

Mythical 361

Chapter 361: I Trust My Lord's Capacity...

After a long time passed and noticing that Xun Yu was completely ignoring him, Fan Qin sheepishly lifted his head to see Xun Yu still absorbed in reviewing official documents.

"Xiubo, do you think our lord made a mistake this time?" Xun Yu asked without looking up.

Fan Qin's face brightened. The thing he feared the most was when Xun Yu didn't say anything, leaving him completely in the dark. As long as Xun Yu was willing to speak, there were ways to deal with the situation. "From the perspective of filial piety, there's not much wrong, but in terms of moral principles, it's somewhat unacceptable. As for the Nine Virtues of a ruler..."

"Hmm," Xun Yu hummed lightly, not continuing the conversation.

Fan Qin waited for a long time, but Xun Yu remained silent. Finally, Fan Qin couldn't take it anymore. "Xun Wenruo, if you don't give me an explanation today, I'm done!"

"One chooses their lord, just as a lord chooses their ministers," Xun Yu responded calmly.

"So, are you saying that we should kick Cao Mengde to the curb? That's fine, we can go help Chen Gongtai, make sure Cao Mengde disappears for good." Fan Qin became excited at the idea. He would love to see internal strife within Cao Cao's camp. If Xun Yu rebelled against Cao Cao, Cao Cao's regime would collapse in no time since most of his key ministers were recommended by Xun Yu.

"To err is human, but to correct one's mistake is even greater," Xun Yu continued.

"I..." Fan Qin was almost choked by Xun Yu's response. After taking a few deep breaths, he asked, "So, you mean that as long as Cao Mengde admits his mistake and doesn't repeat it, you'll let this go?"

Xun Yu didn't respond, too disinterested to engage further. Although Fan Qin was indeed talented in governance, strategy, and assessing situations, his personality was undeniably peculiar.

"But wait," Fan Qin thought aloud, "if all it takes is for Cao Mengde to admit his mistake and you'll forgive him, he still has to survive first. You've already let Chen Gongtai, that madman, loose. You've basically sealed Cao Mengde's retreat, and with Liu Xuande blocking his way in front, how can he possibly make it back alive?"

Xun Yu continued with his work, but suddenly a shadow loomed over him. Startled, he looked up to find Fan Qin staring at him in shock.

"You've figured it out?" Xun Yu asked, meeting Fan Qin's gaze.

"I'm shocked. I never expected you to be this ruthless, and so bold. Aren't you afraid this could backfire?" Fan Qin asked, his face partially hidden behind his ornate fan.

"It doesn't matter. Success or failure benefits us either way," Xun Yu replied calmly. "Since I've chosen him as my lord, it's my duty to guide him. This is both a test and an opportunity. If he succeeds, he will prove to be a great leader. If he fails, then it only means my judgment wasn't as good as I thought."

"Xun Wenruo!" Fan Qin's voice squeezed out through clenched teeth. "You're formidable! You're the most formidable person I've ever met! Calling your schemes 'calculated' doesn't do them justice. Your foresight is terrifying!"

"You're not bad yourself," Xun Yu responded without looking up. "Hurry up and finish processing these documents. There's still much to do in Yanzhou. Make sure that when Gongtai takes control, he has enough resources to manage the aftermath. Our lord needs to suffer a few more setbacks before he can truly mature."

Fan Qin sighed deeply. "Chen Changwen choosing you as his opponent is truly tragic. I can no longer see any chance of him winning. All I can do is pray he lives longer than you; otherwise, Changwen might never recover."

Xun Yu smiled faintly. "Get back to work. Gongtai... well, he's not so different from us. I hope our lord makes the right choices. Otherwise, I'll have to serve another."

"Oh, spare me the drama," Fan Qin teased. "Don't think I don't know what you're up to. Your loyalty isn't really to Cao Mengde. You just believe he can help you restore the Han Dynasty. And if your current plans don't benefit him, they'll still benefit the Han. Isn't that right?"

"Heh, I believe in my lord's capacity," Xun Yu replied, his face serene, though Fan Qin noticed a flicker of something in his eyes. It was enough to convince Fan Qin that if Cao Cao truly disappointed him, Xun Yu had contingency plans in place, along with someone ready to take over.

Fan Qin lowered his head and returned to his paperwork, feeling even more wary of Xun Yu. Xun Yu's strategies were the kind that would have you counting money for him even after he sold you out. His plans didn't rely on complex schemes but rather on pushing situations to a point where people had no choice but to make the most logical decision.

As Fan Qin silently reflected on this, Cao Cao remained unaware that Xun Yu had prepared a test for him. By now, Cao Cao had grown weary of the slaughter. His rage had dissipated, and he no longer harbored much hatred. He was beginning to regain his senses and had lost interest in further killings, instead focusing on gathering his troops and ending the massacre.

However, the chaos in Xu Province had already spiraled out of control. Although Cao Cao had withdrawn his forces, the killings continued. Even in his moment of clarity, Cao Cao realized he had been used as a pawn.

"Zhongde, investigate this for me. Find out who is slaughtering the people of Xu Province in my name! I, Cao Mengde, will own up to the lives I've taken, but no one else will pin their crimes on me!" Cao Cao roared in anger.

"Understood!" Cheng Yu responded. He too had noticed that the massacre in Xu Province was now beyond their control. Even if they stopped killing, others were still doing so in their name. Although they had shed the most blood, they didn't want to bear even more guilt.

"Report! General Le has sent a letter from Fan County for our lord!" A messenger rushed in, kneeling before Cao Cao with a sealed letter in hand.

Cao Cao recognized the handwriting on the envelope and the large characters on it: "To my son, Mengde." Tears streamed down his face as the hatred that had almost faded surged once more.

Chapter 362: Let It Be

Cao Cao opened the letter with a deep sense of hatred, but within moments, the letter slipped from his fingers, and he collapsed, overwhelmed by the shock. Cao Cao lay on the ground, gasping, unable to bear the blow.

"Master! Call for the medic!" Cheng Yu, alarmed by Cao Cao's sudden collapse, rushed forward to support him. His eyes involuntarily drifted to the letter that had fallen to the ground, and with a single glance, his pupils constricted to tiny points.

The words on that letter turned Cheng Yu's mind upside down, and in that instant, many things became clear to him. An uncontrollable anger surged through his body.

After some hurried treatment, Cao Cao slowly regained consciousness, though his appearance seemed to have aged several years. He waved away the others, leaving only Cheng Yu by his side.

"Zhongde, you saw the letter, didn't you?" Cao Cao stared at the ceiling of the military tent.

Cheng Yu lowered his head, remaining silent. He deeply regretted not advising Cao Cao to send an emissary to question Xuzhou before launching his attack.

"Do not dwell on this, my lord," Cheng Yu said awkwardly, fully aware that the situation had nothing to do with Tao Qian. They had squandered an opportunity due to unchecked rage.

"A true lord should possess the Nine Virtues: being broad-minded and respectful, gentle yet firm in judgment, humble but dignified, talented and diligent, willing to listen to others yet decisive, upright but mild-mannered, candid yet detail-oriented, incorruptible and down-to-earth, strong and courageous but aligned with righteousness!" Cao Cao murmured, repeating the words that Chen Gong had once used to admonish him.

Cheng Yu remained silent. Though Cao Cao hadn't explicitly admitted his mistake, by quoting Chen Gong's words, it was clear that he realized his error. Yet, as a lord, he couldn't bring himself to openly confess.

"My lord, what matters now is to find the real culprit and seek justice for the old master," Cheng Yu said respectfully, bowing his head.

"Give the letter to Gongda. Tell him that a lord should possess the Nine Virtues. I will take heed of it. Please inform the others not to let my status concern them." Cao Cao handed the letter to Cheng Yu calmly. "This matter ends here. Gongda will know what to do. Wenruo, Zhicai, and Gongtai are likely disappointed in me."

"Summon Xiahou Yuan and Xiahou Dun!" Lying on his bed, Cao Cao signaled Cheng Yu to leave, then called for the Xiahou brothers.

"Brother, what did Uncle's letter say to trouble you so deeply?" Xiahou Yuan asked, clad in armor, worried as he approached Cao Cao.

"Tao Gongzu intended to give Xuzhou to me, but someone intervened, causing me to act in rage and harm so many innocent people. From this moment, stop all slaughter in Xuzhou. Anyone who disobeys this order shall be executed!" Cao Cao's eyes flashed with cold light. He knew his mistake, but he would not openly admit it.

"What!" Xiahou Dun exclaimed, stunned. "Who would dare do such a thing!"

"Don't concern yourself with that. Just carry out the order. Keep this matter between the two of you," Cao Cao instructed.

After the Xiahou brothers left, Xun You and Cheng Yu entered together. "My lord."

"Gongda, how should we handle this matter?" Cao Cao immediately asked Xun You.

"Just this once," Xun You replied, looking at Cao Cao.

"Chen Gongtai is right," Cao Cao sighed, sitting up straight and staring firmly at Xun You.

"This matter is simple," Xun You said calmly. He wasn't as devout as Xun Yu, but he had his own principles. Seeing that Cao Cao recognized his mistake, Xun You decided that this acknowledgment was enough for a lord.

"Currently, Xuzhou is in chaos. While most of it was caused by our forces, if we stop the killing now and simultaneously eliminate the bandits and rioters while conducting large-scale disaster relief, we can pin the blame on a disfavored family. The situation will resolve itself," Xun You explained with a detached expression.

"Good, let's do that!" Cao Cao's face lit up with hope. Though the situation was grim, if they could manage it properly, the repercussions could be minimized.

"Conduct relief efforts with full force. Let the surviving people of Xuzhou believe that those who accused us of slaughter were slandering us. Since the dead cannot speak, the living will acknowledge us as their saviors. My lord, simply remain silent when discussing the massacre, and show a hint of regret. That's all that's needed," Xun You suggested, appearing distant but precise.

Cheng Yu, after hearing Xun You's plan, realized that they could create a bizarre situation where, although Cao Cao was indeed responsible for the massacre, his subsequent relief efforts and the involvement of other forces would allow them to shift the blame elsewhere.

"My lord, focus on the relief efforts. The dead cannot speak, and even if the survivors witnessed the slaughter, after our aid, we can shift all the blame onto others. Moreover, since there were indeed other forces involved in the massacre, we can fully cover this up," Cheng Yu said with joy, elaborating on Xun You's plan.

Cheng Yu shared the surprising news that other forces, not just bandits and rioters, were involved. This was almost like divine intervention, giving them a scapegoat ready to take the fall.

"My lord, do not deny the massacre outright. You may admit to being momentarily enraged and ask for forgiveness, but never try to absolve yourself completely. Other lords will know the truth, but as long as no one can confirm the numbers, this matter will fade. When discussing it in the future, show a hint of helplessness and nothing more," Xun You advised, rejecting the idea of completely denying responsibility.

"Thank you, Gongda," Cao Cao said, bowing deeply to Xun You.

Cao Cao knew that Xun You had provided him with a way out. In the future, history might record that Cao Cao, in a moment of rage, killed a few people but soon realized his mistake and conducted relief efforts.

Even if tens of thousands died, the fact that he saved tens of thousands more could overshadow the massacre. Historians might gloss over this episode, portraying Cao Cao as a flawed yet redeemable leader. The narrative had been set, and the oath he made to Xun You in return was worth the cost.

Chapter 363: Cao and Liu

Cao Cao adjusted his mood, preparing for the upcoming battle, as he had received word that Cao Bao was leading 30,000 elite troops from Danyang towards him.

Over the next two days, the Cao army continued its disaster relief efforts, just as Xun You had predicted. The dead could not testify against the Cao army, and as they repeatedly executed the bandits and rioters pretending to be Cao's forces, many of the Xuzhou people truly believed that it wasn't the Cao army committing the slaughter but rather someone tarnishing Cao's reputation.

"Hahaha, the situation is improving again. Now we just need to find the real culprits!" Cao Cao's spirits lifted as he reviewed the reports from various places, imagining how many armies he could form with the wealth he had plundered from Xuzhou. He felt one step closer to his dream of becoming the Grand General of the West, conquering the frontier.

"Report, a letter from Strategist Xi." As Cao Cao was reveling in the good news, a messenger rushed in with a letter.

"Hahaha, a letter from Zhicai! Good news, good news! It seems Zhicai has recovered considerably." Cao Cao laughed, feeling as though fortune was smiling upon him.

After reading the letter, his smile grew even broader. "Go, claim your reward at the rear camp."

"My lord, has there been good news?" Cheng Yu asked with a smile.

"Zhicai has recovered, and he has found two great talents for me, as well as retrieving Zhaoji, who was lost in Chang'an," Cao Cao exclaimed joyfully.

"Congratulations, my lord!" Cheng Yu offered sincere congratulations.

"Report, General Cao Chun has sent a message." Another messenger rushed in.

"Read it," Cao Cao said, this time with more solemnity, as it was a military report.

"General Liu Bei's vanguard, led by Zhao Yun and 3,000 White Horse Cavalry, has arrived at Linyi. Sima Li Zheng has fallen in battle. General Cao is besieged in Linyi and cannot break through." The messenger reported with his head bowed.

Cao Cao's expression grew serious. Though he had anticipated Liu Bei's return, he had not expected him to arrive so quickly.

"Send orders to Cao Xiu to lead 3,000 infantry to reinforce Linyi. Hold the position and do not engage. Wait for me to defeat Cao Bao, and then we will meet Liu Bei in Langya!" Cao Cao instructed calmly.

As soon as the messenger left, another rushed in with a letter. "My lord, a letter from Zhuge Ziyu."

"Zhuge Ziyu?" Cao Cao frowned, then his mood brightened. "Hahaha, another great talent! Today is indeed a day of great fortune!"

But as he opened the letter, his face turned pale. "How dare this commoner insult my ancestors!"

Though Cao Cao cursed aloud, his heart ached. This was the prodigy that Xi Zhicai had recommended, yet he had driven him away, making him a lifelong enemy.

"My lord, please calm down," Cheng Yu said, trying to soothe Cao Cao as he tore the letter into pieces in his rage.

"Zhongde, there's no need for this. I want to see what talent this Zhuge family from Langya truly has! Hmph!" Cao Cao forced himself to suppress his anger, speaking as calmly as possible.

"Report, a letter from Mount Tai!" Another messenger arrived.

"Bring it," Cao Cao said, his eyes flashing coldly.

When he opened the letter, two books and two letters fell out. He opened the thicker letter first, finding no insults, only a lengthy strategy. As Cao Cao read, he found himself nodding in approval, even murmuring, "A true genius. I wonder which family he belongs to."

But as he reached the end and saw the signature, his face turned red and white. "Zhuge of Langya, Liang, aged twelve. This is prepared for you, Cao Thief. You slaughtered my homeland; I will ensure you regret this for the rest of your life!"

Seeing the signature, Cao Cao felt a bitter taste in his throat, but he forced himself to swallow the blood. His face contorted in a cold smile. "Zhuge of Langya, let's see how capable your family really is!"

Despite his words, Cao Cao had already etched Zhuge Liang's name deeply in his mind. A twelve-year-old who could draft such a strategy—if it wasn't ghostwritten, he would indeed be a formidable enemy.

Opening the other letter, he found only two words, written in familiar red ink. The memories of Cai Yan's voice and smile flashed through Cao Cao's mind. But seeing the red words "break ties," Cao Cao couldn't suppress his emotions any longer. A mouthful of blood spewed from him, staining the letter red as he collapsed once again.

The death of his father, the guilt of massacring Xuzhou, the sorrow upon receiving his father's final words, the scorn from Zhuge Jin, the talent of Zhuge Liang, and Cai Yan's cold rejection—all these blows overwhelmed Cao Cao, and he fell ill in the camp.

Meanwhile, Liu Bei's army moved slowly. If not for the burden of refugees, Liu Bei would have already reached Pengcheng and joined forces with Cao Bao for a decisive battle against Cao Cao. But the mass of

starving, freezing refugees made it impossible to advance. Liu Bei could only set up camp, constantly gathering supplies to sustain the people.

The more he saw of Xuzhou's desolation, the more Liu Bei hated Cao Cao. Though he had never been to Xuzhou before, he knew that under Tao Qian's three years of minimal taxation, the region had prospered. Now, however, it was a land of sorrow.

When Chen Xi finally arrived with large quantities of food, winter clothes, medicines, and doctors, Liu Bei was still stuck in Donghai County, unable to advance. The tens of thousands of refugees were too much for him to manage, and he couldn't ignore them just to pursue Cao Cao. His conscience wouldn't allow it.

As for Cao Bao, who had reached Pengcheng and was posturing as a champion of the people, he completely ignored the Xuzhou refugees and even sent a letter to Liu Bei questioning his invasion of Xuzhou.

Whether Cao Bao was deluded or simply full of himself, Liu Bei, who had initially considered helping him, was thoroughly disappointed and chose to ignore him. Instead, he focused on caring for the people of Xuzhou.

Though he spent vast amounts of resources daily, Liu Bei didn't mind. Seeing the people gradually recover from their grief, he found a new purpose. He moved among the people, working tirelessly to solve their problems, organizing them into groups, and sending them to safer parts of Xuzhou or, if they wished, to Mount Tai under his protection. Though it was repetitive work, Liu Bei found great joy in it.

Chapter 364: The Hearts of People in Chaotic Times

"Liu Bei, how many refugees have we gathered so far?" Liu Bei asked as he sat in the county town of Tancheng, looking at his civil and military officials. Initially, Chen Xi was supposed to lead a contingent, but before they even left Taishan, reports from Xuzhou made it clear that what was needed wasn't more troops but more supplies. After arriving in Xuzhou, Liu Bei quickly realized that helping the displaced people find peace was more important than defeating Cao Cao.

"More than 300,000," Chen Xi sighed. "The supplies we need should arrive tomorrow." Cao Bao was indeed troublesome, and his overconfidence didn't mean that the other people of Xuzhou were as foolish. For example, Xue Yan, the prefect of Donghai, welcomed Liu Bei with open arms. When Liu Bei suggested opening the granaries, Xue Yan didn't hesitate to comply, firmly choosing to support Liu Bei.

"Only 300,000? That can't be right. The northern part of Xuzhou should have close to a million people. Given the displacement caused by the massacre, there should be more refugees than this." Liu Bei's face darkened as he feared that Chen Xi might reveal that the rest had all been killed by Cao Cao. If that were the case, Liu Bei couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't immediately march against Cao Cao.

"It's not as you think, my lord. Cao Mengde is also gathering refugees and providing relief," Jia Xu sighed. When it came to what Cao Cao was currently doing, Jia Xu could only acknowledge that Cao Cao was indeed a crafty and cunning leader. Even though they knew Cao Cao had participated in the massacre, there was no concrete evidence to prove the extent of it.

"Huh?" Liu Bei was stunned. "Wenhe, say that again."

"Cao Mengde is also providing relief and has been targeting the bandits who are slaughtering the people of Xuzhou. For example, Xiahou Yuan has already eliminated the second-largest group of murderers, led by the self-proclaimed 'Son of Heaven' Que Xuan," Jia Xu repeated.

At these words, the entire county office of Tancheng buzzed with disbelief. No one could believe it.

"Didn't earlier reports say that Cao Cao was massacring the people of Xuzhou? And we've also eliminated several such groups." Zhao Yun was the first to stand up, his tone sharp. He had been killing Cao's soldiers in Xuzhou relentlessly, and now to be told he might have killed the wrong people? How could he stand for that?

"Based on our investigations, it's no longer the Cao army conducting the massacres but rather certain local forces in Xuzhou, likely trying to take advantage of the chaos. As for Cao Mengde, he definitely participated in the initial slaughter, but we don't have an exact count of how many he killed," Jia Xu said helplessly. Without more precise information, he wasn't prepared to offer speculation.

Chen Xi had also made estimates, but he had no way of knowing exactly how many had died. Gathering intelligence under these circumstances—without cameras, recorders, or reliable sources in a multi-faceted conflict—made it challenging just to confirm that Cao Cao had indeed committed a massacre. Knowing how many had died was even harder.

"Wenhe, which local forces in Xuzhou have participated in this massacre?" Liu Bei shifted the topic away from Cao Cao and asked about another matter. He refrained from making any judgments about Cao Cao's actions.

"Two groups are confirmed: Que Xuan and Zuo Rong. Que Xuan's motive is clear—he wants to use this opportunity to discredit Tao Qian and position himself for power. Zuo Rong, on the other hand, seems to be using this chaos to amass wealth," Jia Xu said calmly. "Zuo Rong's forces are sizable, with over 10,000 soldiers and 3,000 horses. They've already ravaged several counties."

"The audacity of these scoundrels!" Liu Bei slammed the table in fury.

"Yun wishes to ease my lord's burden," Zhao Yun said as he stepped forward, his demeanor cold. The once-gentle Zhao Yun had grown increasingly fierce through constant combat. With one step forward, the other generals who had intended to take on the task withdrew.

"The White Horse Cavalry is swift and nimble. This task suits Zilong well. Bring me Zuo Rong's head," Liu Bei ordered coldly. Since witnessing the devastation in Xuzhou, Liu Bei, known for his benevolence, had shown a more authoritarian and fearsome side. He had no mercy for those who perpetrated such slaughter.

"Understood!" Zhao Yun bowed and swiftly left the office to prepare his troops for the assault on Zuo Rong.

"My lord, what follows is my conjecture, as I lack sufficient evidence," Jia Xu said after watching Zhao Yun depart.

"Speak," Liu Bei nodded.

Jia Xu detailed his analysis of Cao Bao's actions. After listening, Liu Bei's face darkened. "Wenhe, how confident are you in this assessment?"

"Seventy percent sure," Jia Xu said quietly.

"That's enough. I came to Xuzhou to kill, whether it's bandits posing as Cao's soldiers or those like Que Xuan and Zuo Rong who are using Cao's name to commit atrocities. They're all my targets. As for Cao Bao, even if there's only a ten percent chance he's involved, he deserves to die! Those who kill without cause must be killed!" Liu Bei's eyes were cold as he looked at Jia Xu, openly expressing a harsher stance than usual.

"That's how it should be. When the lives of hundreds of thousands of people are at stake, the burden of proof lies with the accused. In minor matters, we can afford to deliberate and investigate thoroughly, but in situations like this, we need swift and decisive action!" Chen Xi echoed Liu Bei's cold tone. He could not tolerate those who took advantage of the chaos.

"I suggest we settle the refugees where they are and begin rebuilding their homes," Chen Xi proposed, changing the subject to avoid dwelling on the more unpleasant topics.

"Isn't that a bit too harsh?" Liu Bei, hearing this, immediately softened, his previous sternness dissipating. To him, such measures went against his principles.

"It's the only way we can free ourselves up to deal with Cao Mengde. Compared to forces like Que Xuan and Zuo Rong, which we can easily crush, Cao Mengde is our true enemy. If we continue to be bogged down with the refugees, we won't be able to focus on confronting Cao Mengde unless we impose military rule," Chen Xi said firmly.

"My lord, please reconsider. Although Zichuan's proposal may seem harsh, it's close to the truth. If we don't organize these 300,000 displaced people, we'll be stuck in Donghai for weeks like before," Liu Ye added, standing up. The last two weeks had indeed been wasted, though he had admittedly hoped to wait and see if Liu Bei and Cao Cao would weaken each other.

"Lord Xuande, unlike Cao Mengde, who provides temporary relief, we're offering lasting aid. We need to ensure these people can continue living on their own after we leave. For Cao Mengde, setting up a few food stations suffices, but for us, we must consider their long-term survival," Li You sighed. Liu Bei's approach left Li You unsure of what to say, but he understood that this was Liu Bei's commitment to the people.

Chapter 365: How Can I Let You, Cao Cao, Get Away with This...

Liu Bei remained silent for a moment. "In that case, clarify this matter with Lord Tao and send Cao Bao's letter of questioning to Xiapi. Also, inform Lord Tao that I will not interfere with other affairs in Xuzhou. After defeating Cao Mengde, I will return to Taishan."

"Understood," Li You replied calmly.

"Then continue gathering supplies from Taishan, set up camps, and take in refugees. Build shelters centered around Tancheng. Yun Chang, Yi De, Xingba, Zijian, each of you will lead 3,000 troops to eliminate the bandits who are slaughtering the people of Xuzhou."

With Liu Bei's order given, he no longer worried whether this would provoke the local powers of Xuzhou.

"Understood." Guan Yu and the others stood up, saluted Liu Bei, and then left the county office of Tancheng to prepare their troops for the task of eliminating the bandits and gathering the refugees.

"Zichuan, do you think Cao Mengde realizes his mistake?" After only the strategists remained, Liu Bei, looking puzzled, asked the civil officials.

"I don't know, but given Cao Cao's character, he might stop once he's vented his anger. After all, he is a man of firm resolve and wouldn't kill for the sake of killing." Chen Xi lowered his head, uncertain of how to gauge Cao Cao.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple," Guo Jia, who had recently been closely watched, said. His alcohol was restricted, beautiful women were out of the question, and his supply of Wushi Powder had been confiscated. According to Guo Jia, he was living worse than a dog, but it was evident that his spirit had greatly improved.

"Tell us what you think. I also suspect there's something we're unaware of, but so far, Wenhe hasn't received any reports." Chen Xi looked at the now-thin yet sharp-eyed Guo Jia.

"We have accurate intelligence from Xuzhou. It's clear that Lord Tao intended to hand Xuzhou over to Cao Mengde, but after Cao Mengde's massacre, that plan is naturally void," Guo Jia said, coldly laughing.

"What's more important is that we can be sure Cao Mengde didn't know about Lord Tao's intentions. Otherwise, he could have just sent an envoy to question Tao Qian, and upon confrontation, given Tao Qian's current mindset, he would have willingly handed over Xuzhou. However, now, I'm confident that Cao Mengde has learned of this from another source, and it's accurate information." Guo Jia's face remained calm as he spoke. Though this was his conjecture, based on Cao Cao's current situation, it seemed highly probable.

Liu Ye seemed lost in thought. After a while, he stood up and said, "I might understand Cao Mengde's thinking now. Fengxiao is right. There's a high chance that Cao Mengde has learned of this, and what he's doing now is trying to salvage the situation. Given Cao Mengde's nature, even if he had vented his anger, he wouldn't be providing relief to the people; he'd likely just drive them away."

"Yes, disaster relief is too strange a move for Cao Mengde. It's not that we underestimate him, but given his temperament, he shouldn't be helping those he considered enemies. The logical move would have been to expel them," Jia Xu chimed in, then his expression darkened. Guo Jia and the other strategists, seeing Jia Xu's face, seemed to realize something, their expressions also becoming grim.

"What is it, Zichuan?" Liu Bei asked, puzzled, looking at his strategists before calling Chen Xi by name.

"Cao Mengde might be trying to pin this on us. If he indeed has evidence that Tao Qian intended to give him Xuzhou, then if Tao Qian passes away, we'll be at a disadvantage," Chen Xi said with a bitter smile. "Of course, this is just my guess, but given how little the people know, Cao Mengde's actions could easily obscure the truth. And as Wenhe's intelligence suggests, Cao Mengde is aware that someone has been stirring the pot."

"He wouldn't pin it on us unless we went to see Lord Tao and Tao handed Xuzhou to us, only to pass away shortly after." Guo Jia opened his fan, covering his cold smile. "It may seem unrealistic, but if we actually go to Xuzhou, it could very well happen. Whether it's Cao Cao or the local Xuzhou clans, they both have a strong interest in making it happen."

"Then we'll never be able to clear our names," Liu Ye said, exasperated. "If at that moment, Cao Mengde can produce solid evidence, and coupled with his current efforts to win over the people, we won't just be at a disadvantage; it will be a complete disaster. Until we understand how Cao Mengde got this information, it's best not to approach Lord Tao. Any misstep, and we'll be in deep trouble!"

"Who came up with such a devious plan?" Chen Xi frowned. "The lack of transparent information makes it difficult for the people to truly understand the situation. We're also forced to speculate on Cao

Mengde's actions in the massacre, as we have no evidence to prove how many people he killed. And to make matters worse, other forces were involved in the slaughter as well."

"Send an envoy to question Cao Mengde. Treat it as a declaration of war. Regardless, the displacement of the people of Xuzhou is indeed his doing. Whether he provides relief or not, it's just atonement. Although 'knowing one's mistakes and correcting them' is a virtue, it doesn't mean correcting them absolves the guilt. If that were the case, why would we need laws or armies?" Liu Bei decided.

It was clear that compared to the earlier fervor of wanting to eliminate Cao Cao, Liu Bei had calmed down significantly. In his mind, Cao Mengde might have participated in the massacre, but it was likely just to vent his rage. After all, in Liu Bei's memory, Cao Cao was still the same man who, under the walls of Hulao Pass, risked his life for the people and the emperor, pursuing Dong Zhuo.

"Very well, Lord Xuande is right. Send the envoy. Cao Mengde must have received news of our army's presence in Donghai, and there's no need to lose our composure over a moment of anger," Jia Wenhe agreed.

"Lord Xuande, before you send an envoy to question Cao Mengde, I think it's best to clarify one thing," Chen Xi said, somewhat troubled.

It seemed Liu Bei believed Cao Mengde had only killed a few hundred or a thousand people and was planning to question Cao Cao, expecting that if Cao Cao provided an explanation and took responsibility for the aftermath, the matter could be put to rest.

After all, Cao Cao's efforts in Yanzhou and other places had proven him to be a capable minister. Unlike Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu, who harbored ambitious intentions, Liu Bei's memories of Cao Cao were still of their mutual agreement under the walls of Hulao Pass to restore the Han dynasty. And given Cao Cao's current behavior, it seemed he had indeed recognized his mistakes, making Liu Bei soften considerably.

Liu Bei hoped that Cao Cao could achieve even greater feats and work alongside him to restore the Han dynasty. So he was willing to give Cao Cao some leeway.

As for the thousands of lives lost, Liu Bei could overlook them as long as Cao Cao provided proper arrangements for the survivors. After all, Cao Cao was avenging his father—a reason that could justify even killing. This excuse had been used for 400 years in a society that upheld filial piety.

Chapter 366: So-Called Kindred Spirits

"Zichuan, speak your mind," Liu Bei said with a smile.

"Cao Mengde has slaughtered at least a hundred thousand people, not just a thousand or two!" Chen Xi said coldly.

Although Chen Xi couldn't prove exactly how many people Cao Cao had killed, he had a good sense of the situation. Regardless of the exact number, Chen Xi planned to eliminate the major threat that Cao Cao posed. When he mentioned that it would take a hundred thousand to defeat Cao Cao, he was referring to the fact that even if Cao Cao managed to escape back to Yanzhou and allied with Yuan Shao, Liu Bei could still split his forces to hold off Yuan Shao and finish off Cao Cao!

Chen Xi had already prepared to eliminate Cao Cao and take over his forces, so he couldn't allow Cao Cao to deceive Liu Bei into thinking that his actions were merely a momentary lapse of anger. Letting such a dangerous enemy go was not Chen Xi's style. If he were to act against Cao Cao, it would be a decisive strike. Once Cao Cao was killed, even Yuan Shao wouldn't dare challenge Liu Bei due to his alliance with Gongsun Zan in Youzhou.

"What?!" Liu Bei's face turned ashen.

"Although I don't have enough evidence, the number of civilians Cao Mengde has killed cannot be less than this. Nearly 200,000 people have disappeared, and it's impossible that the likes of Que Xuan's 3,000 men, Zuo Rong's 10,000 men, and the scattered bandits who emerged later could account for such numbers. Furthermore, they acted later than Cao Cao!" Chen Xi said, his eyes flashing coldly.

This time, Cao Cao had to be dealt with. Since they had already come to Xuzhou, and with the moral high ground and the support of the people, it was necessary to eliminate Cao Cao. Such a righteous opportunity to strike against Cao Cao might not come again for years. Chen Xi had set the stage for this confrontation between Liu Bei and Cao Cao to become a one-on-one battle, free from outside interference.

Liu Bei had no allies, while Cao Cao still had Yuan Shao. But once the conflict escalated into a moral battle between good and evil, no one would dare intervene if Liu Bei ruthlessly eliminated Cao Cao, a capable minister with great achievements for the Han dynasty.

With Cao Cao gone, the biggest threat in the north would disappear. Although Yuan Shao was currently seen as resolute and determined, Chen Xi wasn't too concerned, having already laid his plans. However, Cao Cao, the historical overlord of the Central Plains, had to be dealt with before his ambitions fully manifested. Chen Xi had long been pondering how to eliminate Cao Cao.

Chen Xi wanted to deal with Cao Cao, but given the current situation in the world, it wasn't the right choice. Moreover, Chen Xi didn't have a valid reason to act against Cao Cao, especially since Liu Bei wouldn't allow it.

Whether Chen Xi admitted it or not, in the current state of the Han dynasty, only Cao Cao and Liu Bei were genuinely working to maintain the empire's rule, governing their territories as loyal ministers. Although Cao Cao was less fortunate than Liu Bei, his actions led Liu Bei to view him as a kindred spirit!

This was why, in later years, Liu Bei would withdraw Yu Jin, who was guarding Shanyang, back to Fenggao. Liu Bei believed that once Cao Cao broke away from Yuan Shao's alliance, he would make the same choices as Liu Bei—working to prosper his territories and restore the Han dynasty, eventually helping to unify the land under the Han banner.

As Liu Bei had predicted, after rising to power, Cao Cao focused on large-scale farming, improving his territory, creating more standardized laws, suppressing the nobility, and raising the living standards of the common people. Despite the constant natural disasters, Cao Cao persevered time and time again.

To Liu Bei, Cao Cao was like him—a loyal minister working to restore the Han dynasty. So, upon learning that Cao Cao was providing disaster relief in Xuzhou, executing bandits like Que Xuan who had slaughtered civilians, and eliminating forces pretending to be his own, Liu Bei couldn't help but think positively.

Perhaps it was because of his father's revenge, or maybe Cao Cao hadn't killed that many people. Maybe it was just a moment of anger, and he had done much for the Han dynasty. After all, who is without fault? If one can correct their mistakes, it is a great virtue.

With these thoughts, Liu Bei felt a sense of relief, and he began to find many reasons to excuse Cao Cao. His tone softened, and he no longer spoke of killing Cao Cao.

All of this stemmed from the impression that Cao Cao had left on Liu Bei back at Hulao Pass, when the two had talked about restoring the Han dynasty. That conversation, between two young men with the same ideals, made Liu Bei view Cao Cao as one of his own. As Cao Cao worked hard to rebuild Yanzhou afterward, Liu Bei saw him as a comrade-in-arms.

When the Yellow Turbans invaded Yanzhou, Liu Bei could have easily taken over the position of Governor of Yanzhou. When Cao Cao abandoned most of Yanzhou to gather his people in the west of the province, Liu Bei could have taken over the empty territories. But he chose not to!

Even during the time when the alliances of Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao were at odds, there remained a connection between Liu Bei and Cao Cao, known as the shared goal of "restoring the Han dynasty."

Especially when Liu Bei learned that Cao Cao, like him, was infuriated by Emperor Xian's decision to grant amnesty to Wang Yun, he knew that Cao Cao, like him, was loyal to the Han dynasty. Only a true loyalist would feel the sting of betrayal from the emperor.

With so many shared values, Liu Bei naturally felt a deep bond with Cao Cao. This was why he couldn't tolerate Cao Cao's massacre—it was as if a longtime comrade had suddenly betrayed him, something Liu Bei couldn't bear.

Chen Xi's goal now was to show Liu Bei what he wanted him to see. While Chen Xi was dissatisfied with many aspects of Cao Cao, he couldn't deny that the man was a true hero!

In many ways, Cao Cao's actions mirrored Liu Bei's. Both men respected and promoted talented individuals, supported the common people, and shared the ideal of restoring the Han dynasty. They were so alike that they could easily have become allies supporting each other.

However, this time, Cao Cao had made a mistake. If not for this, Chen Xi wouldn't have had a reason to act against him. If Yuan Shao were to be defeated and Cao Cao maintained his current behavior, Liu Bei might not even seek to deal with him. Instead, Liu Bei might help Cao Cao achieve his ambition of becoming the Grand General of the West—a matter of positioning. Liu Bei saw himself and Cao Cao as fellow righteous men striving to restore the Han dynasty!

In Liu Bei's eyes, Cao Cao was someone he could coexist with, and this realization infuriated Chen Xi. Cao Cao would change. Despite his current efforts to serve the Han dynasty and the people, history had proven that Cao Cao would eventually lose faith in the Han. He would inevitably become a great enemy!

Rather than allowing this future threat to grow, Chen Xi believed it was better to seize this opportunity to eliminate Cao Cao. Liu Bei had the strength to do so; all that was needed was the right opportunity. Now that the chance had arrived, Chen Xi didn't hesitate to fan the flames. Even if it meant forgoing the summer planting in Qingzhou, he was determined to take this opportunity to eliminate Cao Cao!

Chapter 367: The Fundamental Problem!

Originally, after Chen Xi revealed the truth about the Xuzhou massacre, given Liu Bei's usual concern for the people, it seemed inevitable that Liu Bei would pursue a relentless conflict with Cao Cao. Unfortunately, while Chen Xi predicted the beginning correctly, he didn't anticipate how the situation would unfold. As for the outcome of destroying Cao Cao, things were veering off course, and Chen Xi couldn't allow that to happen!

Even Chen Xi had to admit that Cao Cao's public relations strategy was a brilliant move, akin to what he had previously instructed Liu Yan to do. However, although Chen Lin and Mi Heng's writings were sharp and persuasive, they struggled to provide solid proof that Cao Cao had indeed killed so many people. All they could do was spread the message that Cao Cao had carried out a massacre, hoping to resonate with other warlords across the land.

The problem was that the dead couldn't testify, which blocked any possibility of an accurate count. As long as Cao Cao insisted that he only slaughtered one village and that the rest was done by other forces, and as long as he had concrete evidence to back his claims, the warlords might just let this matter slide, even if they didn't completely absolve him.

Moreover, the letters from Chen Lin and Mi Heng could be dismissed as nothing more than enemies throwing dirt at each other, making the truth harder to discern.

Of course, these weren't the most important issues. For Chen Xi, even if Cao Cao managed to clear his name, if Liu Bei was determined to eliminate Cao Cao, it was only a matter of time. Currently, the only warlords in the Central Plains capable of facing Liu Bei in battle were Yuan Shao and the remnants of Dong Zhuo's forces. Cao Cao simply couldn't afford to drag this out!

The biggest issue now was that Liu Bei was wavering. In fact, all of Liu Bei's advisors, except for Chen Xi, were not enthusiastic about the idea of eliminating Cao Cao. This was why Jia Xu's analysis had clearly shown bias in favor of Cao Cao—Jia Xu and the others didn't want to fight Cao Cao because it wasn't a profitable venture!

To Jia Xu and the others, Cao Cao was indeed a threat, but the biggest threat to Liu Bei's forces was Yuan Shao in Jizhou. They didn't want to jeopardize their own strategic position, nor did they want to push a potential ally like Cao Cao into Yuan Shao's arms.

Given these considerations, even though it was clear to everyone that Cao Cao's hands were stained with blood, Jia Xu had subtly steered the conversation toward figures like Que Xuan, diverting attention from Cao Cao. The others agreed as well; while the exact death toll was impossible to calculate, they all had a rough estimate in mind.

But the situation now was that none of them—Jia Xu, Guo Jia, Liu Ye, or Li You—were willing to give an estimate. Instead, they focused on Cao Cao's relief efforts and his suppression of those who slaughtered civilians, which rekindled Liu Bei's hope that Cao Cao might indeed share his ideals.

If Chen Xi didn't know Cao Cao's true nature from history, he might also think that Jia Xu and the others' reasoning made sense. But knowing what he did about Cao Cao, Chen Xi was determined not to let this opportunity slip by. Allowing a tiger to return to the mountains was absolutely unacceptable.

"Traitor Cao!" Liu Bei, now fully alert, suddenly became furious, his eyes turning bloodshot. "Jia Wenhe, tell me the truth!"

Liu Bei's icy gaze locked onto Jia Xu. "Tell me everything!"

"What I said earlier was indeed the truth. As for the number of people Cao's army killed, there is no actual data—it cannot be accurately counted," Jia Xu replied calmly, unfazed by Liu Bei's anger.

Liu Bei's face turned ashen. He wasn't a fool and quickly realized the implications of Jia Xu's words. No accurate count—a clever evasion!

With a single blow, Liu Bei shattered the table before him and stormed out.

After Liu Bei left, the entire room fell silent. After a while, Chen Xi cleared his throat. "Prepare yourselves. We need to eliminate Cao Mengde."

"Zichuan, what are you trying to accomplish?" Liu Ye sighed. The others in the room also looked at Chen Xi with bitter expressions. From their perspective, the most important thing to do in Xuzhou was not to waste their forces on killing Cao Cao but to build up their reputation, so they could smoothly take control of Xuzhou later.

"I'm going to eliminate Cao Mengde. He has done something unforgivable," Chen Xi said calmly.

"Zichuan..." Liu Ye started to say something but stopped. He had remained silent earlier, but his mind was clear as a mirror. He understood everything perfectly, and he agreed with Jia Xu and the others' conservative approach. This wasn't the time for a full-scale battle with Cao Cao, which would only give Yuan Shao more confidence.

"This isn't a small matter—it's already big enough. Soon, this will be known throughout the land. Whether people believe it or not, the Xuzhou Massacre will spread across the world. This is the best chance to eliminate Cao Cao. If we miss this opportunity, who knows when another will come?" Chen Xi said firmly. He couldn't think of a better time to eliminate Cao Cao than now, especially under the guise of a righteous cause!

"Zichuan, give me a reason," Guo Jia said concisely.

"Cao Mengde's potential far exceeds Yuan Benchu's. I don't want to create a future enemy who will cost us even more effort to deal with," Chen Xi replied, looking at the others. "Honestly, how would you evaluate Cao Mengde if this Xuzhou incident hadn't happened?"

The others exchanged glances and silently nodded. They couldn't deny that Cao Cao was indeed a formidable ruler.

"But that's not the reason you want to kill him here and now. I've looked closely at Cao Mengde's troops, and they're no pushovers. If we go to war, although we might eventually win by dragging it out, there are too many variables. This whole business with the proclamation has stirred things up so much

that Yuan Benchu now has the justification to intervene," Jia Xu said with dissatisfaction. To him, potential had nothing to do with reality—their biggest enemy right now was Yuan Benchu!

"Exactly. The waters have already been muddied. Although our proclamation will reach everyone, once the fighting starts, its impact will be greatly diminished. This righteous condemnation will become a joke. To other factions, it will look like we're just smearing our enemy," Guo Jia agreed. The biggest problem lay precisely in that—the proclamation would lose its power once the fighting began.

"...I was careless. Let's put the proclamation aside for now. Cao Mengde's actions have muddied the waters, giving Yuan Shao a legitimate reason to intervene. We're no longer at the moral high ground. Even with Tao Gongzu's testimony, we probably won't gain much from it," Chen Xi said, rubbing his temples, his expression dark. The testimonies that Cao Cao could present were a significant hurdle.

"What's more important is that attacking Cao Mengde has no real value. It would only benefit Yuan Benchu. Even if we heavily damage Cao's forces, eliminating Cao Cao completely might be impossible. Yuan Benchu would be more than happy to step in. Essentially, we'd be pushing a potential ally into Yuan Benchu's arms," Li You said with a sigh. "The biggest problem now is that no warlord, including Tao Gongzu, can prove how many people Cao Cao actually killed."

"We can prove it!" Chen Xi sneered. "Isn't Cao Mengde showing us how it's done? Can he present evidence that he didn't kill those tens of thousands?"

Chapter 368: Destroying Cao Cao

Chen Xi's words left everyone speechless. Indeed, they couldn't prove it, but neither could Cao Cao. This whole situation was turning into a joke—a mere excuse to launch an attack!

"What are we afraid of? Do we think we will lose?" Chen Xi sneered.

"Losing isn't the issue. It's that there's no value in this," Jia Xu sighed. "I don't recommend exhausting our forces over this. We should focus on smoothly taking over Xuzhou with minimal cost. Only when we control Xuzhou, with Qingzhou and Mount Tai in hand, can we truly be considered a dominant force."

"Cao Mengde is too dangerous. If we let this chance slip by, I'm not sure if we'll get another. So let's vote—raise your hand if you don't want to deal with Cao Mengde now," Chen Xi said, glancing at the

others. "But first, let me say this: Once Lord Liu learns the truth about Cao Mengde's massacre, it's a certainty that they will be at each other's throats until one of them is dead."

Not a single hand was raised. Chen Xi let out a long breath. "In that case, let's join forces and end Cao Mengde here in Xuzhou. I'll make sure this Xuzhou plain becomes his grave!"

"Let me handle it this time. Ordinary strategies won't work here," Jia Xu sighed. Although he didn't want to fight Cao Cao, it was better for him to handle this than to let Liu Bei lead an enraged army. "Although I really don't want to face off against Cao Cao, I suspect I'm not the only one who feels that way, except for you, Zichuan."

Chen Xi noticed a strange look in Jia Xu's eyes. Was something off today?

"Don't look at me like that. I've left a bit of a bad impression on Lord Liu recently, so let me take care of this. I need to prove that I am indeed looking out for him," Jia Xu said helplessly.

"Alright, I'll leave it to you, Wenhe," Chen Xi nodded. "Within three days, the proclamation by Chen Gongzang and Mi Zhengping will reach Xuzhou. That will mark the beginning of our righteous battle against Cao Cao, where we stand on the moral high ground, condemning him!"

"Alright, alright, a righteous battle," Guo Jia said with a hint of sarcasm. "As long as we win, it'll be a righteous battle. Just find a way to cut down Cao Mengde for good. If you don't kill a snake, it will come back to bite you—solve the problem in one strike."

"Liu Bei won't care about the details. He will understand that we are doing this for his own good. But after this battle with Cao Cao, prepare to face Yuan Shao in Qingzhou," Liu Ye sighed. "Cao Cao's personality is full of contradictions. When you find the right opportunity, make sure to kill him in one strike."

"Wenhe, if you need help, I'm available," Li You offered. "Cao Mengde's advisors, Xun Gongda and Cheng Zhongde, are no easy opponents."

"Don't worry, I know how to handle it," Jia Xu nodded. "Since we've decided to deal with Cao Mengde in Xuzhou, Zichuan, mobilize the field troops to bolster our ranks. Let them see some blood. Since we need

to prepare for the battle in Qingzhou afterward and to take over Xuzhou, let's solve all the problems at once."

"My original plan was to mobilize 100,000 troops so we'd have enough to handle anything that comes up. Looking back, you all never intended to deal with the massacre, did you? You just wanted to put on a show! Five thousand troops were meant to handle the local clans, not Cao Mengde! You all planned this behind my back!" Chen Xi grumbled. "No wonder you all agreed to deploy troops but never mentioned how to resolve the situation!"

"Five thousand troops are more than enough. If we handle things well, they'll suffice," Liu Ye said, dissatisfied. "Mobilizing 100,000 is excessive. Besides, as you said, none of us planned on taking down Cao Mengde. The five thousand troops were just meant to intimidate—we never intended to fight."

"No wonder Lord Liu's intentions changed. Even if he had goodwill toward Cao Mengde, without your manipulation, we would have been fighting by now. You used dealing with the refugees as an excuse to sit back and watch. The reason Lord Liu is still tied up here is all your doing!" Chen Xi accused Liu Ye, frustrated that the others had conspired to follow a unified strategy without telling him.

Seeing Chen Xi's gaze, Liu Ye voiced what he'd wanted to say all along. "What value is there in fighting Cao Cao? Yanzhou? It's a battleground on all sides. If we take it, once we go to war with Yuan Shao, we'll have too many enemies to defend against. Expanding our territory could even reduce the forces we can mobilize!"

"Five thousand troops are enough to intimidate Cao Mengde. We could secure Xuzhou without much effort. With Xuzhou backed by Yuzhou, we only need good generals to guard Xiapi and Guangling, and we can easily deal with Yuan Gonglu. Our power will soar without any real loss. There's no need to fight Cao Mengde," Guo Jia said, also puzzled by Chen Xi's insistence.

"What's the point of all this slander? What does it mean to us, who already control Qingzhou, Xuzhou, and Mount Tai? Do you think Sun Gongyou and Mi Zizhong haven't been in contact with the local forces in Xuzhou? Chen Yuanlong is on our side! We were just stalling Lord Liu, giving him time to cool down!" Li You added with a bitter smile. "Fighting Cao Cao offers no benefit. Taking over Yanzhou after securing Jizhou, Bingzhou, and Youzhou, making Yanzhou the front line, is what's in our best interest! Zichuan, what are you thinking?"

Chen Xi struggled to explain. After a moment, he looked up and said, "It's hard to put into words, but Cao Cao is truly a formidable enemy for us, and compared to Yuan Benchu, Cao Mengde is far too unpredictable!"

"Alright, I believe you," Liu Ye and the others sighed. "You are known for planning ahead. Maybe you've seen something we haven't. If that's the case, then let's eliminate Cao Mengde. We'll hand Yanzhou over to Lu Bu and let him and Yuan Shao fight over Bingzhou. That way, we can keep Yuan Shao occupied. As for the reason to take down Cao Cao, let it be the massacre of 100,000 people!"

"Only a foolish move would make the world think that Lord Liu's actions are driven by rage. So, let's go to war. If we take down Cao Cao here, it will be one less warlord to worry about!" Li You said with resignation.

"Yuan Gonglu has likely already sent troops to Nanyang. Cao Mengde's forces in the rear are dwindling. Once Lu Bu cuts off his retreat and his supply lines are severed, our victory is inevitable," Chen Xi said, pointing to Nanyang and Yanzhou. Defeating Cao Cao would be a decisive move.

"Too bad others will reap the benefits," Guo Jia quipped. Since they'd decided to take down Cao Cao, there was nothing more to say.

"The greatest benefit is securing Xuzhou," Chen Xi sighed.

If Chen Xi didn't know Cao Cao's character, he would have agreed that there was no need to fight him. With Yanzhou under attack, even if Cao Cao still coveted Xuzhou, he would have no choice but to retreat to Yanzhou. They could have sent a small force to Xuzhou and gained control without a bloody battle.

"Who says there are no benefits? If Lu Bu takes over Yanzhou, we'll gain a natural ally. Compared to the ambiguous relationship between Cao Mengde and Yuan Benchu, Lu Bu is much easier to manage," Jia Xu said, having come to terms with the situation. If they were going to destroy Cao Cao, they might as well focus on the positives.

"True. Lu Bu's generals Gao Shun and Zhang Liao are among the best of the best. His other commanders are also fierce warriors, and they are the talents we need," Li You added, understanding the implications.

"Thinking about it that way, I feel much better. Having a more manageable neighbor will make things much easier for us, especially since we'll share a common enemy. The best part is that Lu Bu isn't exactly known for his intelligence," Guo Jia laughed heartily.

The others joined in the laughter, smoothing over the previous strategic disagreements. They united once more, ready to eliminate Cao Cao in Xuzhou.

Meanwhile, in Pengcheng, Cao Cao had already clashed with Cao Bao several times. The elite Danyang soldiers had prevented Cao Cao from gaining any advantage, and for some reason, Cao Cao hadn't recalled his forces from disaster relief efforts, relying solely on his core troops to deal with Cao Bao. This only made Cao Bao more confident with each battle.

Buoyed by his recent victories, Cao Bao's confidence soared. He finally decided not to continue defending the city and instead planned to lead his entire army to meet Cao Cao in a decisive battle outside Pengcheng. He was convinced that this one battle would bring him glory, and with it, the position of Governor of Xuzhou!

P.S.: I'm just curious—how come none of you noticed that getting Xuzhou without a fight isn't as important as eliminating Cao Cao? I've written so many strange details, and no one seems to have caught on. Not a single advisor spoke up during the troop deployment, and somehow, our 100,000-strong army mysteriously shrank by half. What's even more puzzling is that the remaining 50,000 troops are now focused on relief efforts rather than combat—how can this happen during a war?

For us, Cao Cao is indeed an important figure, but considering the situation in this story, take a look at Yanzhou on the map. Calculate how many troops it would take to defend it, and see who our potential enemies are. Then, evaluate the situation in Xuzhou and think about which side has more strategic value for top-tier advisors like Guo Jia.

Chapter 369: The Strategy for a Lethal Strike

After watching Liu Ye and the others leave, Chen Xi let out a long sigh of relief. The biggest strength of this group was their wisdom and strategy, but precisely because they were so intelligent, their perspectives and thinking wouldn't simply follow behind Chen Xi as yes-men. They each had their own minds, and every one of them was capable of overseeing an entire region.

Chen Xi thought about it with some helplessness.

Whether it was Guo Jia's nature, Jia Xu's cautiousness, Liu Ye's ability to speak differently to different people, Lu Su's geniality, or Li You's seasoned pragmatism, they all led to the same outcome—none of them would offer straightforward advice.

For instance, this time, not a single one of them directly advised Liu Bei against attacking Cao Cao, but it ended up like this. If it weren't for Chen Xi, the plan to attack Cao Cao would have already been shelved, left to be handled by people like Chen Gong, Lu Bu, Li Jue, and Yuan Shu.

Chen Xi could guarantee that Jia Xu and the others had likely already made arrangements. He couldn't be sure about Li Jue, but Lu Bu and Yuan Shu would definitely be enough to make Cao Cao experience the highs and lows of life in a very unpleasant way.

This group had too many ways to subtly change Liu Bei's mind without him even noticing. None of them would ever make a direct appeal; instead, they would all find ways to subtly steer Liu Bei back onto the right path without openly confronting him.

Chen Xi thought about their traits but still couldn't think of anyone who fit these characteristics.

Meanwhile, Jia Xu studied the map, comparing the forces of Cao Cao and Liu Bei, and quickly devised an overall strategy. "However, if things go slightly awry, it could lead to disaster. Will the lord approve of this plan?"

With that in mind, Jia Xu took the map to Liu Bei. "My lord."

"Wenhe, do you have important matters to discuss at this late hour?" Liu Bei closed the Analects he was reading and looked at Jia Xu. Initially, Liu Bei had been furious when he realized his advisors had concealed and guided him, but after Chen Xi had laid out the entire situation, his anger had subsided. He understood that Jia Xu's plans, though sometimes cold, were ultimately for the sake of his greater ambition.

"My lord, please look here." Jia Xu spread the map on the table and pointed to Pengcheng, where the Ji and Yellow Rivers intersected, outlining his strategy.

Liu Bei barely hesitated before nodding. "Let's proceed as you suggest. I trust Zhongkang will ensure my safety."

"Rest assured, my lord. Xu Chu will protect you," Xu Chu's booming voice echoed into the tent.

"In that case, I entrust this matter to you, Wenhe," Liu Bei said with a hearty laugh. "I've faced far more dangerous situations during the Yellow Turban Rebellion. With Zhongkang and Anguo guarding me, what is there to fear? Besides, I have complete faith in your wisdom, Wenhe—Cao Cao is sure to lose!"

"I am humbled," Jia Xu replied, bowing his head. As long as Liu Bei maintained his courage, the odds of decisively ending Cao Cao were about 90 percent.

"No need for such humility. Wenhe, in the future, feel free to speak your mind about any strategy, even if it goes against my preferences. You don't need to worry about being punished for differing opinions. If I'm wrong, I will admit my mistake, even if someone scolds me to my face. So, don't hesitate to present your plans," Liu Bei sighed, noting that Chen Xi had made him aware of the temperaments of his advisors.

"My lord's broad-mindedness is beyond reproach. It is we who have judged you with a small-minded perspective," Jia Xu replied, still bowing his head.

"Well then, you can accompany me on this campaign. Zichuan is more skilled in civil administration, and while he's capable in military affairs, there are tens of thousands of civilians who need resettling," Liu Bei said, realizing that continuing to press Jia Xu wouldn't do much good.

"Rest assured, my lord," Jia Xu replied.

On the other side, Cao Cao was also in consultation with Xun You and Cheng Yu about how to deal with Cao Bao the next day. For Cao Cao, the elite nature of the Danyang soldiers had piqued his interest, which was why he had repeatedly feigned weakness.

"My lord, to defeat the elite Danyang troops, the best strategy isn't to defeat them ourselves but to have them defeat themselves," Xun You said in his usual wooden tone.

"Gongda is right. Liu Xuande's proclamations have spread across the land. Despite our earlier actions, we have already lost the moral high ground. This is partly because Yuan Benchu has suppressed Chen Gongzang's proclamation, but even so, Mi Zhengping's document is still difficult to handle," Cheng Yu said with a headache. "Liu Xuande's battle declarations express his fury vividly. We can't avoid this conflict with Mount Tai."

Although Cheng Yu and others didn't look down on scholars who were adept at writing, they hadn't placed them on a high pedestal either. However, after reading Mi Heng's proclamation, which could incite fury and rage, Cheng Yu realized that everything had its place and time.

Having witnessed Mi Heng's proclamation firsthand, Xun You even felt a tinge of gratitude towards Yuan Shao. If Yuan Shao hadn't suppressed Chen Lin's proclamation, Cao Cao's reputation would have been utterly ruined by now.

The most terrifying thing about Chen Lin's proclamation was that it didn't contain a single insult, fully displaying the elegance of a scholar. If it were to spread, many bored nobles would scrutinize every detail of what Cao Cao had done in Xuzhou.

In that case, the massacre of Xuzhou could no longer be swept under the rug, as these nobles weren't fools. They might not be able to calculate the exact number of people killed, but they could definitely produce an estimate.

As for Mi Heng's venomous proclamation, though it could infuriate, many nobles saw it as mere mudslinging between enemies.

Chapter 370: The Plan to Eliminate Cao Bao

"Liu Xuande is a hero, unwavering in his ideals despite wealth and power. Unlike what you all initially thought, I recognized long ago that Liu Xuande came for me. In his mind, killing me is more important than taking Xuzhou. Even though some of his subordinates might help cover up the Xuzhou massacre, once Liu Xuande learns the truth..." A bitter smile appeared on Cao Cao's face.

Cao Cao knew he had gone too far this time. If Liu Bei discovered the truth, given his benevolence towards the people, a battle to the death would be inevitable. Thus, Cao Cao had already prepared for a confrontation with Liu Bei and even intended to use Liu Bei's anger to seize victory.

“Lord, let us not dwell on this matter for now. We should first deal with the Danyang soldiers. Once we break Cao Bao’s forces, Xuzhou will be defenseless for a while,” Cheng Yu said calmly.

“The Danyang veterans are indeed formidable, a remnant of Tao Qian's forces from his campaigns in Xiliang. Their strength is undeniable. However, with Liu Bei in the background, we should avoid direct attacks on Cao Bao. Although Cao Bao lacks military knowledge, the battle-hardened Danyang soldiers, even without command, can rely on their experience to unleash tremendous power,” Xun You added, frowning slightly.

The most troublesome aspect of elite soldiers is their extensive combat experience. Even without orders, they know how to act according to the situation on the battlefield, adjusting their actions based on the circumstances without needing commands.

As Xun You spoke, a glint of brilliance flashed in his eyes, though his expression quickly returned to its usual stoic appearance.

“This is indeed a difficult matter. If we could capture such a large number of elite veterans, it would greatly bolster our forces in Yanzhou,” Cao Cao said enviously.

More than thirty thousand veterans, half of whom had fought in the Xiliang campaigns under Tao Qian, while the rest had also seen combat in various battles. If such a force could be incorporated into his army, it would be a tremendous boost for Cao Cao, who was short on seasoned troops.

“The Danyang soldiers are essentially mercenaries. If we capture them, we can integrate them into our ranks,” Cheng Yu agreed.

However, Cheng Yu couldn't help but sigh as he thought of the Danyang veterans' combat prowess. “Cao Bao may lack talent and virtue, but even without him, the Danyang veterans—guided by their centurions, captains, and sergeants—wouldn't be easily defeated. They’ve experienced too many battles; they know what to do even without orders.”

“I believe that having Cao Bao in command is precisely why we can win this battle easily,” Xun You, who had been silent until now, finally spoke.

“Does Gongda have a brilliant strategy?” Cao Cao asked, overjoyed.

“The reason the Danyang veterans are known for their discipline is that, despite being mercenaries, they strictly follow orders,” Xun You said, his expression blank. “For an effective commander, it’s enough to trust in the Danyang soldiers’ combat abilities and issue orders at the right time. But with Cao Bao...”

“What a brilliant plan!” Cheng Yu quickly grasped Xun You's intent, clapping his hands in laughter.

Cao Cao, after pondering briefly, also understood Xun You's meaning, and a smile spread across his face. By constantly forcing Cao Bao to issue orders, the Danyang soldiers would eventually fall into disarray due to Cao Bao's lack of military knowledge.

“In that case, we don't need to recall Yuanrang and Miaocai just yet. Each time a new reinforcement arrives, it will further disrupt the Danyang soldiers' orders. Eventually, chaos will ensue, and defeating them will be a breeze,” Cao Cao said, now eagerly anticipating the prospect of capturing the Danyang veterans.

As for whether Cao Bao would issue misguided orders, Cao Cao was certain that he would. People inexperienced in battle often made that mistake, especially when they couldn't accurately assess the battlefield.

This would lead to a disconnect between reality and perception, as well as a disconnect between the commander and his troops. Situations that seemed dangerous to the commander might not actually be so, and vice versa, leading to misjudgments. After several such incidents, chaos would be inevitable.

“We need to choose the right battlefield. If we send a challenge to battle, the recently victorious Cao Bao will likely accept it. And to show his magnanimity, he’ll agree to fight at the location of our choosing. So, let’s pick a place suitable for large-scale combat,” Cheng Yu said, now focused on the map. Their goal was to expand their forces, not to kill as many enemies as possible.

“Here,” Xun You pointed to a spot on the map with his slender finger. “Treating prisoners of war humanely is also a virtue for a lord. Promising ‘no killing of those who surrender’ can help us wash away the negative impact of the past. After holding the Danyang soldiers for ten days, we can use the wealth we've gathered to persuade them.”

Both Cheng Yu and Cao Cao looked at the plain where the Yishui and Yellow Rivers met and nodded. The area was ideal for a large-scale battle. The ice was beginning to thin; it might support a few people crossing, but definitely not tens of thousands.

"In that case, let's do it. I don't believe Cao Bao has the ability to lead the Danyang soldiers into a back-against-the-wall situation," Cao Cao said, laughing heartily.

"If it weren't for Cao Bao, there might be a chance. But with him in charge, it's impossible. Cao Bao is overly ambitious but lacks the talent. When the situation turns against him, he'll undoubtedly flee, giving us an opportunity," Cheng Yu added with a smile.

Cao Cao quickly wrote a letter challenging Cao Bao to battle and sent it to Pengcheng, awaiting Cao Bao's response.

That very day, Cao Bao's reply arrived, unaltered and even suggesting that if Cao Cao was dissatisfied with the chosen battlefield, they could select another, as he wouldn't mind.

"So confident," Cheng Yu laughed after reading the letter. "This battle will end Xuzhou's resistance. Cao Bao truly lives up to his name!"

"Gongda, you don't seem very excited," Cao Cao remarked, writing orders to the Xiahou brothers while contemplating the impact of defeating Cao Bao.

"I'm considering what Liu Xuande's attack style will be like, given his temperament," Xun You replied calmly.

"Given Liu Xuande's benevolence, once he learns the truth, he'll likely want to tear me apart. Based on our previous encounters, there's a good chance he'll recklessly launch an attack against me," Cao Cao said without hesitation.

Xun You quietly calculated, unaware that Jia Xu was counting on just that.