path indefinitely. He declared Zhao Yun his last disciple and retreated to the mountains to focus on refining his spear techniques.

With the mountain sealed, Li Jin could only find alternative methods. His plan was to train Li Dian to become a well-rounded expert, capable of eventually defeating Zhao Yun on the battlefield, where such a death would be seen as honorable and justifiable. As for Zhao Yun's numerous secret techniques, those were merely tricks in the grand scheme of things.

Li Jin's lack of knowledge about Tong Yuan's current condition spared Zhao Yun much trouble. After using a significant portion of his inner energy to enhance his disciples, Tong Yuan had retreated to recover. Although he practiced a unique water-based energy technique, allowing him to replenish his energy endlessly, Zhao Yun's exceptional talent had pushed Tong Yuan to his limits, leaving him temporarily weakened.

This was why Tong Yuan had secluded himself. His estimation of Zhao Yun's potential had been off the charts, causing him to nearly exhaust himself during the process of elevating Zhao Yun's abilities. Now, Tong Yuan needed time to recover fully.

Chapter 358: Strategies of the Court and Schemes of the Lords

After Liu Bei departed, Chen Xi finished assigning tasks to everyone and then focused on calming down Chen Lan and Fan Jian, reassuring them so that they wouldn't worry too much about the upcoming war.

"What are you doing, Kongming?" Chen Xi frowned as he saw the mess Zhuge Liang had made in his study.

"Studying the current situation of the world," Zhuge Liang replied without looking up. "I want to demonstrate my capabilities."

"Oh?" Chen Xi curiously glanced at the scattered documents and intelligence reports on the desk. "Why go through all this information about Cao Mengde's past? You should be analyzing the battle in Xu Province."

"I've studied Cao Mengde thoroughly. He has one virtue—he values talent. I consider myself a capable strategist, and I'm still young. What I'm going to do now is show Cao Cao how brilliant I am and then make it clear that we are sworn enemies. I want him to regret this for the rest of his life," Zhuge Liang said, his eyes flashing with determination. Although he couldn't participate in the battlefield at Xu Province, he intended to deliver a heavy blow to Cao Cao's heart through his words.

"Xu Province... Lord Xuande has already gone there. He will stop Cao Mengde, so don't worry. Let me help you with this," Chen Xi said, patting Zhuge Liang on the shoulder.

“You want to join in?” Zhuge Liang was surprised. “The things I write will undoubtedly be seen by Cao Mengde’s strategists. Your thinking is always unconventional—aren’t you worried...?”

“It doesn’t matter. When we truly rise to power, nothing will be able to stop us. My focus is on the people—their food, their prosperity, their protection from epidemics. The deaths in battle are always the minority; starvation and disease claim far more lives,” Chen Xi said calmly.

“I see. So, when you generously invited all the lords into our lands, you were actually hoping they would learn about our agricultural practices and disease prevention methods,” Zhuge Liang quickly understood.

“Yes. It’s about preserving the vitality of the Central Plains. Even if a million people die in battle, it’s nothing compared to the devastation of an epidemic sweeping through multiple provinces. I’m just trying to do my best and leave the rest to fate,” Chen Xi sighed. “I’ll help you write the letter.”

“Alright. Take a look and see if there are any issues with what I’ve written so far,” Zhuge Liang said, handing over a sharp, biting letter that expressed his hatred for Cao Cao while also showcasing his wisdom.

“It’s very good. We’ll have it delivered through Cai Zhaoji’s hands. I heard from Li Wenru that she has severed ties with Cao Mengde,” Chen Xi sighed, realizing that the way Zhuge Liang had written it left little room to insert anything about agriculture or disease prevention.

“Why is Cao Mengde acting this way? Based on his previous behavior, this doesn’t seem like something he would do,” Zhuge Liang, despite his hatred for Cao Cao, couldn’t help but be puzzled by the man’s actions.

“He lost control. Once the slaughter started, he couldn’t stop it. Of course, local opportunists likely took advantage of the situation, but the initial spark definitely came from Cao Mengde. He’s killed the most, so don’t dwell on it—he’s no longer on the same path as us,” Chen Xi sighed. After this massacre, Cao Cao’s temperament would be quite different from before.

“Feel free to use anything in the study. Chen Yun will clean it up later,” Chen Xi said with a sigh. He had once admired Cao Cao, but no amount of admiration could cover up the atrocities he had committed.

After leaving the study, Chen Xi explained the situation to Fan Jian and Chen Lan. Both women were somewhat unwilling to accept it; after all, their marriage was still fresh, and now he had to go to war so soon.

“Alright, don’t make such faces. While I’m away, try to console Cai Zhaoji and make sure she doesn’t do anything rash,” Chen Xi sighed. This incident had hit people like Cai Yan and Gu Yong, who were both righteous and had personal ties to Cao Cao, particularly hard.

“I understand,” Fan Jian replied, though she was clearly not pleased.

“Don’t be so petty. You’ll need Cai Zhaoji’s help in teaching our future daughters the arts of music, chess, calligraphy, and painting. There aren’t many women better suited for that than her,” Chen Xi explained helplessly.

“Hmph, why would we want daughters? What’s wrong with having sons?” Fan Jian retorted unhappily.

“Actually, daughters are quite nice too,” Chen Lan said softly from the side. Though she was also a wife, she always felt overshadowed by Fan Jian and had no desire to compete with her.

Chen Xi sighed, realizing that it might be better to wait a couple of years. Given Fan Jian’s current state, raising a child would probably feel more like playing with a toy.

For the next few days, Chen Xi busied himself with gathering the supplies he needed. Meanwhile, Cai Yan’s letter, along with two books on epidemic prevention and agricultural practices, was sent to Cao Cao.

After Li You left that day, Chen Xi had someone deliver the books under his name to Cai Yan. After she packed the books and the letter in a paper bag and sent them off, Cai Yan felt much better. Li You’s thoughtful gesture had given her a sense of warmth, reminiscent of the days when her father was still alive.

“Oh, what brings the two of you here?” Chen Xi asked curiously when he saw Jia Xu and Fa Zheng appear in the outer courtyard of his home.

“We have some answers,” Jia Xu replied, tossing a packet of documents to Chen Xi. “Take a look.”

Chen Xi quickly scanned the contents and was shocked. He turned to Jia Xu. “Are you sure this isn’t a joke? Why would Tao Gongzu think like this? Haven’t we always had a good relationship with Xu Province?”

“Think about it, Zichuan. Tao Gongzu is a lord, after all, and our good relationship with him had its reasons,” Jia Xu replied with a bitter smile. “Likewise, his suggestion to hand Xu Province over to Cao Mengde also had its reasons! This time, Cao Mengde made a foolish move! If he had just communicated with Tao Qian, he could have obtained Xu Province without bloodshed. Instead, his moment of rage has turned the world upside down. I’m sure Tao Gongzu himself can’t understand why Cao Cao would slaughter Xu Province like this!”

Chapter 359: Lords, Clans, and the People

Chen Xi paused and silently closed the documents. He suddenly recalled that, in the original history, Mount Tai was supposed to have fallen under Cao Cao’s control. This led to multiple battles between Cao Cao and Tao Qian, sparked by various alliances with Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao, ultimately making them mortal enemies. Under such circumstances, there was no way Tao Qian would have ever handed over Xu Province to Cao Cao.

In this timeline, however, Liu Bei occupied Mount Tai, preventing any direct conflict between Cao Cao and Tao Qian. As a result, the historical battles never occurred, and Tao Qian spent his time as a minor player in Yuan Shu’s alliance, eventually succumbing to illness.

For the Tao Qian of this timeline, who was old and frail, it made little difference whether he handed Xu Province to Liu Bei or Cao Cao. He had no grudges against either of them, and both had demonstrated their potential.

However, Liu Bei’s previous aggressive attack on Yuan Shu left Tao Qian with the impression that Liu Bei might not honor alliances. Despite Liu Bei never formally joining Yuan Shu’s alliance, Tao Qian found himself favoring Cao Cao, who appeared more straightforward.

Chen Xi massaged his temples, feeling a headache coming on. Human nature was indeed complex. If Tao Qian and Cao Cao had been engaged in frequent skirmishes, Tao Qian would have seen Cao Cao as his mortal enemy, and Xu Province would never have gone to him. But this situation was entirely different from the historical events!

Tao Qian's Xu Province bordered only two powers: Liu Bei and Yuan Shu. Liu Bei had no interest in attacking Tao Qian, and Yuan Shu, who prided himself on loyalty, saw Tao Qian as an early supporter and thus a subordinate to protect. As a result, even though the rest of the Central Plains were in turmoil, Xu Province remained unusually peaceful, like an untouched oasis amid the chaos.

Without any major wars, Tao Qian had time to focus on agricultural development and his two sons' futures. His years of peace and focus on governance led to significant progress. Thanks to consistent good harvests and his strict adherence to the imperial tax code, requiring only a third of the harvest in taxes, most families in Xu Province had accumulated surplus grain. This raised Tao Qian's prestige considerably.

As his influence grew, Tao Qian managed to suppress the power of local noble families, allowing him the freedom to choose his successor. And in Tao Qian's mind, Cao Cao, who shared a similar approach to governance, seemed like the perfect candidate.

"So this really was the work of the local Cao family in Xu Province?" Chen Xi asked, incredulous.

"Yes, that's right. Tao Gongzu finally gained enough power to start weakening the local nobility and consolidating his authority. This gave him the confidence to choose his own successor," Jia Xu said with a bitter smile. "That's also why Tao Gongzu vomited blood after hearing about Cao Mengde's massacre in Xu Province."

Chen Xi was speechless. Anyone in Tao Qian's position would have been furious. He had painstakingly weakened the noble families in Xu Province, identified Cao Cao as a worthy successor, and was ready to hand over the province peacefully. Then, Cao Cao's massacre destroyed everything he had worked for.

"Cao Mengde went too far. He didn't even send an envoy to question Tao Qian," Chen Xi sighed. "He let his rage get the better of him, and after the massacre, the wealth he plundered kept him from stopping. It's a pity—Tao Gongzu's reputation is ruined. Both the noble families and Cao Cao will blame the massacre on him, rendering all his efforts meaningless."

"Exactly. I've confirmed that some local noble families in Xu Province took advantage of the chaos to exacerbate the situation," Jia Xu said, his expression showing disgust. He had some evidence to back his claim, which is why he was so certain.

"Some noble families truly are despicable. Tell me, who was behind this?" Chen Xi asked with a frown.

"Zuo Rong, Que Xuan, and possibly the local Cao family in Xu Province, who may have incited rioters and refugees," Jia Xu replied.

"We'll eliminate them all," Chen Xi said coldly, issuing a death sentence without hesitation. "And by the way, is Cao Bao still in command of the troops?"

"Yes," Jia Xu confirmed.

"What a cunning plan!" Chen Xi sneered. "They killed Cao Ju and incited the conflict in Xu Province. Even if Cao Cao hadn't initiated the massacre, they would have created the opportunity themselves. Their goal was to weaken Tao Gongzu's authority, defeat Cao Cao, and restore power to the noble families while also reclaiming their lost prestige. It's a good plan!"

As Chen Xi spoke, his eyes revealed unfiltered killing intent. Such people, in his view, deserved nothing less than death.

"Cao Bao miscalculated by assuming Tao Gongzu would hand Xu Province to Cao Cao. And thanks to the circumstances, he inadvertently set the stage for disaster. A series of unfortunate coincidences," Jia Xu said with a sigh of resignation.

"I've already investigated Cao Bao. Unless something extraordinary happens, Xu Province is doomed to fall," Jia Xu continued with a bitter smile. "As much as I dislike admitting it, Cao Mengde is a highly skilled commander. With the wealth he's looted from Xu Province, he won't have any logistical issues. There's a 90% chance Cao Bao will be defeated before our lord can arrive."

"Leave him to his fate. Even if the veterans from Danyang retreat, they'll know how to escape. If we try to rescue Cao Bao, he might even inadvertently help Cao Cao by disrupting our formations. If he gets caught up in the fighting, he'll be as good as dead," Chen Xi said dismissively. "Make sure the local Cao family in Xu Province is wiped out as well."

"Oh, I've already sent people to incite the bandits and rioters in Xu Province," Jia Xu said, nodding. "At this point, as long as we defeat Cao Mengde, there's a 90% chance Tao Gongzu will hand Xu Province over to our lord."

"Yes, I understand. The rest is up to you," Chen Xi said with a sigh, knowing that Jia Xu was far better at handling such matters than he was.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure you're satisfied with the outcome," Jia Xu replied, a mocking smile on his face. While he didn't particularly like noble families, he usually wouldn't go out of his way to target them—unless they caused trouble. Now that they had, Jia Xu had no qualms about making an example of a few.

As Jia Xu and Chen Xi shared a cold, calculating smile, Fa Zheng, sitting nearby, couldn't help but shiver with discomfort.

Chapter 360: Xun Wenruo's Thoughts

"Xiaozhi, what's going on with you?" Chen Xi reined in his cold smile and looked at Fazheng.

"Take a look at this report and my analysis," Fazheng said solemnly as he handed over some documents to Chen Xi.

After quickly skimming through the documents, Chen Xi passed them to Jia Xu. "Wenhe, you should take a look at this too. So, you're saying that Chen Gongtai has made a move? That shouldn't be possible; he's under Xun Wenruo's watchful eye. It's not that easy to act without Xun Wenruo noticing. Does he really think Xun Wenruo is someone to be trifled with?"

"That's what puzzles me as well. The intelligence from Yanzhou suggests that Xun Wenruo was furious when he learned about Cao Mengde's massacre in Xu Province. It seems he might have been too angry to think straight," Fazheng speculated, trying to find a reasonable explanation.

"No way," Jia Xu interjected before Chen Xi could speak. "Xiaozhi, Xun Wenruo is not the kind of person who would let personal emotions cloud his judgment. Even if he's displeased with Cao Mengde, he would wait until Cao Mengde's return to express it. For now, he will fulfill his duties. The idea that he

might have lost his composure can be dismissed. It's more likely that he has his own plans in motion. Remember what happened with Yuan Gonglu?"

"I've never underestimated Xun Wenruo. After what happened in the Battle of Jingzhou, I recognized him as a highly dangerous individual. Unlike other strategists who rely on cunning schemes, he follows a path of open and righteous strategies that are difficult to counter," Fazheng said with a deep sense of caution.

It was clear that Fazheng was highly wary of Xun Yu. After all, Xun Yu's strategic brilliance had once effortlessly extricated Cao Cao from a difficult situation and dragged other lords into the conflict, allowing Cao Cao to emerge stronger and more confident. Such straightforward and unavoidable strategies left Fazheng feeling helpless.

"This is troublesome. Xun Wenruo must have his own calculations, but we can't figure them out yet," Chen Xi said with a sigh. "Well, let's not overthink it. Since Chen Gongtai has aligned himself with Lu Bu, there's nothing more to say. If they can unexpectedly seize a large portion of Yanzhou, it will be beneficial for us as well, cutting off Cao Mengde's retreat."

"Better safe than sorry," Jia Xu said, frowning. He still felt that Xun Yu had some hidden moves, but after carefully considering the situation, he couldn't identify any immediate threats. Without Cao Cao returning, the existing forces in Yanzhou would be hard-pressed to stop Lu Bu's Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry.

"Forget it. We'll deal with whatever comes our way," Chen Xi said, waving off the concern. "I don't believe Xun Wenruo can pull off some miracle. If it comes to it, we'll handle it as it comes."

"That's all we can do," Jia Xu agreed. "Given the situation, I suggest leaving Yu Jin and Taishi Ziyi to guard Mount Tai. With one for offense and the other for defense, Mount Tai should remain secure."

"Zijing and Xiaozhi should also stay in Mount Tai. One focuses on stability, the other on strategy. With them, we can rest assured. As for Xuan Gao, he can continue guarding Licheng," Chen Xi added with a nod.

"But I want to go to Xu Province!" Fazheng immediately voiced his dissatisfaction. "Isn't that boy Zhuge Kongming also quite capable? Let him stay in Mount Tai to handle administrative matters. Zijing could serve as the chief advisor."

"Don't be reckless. Kongming may excel in grand strategies, but you're better at unconventional tactics. Besides, I'm concerned that Lu Fengxian might harbor ill intentions toward Mount Tai," Chen Xi said with some apprehension. "While Chen Gongtai isn't the best at immediate wartime strategies, he's incredibly skilled at long-term planning and slowly accumulating advantages. Against such a person, pure, straightforward tactics won't easily win."

Although Fazheng was clearly unhappy, he was eventually persuaded. After all, his father would arrive in Mount Tai within half a month, and it wouldn't be appropriate for him to be absent when that happened.

Meanwhile, in Yanzhou's Chenliu, Xun Yu had turned from the warm, gentle spring breeze to a cold, harsh winter wind ever since news of Cao Cao's massacre in Xu Province reached Yanzhou. From that day on, there had not been a single sound of laughter in the Chenliu government office. Anyone who saw Xun Yu's dark expression felt a deep sense of dread.

"Wenruo, there's no need to be like this. Wars inevitably lead to casualties, and you see, Cao Mengde is about to face his own retribution. Why be so troubled?" Fan Qin casually chatted while handling official duties. Though Fan Qin often spoke, Xun Yu rarely responded, but that didn't stop Fan Qin from chattering on endlessly.

"..." Xun Yu said nothing, only casting a sharp glance at Fan Qin, his eyes full of warning.

But Fan Qin acted as if he didn't notice. "You see, even Chen Gongtai is ready to deal with Cao Mengde directly. Shouldn't we lend a hand and deal with Cao Mengde as well? It's certainly more exciting than sitting here handling boring paperwork all day."

Once again, Xun Yu glanced at Fan Qin, this time with an authoritative look. Although he was infuriated by Cao Cao's actions, Xun Yu understood that this was a result of external manipulation. After carefully investigating the situation in Xu Province, it became clear that Cao Cao had been used as a pawn.

For this reason, Xun Yu's anger was directed less at Cao Cao's increasingly restrained behavior and more at those who had orchestrated the chaos, turning the situation into a catastrophe. If not for them, Cao Cao might have vented his anger in one battle and been done with it. Now, things had spiraled out of control.

"Xiubo, what exactly are you trying to say?" Xun Yu asked after finishing a stack of official documents and turning to Fan Qin.

"I mean, let's fight Cao Mengde too! Dealing with him would certainly be more exciting than this dull routine. After all, what's more fun than 'eating, sleeping, and beating Cao Cao'?" Fan Qin suggested, a mischievous grin on his face.

Xun Yu remained silent, but his gaze sharpened as he stared daggers at Fan Qin.

"Wenruo, what are you really planning? You've got me completely confused. How do you intend to handle Cao Mengde?" Fan Qin complained, resting his head on the desk in frustration, his voice muffled and unclear.

Xun Yu ignored him, continuing to process official duties. He had long recognized that Fan Qin's moral compass was somewhat skewed. To Fan Qin, life was divided into two categories: interesting activities and boring routines. Right now, dealing with Cao Cao seemed to be a thrilling prospect.

However, Fan Qin was uncertain of Xun Yu's intentions and had been testing him non-stop. After all, as long as Xun Yu remained on Cao Cao's side, no matter how badly Cao Cao might falter, he could always rise again.