

Mythical 371

Chapter 371: Calling Him Incompetent Would Be an Insult to the Incompetent!

By the time Liu Bei received the battle report, Cao Bao had already been killed, and over ninety percent of the thirty thousand elite Danyang soldiers had been captured by Cao Cao, thanks to the advantageous terrain.

Reading the situation detailed in the report, Liu Bei felt that calling Cao Bao incompetent would be an insult to incompetence itself. Thirty thousand elite Danyang soldiers, Tao Qian's prized assets, had been utterly wasted, along with Cao Bao's own life.

On that fateful day, Cao Bao led his entire force of thirty thousand elite soldiers out of their stronghold, completely confident after a string of victories. In his arrogance, he had no idea who he was anymore, holding nothing but disdain for Cao Cao. He left Pengcheng completely undefended, and even when Cao Cao sent five hundred men to occupy it, Cao Bao remained oblivious.

When he arrived at the confluence of the Yishui and Yellow Rivers, he found no sign of Cao Cao's main army. Instead of being cautious, he was overjoyed, thinking that Cao Cao was too afraid to face him. He sent messengers urging Cao Cao to come to battle.

As expected, Cao Cao sent a reply that only made Cao Bao laugh even harder. He assumed Cao Cao feared his military prowess and, feeling emboldened, sent another taunting letter. However, Cao Cao, who had been severely mocked by Mi Heng recently, found Cao Bao's insults laughable. Cao Cao decided to continue stalling.

Under the long and increasingly hot sunshine of the second lunar month, even the elite Danyang soldiers began to feel restless. The prolonged wait caused a creeping sense of unease, a rare feeling for such seasoned veterans.

Meanwhile, on the other side, Cao Cao, Xun You, Cheng Yu, Cao Hong, and Cao Xiu were leisurely roasting buns over a fire, occasionally glancing at the sun to check the time.

Cheng Yu couldn't help but smile wryly at Cao Cao and Xun You. He lacked their patience; Cao Cao was intentionally stalling, knowing that every incense stick's worth of time they delayed would grant them a

greater advantage. Xun You, on the other hand, was waiting for the sun to sink lower, making the sunlight more blinding and giving them another edge.

For Cao Cao and Xun You, the exact time of battle didn't matter. What did matter was ensuring victory over Cao Bao. If they succeeded, this strategy would be hailed as brilliant. If they failed, it wouldn't have mattered when they arrived on the battlefield.

"Lord, isn't this a bit improper?" Cheng Yu asked, his nerves fraying. "The time has long passed, and if others think we're afraid to fight, it won't look good. We should march out immediately."

Cao Cao casually plucked a roasted bun from a spear and handed it to Cheng Yu. "Try this. It's one of Chen Zichuan's inventions—long-lasting and with a decent taste."

Cheng Yu, caught between amusement and exasperation, took the bun and quickly ate it. As he was about to argue further, Xun You intervened. "The lord didn't specify a time for the battle. If anyone asks, we'll simply say we never agreed on a specific hour. Let them wait until the timing is perfect for us."

"Come on, let's finish eating and then stretch a bit. Have the vanguard drink three bowls of wine each. Record their names, and whether they live or die, pay them five times their due," Cao Cao declared with a generous air.

"Understood," a subordinate noted down Cao Cao's orders.

So, the Cao army not only had breakfast but also lunch. After eating and digesting, each soldier was given a bowl of wine, while the death squads received three bowls. Only after all this was done did Cao Cao order the army to march.

Cao Bao, who had been driven to madness by the long wait, finally saw Cao Cao's forces approaching. He rode out in his chariot and shouted at Cao Cao, "Cao Mengde, how dare you be so rude, arriving so late!"

"I never specified a battle time. Why did you arrive so early?" Cao Cao sneered in response.

“Fine, fine, well played, Cao Mengde! No wonder your father was killed by Zhang Kai and thrown into a dung pit—you deserved it!” Cao Bao spat, pulling out the challenge letter and confirming that indeed, no time was mentioned. Enraged, he cursed, oblivious to the consequences.

Cao Cao froze, then his hair and beard bristled with fury. “Cao Bao, how dare you mock my father’s death! Cao Xiu, Cao Hong, Lu Qian—seize Cao Bao! I will use his blood to honor my father!”

Cao Cao wasn’t foolish. Though he initially reacted in anger, he quickly realized why he had never found his father’s body. In an instant, he connected the dots, realizing Cao Bao had been involved.

Cao Bao was also momentarily stunned. He had blurted out the insult in a fit of rage, never expecting Cao Cao to piece things together so quickly. His face darkened, and he stopped responding, vowing to kill Cao Cao here and now; otherwise, his dream of becoming the Governor of Xuzhou would be forever shattered.

“Charge!” Cao Bao pulled back his forces and immediately ordered a full assault, driving his half-starved Danyang veterans into battle.

“Kill them!” Cao Xiu roared, leading three thousand infantry in a direct assault on Cao Bao’s left flank. The red clouds of battle qi from his troops clashed violently with the crimson aura of the Danyang veterans, while arrows rained down mercilessly on both sides.

“Zilian, lead the death squads and capture Cao Bao alive!” Cao Cao ordered, his eyes bloodshot. At this point, he no longer cared about saving the death squads for a final blow—he wanted Cao Bao alive.

Cao Hong ripped off his helmet and let out a deafening roar, leading a thousand death squads straight towards the center of the Danyang soldiers where Cao Bao was positioned. He decapitated a centurion in one strike, and his death squad, undeterred, charged into the enemy’s spear formation, breaking through with suicidal determination and advancing toward Cao Bao.

“Hurry! Crush their left flank! Han Qi, stop Cao Xiu!” Cao Bao panicked as he saw his left flank collapsing under Cao Xiu’s assault. His frantic and misguided commands only further disorganized his troops. When he noticed several bolts from a ballista pierce the ground just ahead of him, killing several soldiers, his fear escalated, and he ordered a retreat.

“Destroy those ballistae!” Cao Bao yelled, retreating with his command banner while still trying to direct his forces. The once tightly coordinated Danyang soldiers began to lose their cohesion, but their battle-hardened instincts allowed them to hold their formation against the Cao army’s onslaught.

“Retreat! Can’t you see the enemy is almost upon us?” Cao Bao screamed at the military officer driving his chariot. “Retreat! Have the left and right flanks close in on the center and eliminate the Cao forces that have broken through!”

The officer, Xu Sheng, looked at Cao Bao with disdain but didn’t retreat. Bowing slightly, he said, “General, I advise against retreating. The enemy likely allowed us to push in, planning to divide and conquer. If we continue retreating, it will destabilize our forces.”

“Shut up! Who’s the commander here, you or me?” Cao Bao, seeing that Cao Hong was now less than 150 paces away, could no longer hold back his fear. That was close enough for Cao Hong to shoot him with a bow, even if his internal energy was suppressed.

As Cao Hong drew his bow, Cao Bao could no longer stand it. He kicked Xu Sheng off the chariot and took the reins himself, driving the chariot away from Cao Hong to increase the distance.

Thud! A soft sound echoed as one of Cao Bao’s personal guards was shot down beside him. Cao Bao’s screams grew louder as he frantically whipped the horses, fleeing toward the rear in a panic.

Chapter 372: A Prospect of Danyang Elites and Xiliang Cavalry

As Cao Bao retreated with the command banner, the Danyang elite soldiers quickly fell into disarray. However, thanks to their rigorous training and numerical advantage, they managed to stabilize their formation despite being caught off guard by Cao Cao’s onslaught, although their morale took a significant hit.

“These Danyang elites truly live up to their reputation as one of the most formidable large-scale forces, second only to the Xiliang Cavalry and the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry,” Xun You remarked from his vantage point, watching the Danyang soldiers struggle to regain control after their commander’s chaotic retreat.

Cheng Yu’s face also showed a hint of concern. Although he had anticipated the strength of the Danyang elites, witnessing their prowess on the battlefield was still a shocking experience. The people of Danyang might indeed have been born for war.

Xun You's thoughts drifted back to the time when he served as a Yellow Gate Attendant in Chang'an and witnessed the power of the Xiliang Cavalry firsthand. The reality of that force was far beyond what he had imagined.

In the regular army, soldiers were typically supported by auxiliary troops. Generally, one regular soldier was accompanied by two or three auxiliaries who provided logistical support and did not participate in combat. This was the standard structure of an army where the number of auxiliary troops often outnumbered regular soldiers.

However, there were always exceptions. For example, the Danyang soldiers did not rely on auxiliaries, and the Xiliang Cavalry had their own unique setup where their auxiliary forces were actually Qiang cavalry. Xun You knew that in the early days, the Xiliang Cavalry had no need for auxiliaries. However, when Li Ru rose to power, he established a system of auxiliary troops for them.

The Xiliang region had an abundance of Qiang cavalry, who, despite not being as skilled as the Xiliang Cavalry, were still effective enough to support them in battle, particularly against infantry.

When Dong Zhuo consolidated his control over Xiliang, he had to weaken the power of the Qiang tribes while also avoiding making them feel betrayed. Thus, following Li Ru's advice, he established what could be described as the most eccentric auxiliary system in the Han Dynasty.

While other armies relied on commoners as auxiliaries, the Xiliang Cavalry used Qiang cavalry as their support. Dong Zhuo's reasoning was that the Qiang people were strong warriors who respected power. By offering them food and security, he managed to turn many of them into loyal followers.

Whether or not Dong Zhuo's words were mere flattery, the fact remained that the Qiang tribes often followed the Xiliang Cavalry wherever they went. Over time, they formed a hierarchical system where the Xiliang Cavalry sat at the top, each supported by three Qiang cavalry as auxiliaries. The Qiang cavalry, in turn, would gather their own followers, creating a pyramid structure.

This led to a rather comical situation: when the Xiliang Cavalry mobilized ten thousand troops, they actually brought along a massive force of one hundred thousand. Unlike other armies where auxiliaries didn't fight, the Qiang cavalry often engaged in battle under the leadership of the Xiliang Cavalry, easily overcoming regular infantry. Without the Xiliang Cavalry, however, the Qiang cavalry were merely a second-rate force.

The most frustrating aspect was that the Qiang cavalry had grown accustomed to following the strongest leaders. Whenever the Xiliang Cavalry passed by, the Qiang tribes would automatically provide reinforcements, eliminating the need for conscription.

Xun You, having witnessed the Xiliang Cavalry in action, understood the immense logistical burden they posed. Supporting ten thousand Xiliang Cavalry and their auxiliaries was akin to sustaining a force of two hundred thousand infantry, though their combat power justified the cost.

This was why when Li Jue, Guo Si, Zhang Ji, and Fan Chou collectively claimed to command thirty thousand iron cavalry, everyone believed them. It was also why Zhang Ji, despite his efforts to establish farming settlements, still had to resort to plundering to sustain his troops—supporting one Xiliang Cavalry meant supporting multiple auxiliaries as well.

After Li Jue and Guo Si's deaths, the leaderless Xiliang Cavalry should have faded into history due to a lack of resources. However, Ma Chao, with his martial prowess, managed to rebuild the pyramid structure of the Xiliang Cavalry. Though now consisting of more Qiang cavalry, the core remained the Xiliang Cavalry, which is why Ma Chao later posed such a threat to Cao Cao, even forcing him to shave his beard and flee.

Without the Xiliang Cavalry's leadership, the Qiang cavalry alone would never have been able to achieve such victories.

Xun You slightly frowned, doubting the strategy his uncle Xun Yu had proposed.

As he observed the chaotic battlefield, he noticed that with Cao Bao no longer issuing confusing commands, the Danyang soldiers had managed to stabilize their formation under the leadership of their centurions, sergeants, and lieutenants. Despite lacking high-level command, they began to regain control of the situation.

"Zhongde, it seems we underestimated the strength of the Danyang elites. Our infantry is still no match for them. Send orders to Xiahou Yuan and the others to proceed with the plan. To minimize our losses, we must rely on Cao Bao's chaotic commands to disrupt the Danyang soldiers' formation," Xun You instructed, turning to Cheng Yu.

Cheng Yu nodded, relaying the orders to the waiting messengers who quickly mounted their horses and sped off to the south.

In just the time it took to eat a meal, Xiahou Yuan, leading his troops, had already launched a direct assault on Cao Bao's command banner from the rear. The Danyang soldiers fell into chaos once again, their efforts to stabilize the front lines undone by the confusion in the rear. The formation crumbled, and their cloud-like battle aura dissipated, leaving them in an even worse position.

"Rear units, form a defensive circle!" shouted Xu Sheng. But as a sergeant, even though he knew the correct course of action, he couldn't communicate it effectively. Meanwhile, Cao Bao's erratic orders only worsened the situation, leading to the loss of three centurions and further weakening their defense.

Before Cao Bao could make any adjustments, Xiahou Dun led another infantry assault, piercing through the Danyang formation under a rain of arrows. Xiahou Dun fought ferociously, cutting down the elite soldiers at the rear.

With the arrival of Mao Jie's third unit, the Danyang army was thrown into complete disarray. Amidst the chaos, Xiahou Yuan shot down Cao Bao's command banner from a distance. Terrified, Cao Bao could no longer suppress his fear. Screaming in panic, he abandoned control of the Danyang soldiers and fled towards the Yishui River, unable to endure the lethal atmosphere of the battlefield. He was a scholar, not a warrior!

Chapter 373: Cao Mengde Enlightened

"Enemy general defeated! Soldiers, charge with me and crush the enemy!" Cao Cao shouted, leading the reserve troops as he charged forward with the Yitian Sword in hand.

Upon hearing this, the morale of the Danyang elite troops collapsed. They were capable of fighting without a commander, but if the commander fled during battle, who were they fighting for? Although the Danyang troops had the qualities of elite soldiers, their core nature was still that of mercenaries. Even after being employed by Tao Qian for years, their relationship remained a mercenary contract. Now that Cao Bao had fled and had previously been withholding their rations, the Danyang soldiers lost the will to fight.

In the next moment, the lower-ranking officers of the Danyang troops made the same decision. Almost simultaneously, they mobilized their cloud energy and launched an attack on Cao Cao's forces. Then,

taking advantage of a brief disengagement, they quickly tightened their formation, pulling back into a defensive circle with shield-bearers on the outside, spearmen in the middle, and archers protected at the center. Their formation resembled a bristling hedgehog as they coldly stared down Cao Cao's army.

"Lord, do not focus on the Danyang elites. Pursue Cao Bao and capture him first. After that, we can talk about surrendering the Danyang troops," Cheng Yu advised as he rushed over to Cao Cao, who was hesitating whether to attack.

"Zimou, capture Cao Bao alive! The rest of you, fall back ten steps," Cao Cao ordered Xiahou Yuan.

The Cao army's withdrawal allowed the Danyang troops to relax slightly, but years of battle experience kept them wary of the Cao forces as they held their spears, silently standing off against the enemy.

Xiahou Yuan spurred his horse and pursued Cao Bao, who was inexplicably fleeing across the ice of the Yishui River toward the confluence with the Yellow River.

"Where do you think you're going?" Xiahou Yuan shouted as he spotted Cao Bao from afar. His spear gleamed as he launched a powerful attack at the ice beneath Cao Bao. The ice shattered, sending Cao Bao and his guards plummeting into the frigid river.

"Got you!" Xiahou Yuan leaped over to the spot where Cao Bao had fallen, thrusting his spear into the water and pulling Cao Bao out. "Ha! Caught a big fish!"

"So cold..." Cao Bao shivered, teeth chattering as he pleaded, "General, please spare me. I am the head of the Cao family in Xuzhou. If you spare my life, the Cao family will be forever grateful."

Xiahou Yuan laughed. "Cao Bao, you really are a fool. Don't you even know who I am? Enough talk. My elder brother is waiting for me to bring you back." With a cold expression, Xiahou Yuan clamped Cao Bao under his arm and, with a few swift jumps, returned to his horse and headed back.

"Elder brother, I've captured Cao Bao," Xiahou Yuan said proudly as he tossed the shivering Cao Bao, who was either frozen or terrified, in front of Cao Cao.

"Cao Bao, tell me the truth about my father," Cao Cao demanded, pressing the Yitian Sword against Cao Bao's throat, his expression icy.

"Lord Cao, please spare me! I was only following Tao Qian's orders to have Zhang Kai escort your father. All of this was Tao Qian's doing; it has nothing to do with me! Please believe me, Lord Cao!" Cao Bao grovelled, abandoning all pretense of being a nobleman as he begged for his life.

"Cao Bao, tell me the truth. If you do, your Cao family in Xuzhou will live. If not, I will wipe out your entire family!" Cao Cao kicked Cao Bao to the ground, his voice filled with rage. "This is your last chance. Tell me the truth, or your family will be annihilated!"

Cao Bao kowtowed repeatedly but still refused to reveal the truth.

"If you won't talk, then I'll say it! You ordered Zhang Kai to ambush and kill my father. You used my name to massacre the people of Xuzhou. Everything you've done was to undermine Tao Qian and seize power for yourself," Cao Cao roared, his eyes bloodshot. "I don't care if you wanted to undermine Tao Qian. I don't care if you wanted to seize power. But you should never have involved my father! You deserve to die!"

"Lord Cao, I was wrong! Please, spare me! I can help you take Xuzhou! The Cao family can help you take Xuzhou! Please, spare me!" Cao Bao pleaded desperately, his fear driving him to abandon all dignity.

"Die!" Cao Cao, consumed by fury, swung his sword, slicing Cao Bao in two. But even that wasn't enough to quell his rage. He continued hacking at Cao Bao's body, reducing it to a bloody pulp in front of tens of thousands of soldiers.

Finally, after venting his anger, Cao Cao stopped and collapsed to the ground, weeping bitterly. His father had been killed over such a trivial matter, and in his grief, he had slaughtered countless innocent civilians. Now, standing over the real culprit's remains, he felt no sense of justice or relief. The people of Xuzhou who had perished could no longer accuse him of their deaths, but that didn't ease his conscience.

At that moment, Cao Cao felt a profound disillusionment. He had strived for the well-being of the people, from his defeat at Hulao Pass to his return to Chenliu, to taking control of Yanzhou, occupying Yingchuan, and seizing Nanyang. He had worked tirelessly to govern his territories, promoting

agriculture, suppressing bandits, and recruiting talented individuals, all in an effort to improve the lives of his people. Yet, this was the outcome.

"Hahaha... If the heavens are blind, then I will be their eyes. Even if I make mistakes, it's better than doing nothing. I, Cao Mengde, will remain steadfast, whether praised or condemned!" Cao Cao seemed to reach a moment of clarity, and his mind cleared. The anxiety, despair, and disillusionment that had plagued him vanished in an instant.

Cao Cao appeared to undergo a transformation, his confusion and doubt replaced by unwavering resolve. Those close to him, like Cheng Yu and Xun You, felt their own convictions grow stronger as if their minds had been purified.

Cao Cao stepped forward and addressed the Danyang soldiers, saying, "Lay down your weapons and surrender, and I guarantee your safety."

The Danyang soldiers murmured among themselves. They had been deeply disappointed by Cao Bao's conduct during the battle. Moreover, Cao Bao's interactions with Cao Cao had made it clear that he was the true culprit behind Xuzhou's suffering, which only fueled their resentment.

As mercenaries recruited from Danyang, the soldiers had little loyalty to Cao Bao. His behavior, coupled with the revelations about his role in the tragedy of Xuzhou, made them feel like accomplices to his crimes. They began to wonder if they had been fighting on the wrong side all along.

"I surrender," someone finally said, dropping their weapon. One after another, the Danyang soldiers followed suit, laying down their arms. And thus, Tao Qian's once mighty Danyang elite force came to an end under his command.

Chapter 374: The Plague

"Wenhe, are you sure this plan will work?" Chen Xi asked as he reviewed Jia Xu's strategy with some concern.

"Aren't you busy with disease prevention and disaster relief? What brings you here?" Jia Xu was puzzled by Chen Xi's sudden arrival. He thought Chen Xi was handling logistics and rear-line operations, so why did he suddenly show up?

"I came to request a transfer order from Lord Xuande. The weather has warmed up after the spring, and there's been a small outbreak of plague. I'm preparing to dispatch troops for quarantine and treatment. Physician Hua is already on the scene, and according to him, the situation should be manageable," Chen Xi sighed. Although they had anticipated this, it was still disheartening to see people die from the disease.

"Hua Tuo can control the plague?" Jia Xu was initially alarmed at the mention of a plague. Such diseases were deadly, and when they spread, they could wipe out entire counties or even regions. However, upon hearing that Hua Tuo could control it, Jia Xu was stunned.

"If he couldn't, why would I bring him here? However, he's only one person, and the biggest problem with plagues is that people tend to flee and spread the infection. I'm planning to quarantine the areas around Langya where the plague has broken out," Chen Xi explained with a sigh. In this era, once a plague broke out, the only solution was often relocation, which only caused the disease to spread further.

Jia Xu's pupils contracted slightly. "Zichuan, are you sure you're not just planning to burn the infected areas to the ground and cut your losses?"

"Don't say such things. It's not that serious. I found that our soldiers are in good health, and even in infected areas, they're unlikely to catch the disease as long as they avoid contaminated food and water. That's why I'm here to request a troop transfer. If possible, resolve the situation with Cao Cao quickly—I have a bad feeling about this," Chen Xi said with a frown.

"A bad feeling?" Jia Xu also frowned, contemplating the situation.

"Maybe I'm just overthinking it," Chen Xi sighed. "More people die from disease than from battle. But thankfully, we discovered it early, and no major issues have arisen. We have plenty of medicinal herbs, so as long as Hua Tuo prepares the necessary remedies, we should be fine."

"That's good to hear. Our focus has always been on the prosperous lands of Xuzhou. I'd hate to see Lord Xuande inherit a ruined Xuzhou because of this plague," Jia Xu said, nodding.

"Yes, but be cautious. Xun You and Cheng Yu are not easy opponents," Chen Xi reminded Jia Xu before heading off to find Liu Bei.

Jia Xu watched Chen Xi leave and silently reflected.

"Lord Xuande," Chen Xi called out to Liu Bei, who was busy inspecting supplies.

"Zichuan, what brings you here?" Liu Bei asked curiously.

"There's been an outbreak of plague in the rear. I need soldiers for quarantine efforts," Chen Xi said bluntly.

"A plague in the rear!" Liu Bei was immediately alarmed.

"It's not a major plague, and if handled properly, it will be contained quickly. Physician Hua is already at the scene, and the necessary medicinal herbs have been delivered. I've also instructed everyone to only drink boiled water," Chen Xi explained with a sigh. "Please grant me the authority to transfer troops."

"Thank goodness. As long as Physician Hua can contain the plague, spare no effort in assisting him. As for the troop transfer, didn't I give you the Female Sword as a token for such matters? You can use that to transfer troops," Liu Bei said, somewhat puzzled.

The last time Chen Xi had trouble commanding the civil officials, Liu Bei had given him the Female Sword as a token of authority. Chen Xi had since forgotten about it, leaving it in his study.

"Well, I'd still prefer to have your direct authorization," Chen Xi said awkwardly. "Our regular soldiers are in good health, so they should be fine as long as they follow precautions in the plague areas. But the affected areas are extensive, so we'll need to draw more troops from Taishan for the quarantine."

"Very well," Liu Bei agreed, trusting Chen Xi to handle the plague. He handed over the necessary orders.

With the transfer orders in hand, Chen Xi rushed back. The plague around Langya was more serious than he had let on. The outbreak had escalated rapidly with the warming weather, leaving Chen Xi feeling overwhelmed. Quarantine had become essential, but fortunately, the disease seemed to have little effect on those with internal energy.

Meanwhile, after Chen Xi's departure, Liu Bei finished inspecting the supplies and prepared to march his forces towards the confluence of the Ji River and Yellow River near Pengcheng.

In just five days, Liu Bei led a vanguard of 20,000 troops, including Hua Xiong, Xu Chu, and Wu Anguo, across the Ji River. After advancing several miles, they set up camp for the night.

"Military Advisor Jia, are you sure this will work? If we lose after forming a back-to-water formation, there will be no escape!" Hua Xiong expressed his concerns as they faced the daunting task of fighting Cao Cao, who had already occupied Pengcheng.

"This battle rests on your shoulders," Jia Xu said with a smile, recalling the intelligence about the large military camp several miles outside Pengcheng.

Cao Cao wasn't foolish; he hadn't concentrated all his forces in Pengcheng. Instead, he had split his army, establishing a large camp outside the city. This allowed him to assist either the city or the camp in case of an attack, and if Liu Bei divided his forces, Cao Cao's numerical advantage would be fully displayed. While it was a good defensive strategy, Jia Xu had never intended to lay siege to the city.

"Don't worry. Just focus on your task. Lord Xuande's safety depends on you, Zhongkang, and Anguo," Jia Xu reassured him with a smile.

Jia Xu glanced at the sun, calculating the time.

"Let's head back to camp," Jia Xu said, turning away with a frustrated Hua Xiong trailing behind.

"Military Advisor Jia, the lord has requested your presence upon your return," a messenger informed Jia Xu as he entered the camp.

"Understood." Jia Xu calmly made his way to the central tent, noting that the camp had been hastily set up.

"Lord," Jia Xu greeted Liu Bei with a bow, observing his leader's anxious expression.

"Wenhe, tonight I intend to launch a night raid on Cao Cao's camp. Even if he anticipates it, I can't hold back any longer!" Liu Bei declared. As he had drawn closer to Cao Cao, his anger had intensified, reaching a peak upon arriving at Pengcheng. He had lost all hope in Cao Cao and was now consumed by rage.

Liu Bei was no longer the seasoned Han King of his later years, who could conceal his emotions. Now, his anger toward Cao Cao was all-consuming. Even knowing that Cao Cao might be prepared for a night attack, Liu Bei was willing to risk it to vent his fury.

Chapter 375: Let's Begin a New - ...

"Since that is the case, Lord Xuande, please divide the troops into two groups. The front team will conduct a night raid, and if it fails, the rear team can provide support. At worst, tonight's night raid will turn into a full-scale assault," Jia Xu said calmly with his head lowered. There was a ten out of ten chance that Cao Cao was prepared, but there are only two opportune times to eliminate a major enemy: either by surprise at the outset or by dragging the fight until the enemy is exhausted.

Jia Xu was confident that if it came down to a drawn-out battle, they would undoubtedly survive. In this world, the only force that could go toe-to-toe with Taishan's forces was not Cao Mengde.

The problem was, if they prolonged the fight, it would only result in both Liu Bei and Cao Cao being weakened, benefiting Yuan Shao. After all, occupying Yanzhou without securing the northern territories would be pointless for Liu Bei.

Jia Xu and the other strategists had considered going all out to eliminate Cao Cao, even if it meant leaving Yanzhou for Lu Bu. However, this idea was ultimately dismissed—not because of a lack of foresight, but because of Yuan Shao.

Whether they wanted to admit it or not, Yuan Shao's display of power at the Battle of Jieqiao had shaken the world. Even Yuan Shu sheltered Lu Bu out of gratitude for his past deeds with the Yuan

family. What Jia Xu and the others feared most was Yuan Shao offering Lu Bu the chance to return to his home in Bingzhou, or even aiding Lu Bu's return to power.

The possibility of this happening was slim, but because of its dangerous implications, Jia Xu and the others decided to avoid it. After all, if such a disastrous scenario were to occur, the Han dynasty would be as good as over.

If Jia Xu had shared this with Chen Xi, Chen Xi would have told him that the chances of this happening were nine out of ten.

The celestial phenomena in 191 and 192 CE might have been favorable, and with Xun Yu and Xi Zhicai helping Cao Cao seize Nanyang with a population of 2.4 million, Cao Cao could rise. However, from the year of the Xu Province massacre onward, locust plagues, droughts, and freezes never ceased. Most of the provinces were left without any stored grain.

From this point on, no matter which territory you seize, it won't have a three-year grain supply. In fact, if you manage to find three months' worth, that territory would be considered wealthy. From now on, whoever can seize power will be victorious...

This means that Lu Bu running out of food was inevitable. Whether Yuan Shao provides grain to help Lu Bu relocate to Bingzhou or directly seizes Yanzhou while Lu Bu is weakened by starvation, Yuan Shao would gain control of Yanzhou. There's nothing more important than the Yuan family reuniting the north and south.

No matter how deep the enmity between Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao, when the Central Plains is left with only Liu Bei and the rest are Yuan family members, the Yuan family would undoubtedly target Liu Bei.

Whether Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao would prioritize their family in such a situation, both Jia Xu's understanding of human nature and historical evidence—such as Yuan Shu fleeing north with the Imperial Seal to join forces with Yuan Shao—suggest that noble families truly prioritize their clan above all else.

Unlike in history, where Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao saw each other as rising and falling rivals with little reason to cooperate, this time both Yuans control more than two provinces each and are expanding.

Once they reunite, they could easily intimidate several southern provinces. After redistributing resources and combining their strengths, the Yuan family would become immensely powerful.

With nearly eight provinces under their control, possessing three grain-producing regions and three horse-breeding regions, the Yuan family wouldn't need any intricate strategies to wipe out Liu Bei, who had just fought a major battle with Cao Cao. It would take less than a month.

The reason is simple: after recently seizing Yanzhou, Lu Bu would be unable to withstand a single wave of Yuan Shao's attacks this summer. Even during Cao Cao's time, when he had capable advisors, Tian Feng and others repeatedly advised eliminating Cao Cao whenever possible. Replacing him with Lu Bu, under these circumstances where the Yuan family reuniting essentially means the world is theirs, the Yuan family would surely prioritize their reunion.

Once Yanzhou falls into Yuan Shao's hands, the Yuan family will undoubtedly turn their attention to wiping out Liu Bei, who will be completely surrounded. Holding the ten provinces of You, Ji, Bing, Qing, Yan, Xu, Yu, Yang, Jing, and Jiaozhi, plus most of Sili, the Yuan family will be in an unassailable position.

In fact, Jia Xu had also calculated that if they could eliminate Cao Cao with minimal losses, they could end the chaos even more quickly. With Liu Bei holding Qing and Xu provinces, along with sufficient troops and grain, surviving the Yuan family's first wave of attacks with eight provinces wouldn't be too difficult. After that, with Chen Xi's pre-prepared strategy, dominating the north would be a certainty. Although the process might be dangerous, it seemed like a feasible plan.

However, this process was indeed perilous. If they mishandled it, the Yuan family could have ten provinces under their control this year and unite the country next year.

This is why, despite having a strategy to deal with Cao Cao, Jia Xu had hesitated to use it—because it was simply too risky.

Nevertheless, Chen Xi's firm belief that now was the best time to eliminate Cao Cao had convinced Jia Xu. If they could eliminate Cao Cao with minimal losses, then facing the Yuan family and ending the chaos sooner would be a good outcome.

Because of this, Jia Xu decided to observe the situation and, if possible, eliminate Cao Cao here. If the plan succeeded and they eliminated Cao Cao with minimal losses, then a new chapter in history would

begin, and they could proceed confidently—after all, Chen Xi had assured them he could handle the situation. If the plan failed, Jia Xu could send a fake messenger to inform Cao Cao that Yanzhou had been taken and that he needed to rush back to defend it. In any case, Jia Xu would never sacrifice significant forces to eliminate Cao Cao.

Jia Xu took a deep breath and thought.

"So be it. I'll lead the night raid, and you and Zijian will handle the rear guard," Liu Bei made the decision Jia Xu had predicted.

"Very well, Lord Xuande. If there's no result within an hour, Zijian and I will lead the troops to rescue you," Jia Xu said with his head lowered. Perhaps Liu Bei saw this level of personal risk as nothing unusual. With Xu Chu and Wu Anguo protecting him, even if the night raid failed, Liu Bei would remain unharmed. Besides, Liu Bei didn't believe they would necessarily fail.

Jia Xu carefully observed Liu Bei's every move, considering all the possibilities.

Liu Bei ordered the army to rest, and all the soldiers knew that a battle was inevitable that night. After lunch, they all retreated to their tents to rest.

"Will Liu Xuande come tonight, Gongda?" Cao Cao asked as he paced back and forth in his tent. Although he was convinced Liu Bei would come, he couldn't shake his unease since Liu Bei had crossed the Ji River.

"He will come. Whether it's Liu Xuande himself or his strategists, tonight's battle is unavoidable. Our goal is to defeat Liu Bei with minimal losses," Xun You replied woodenly.

"I believe Liu Xuande's side has also prepared for a strong assault. However, this time, not only must we crush the night raid with overwhelming force, but we must also press the attack and seize Liu Bei's main camp, even if it costs us thousands of men. The outcome must be decided before we cross the Ji River," Xun You said calmly.

"A fight with our backs to the river?" Cao Cao frowned. "Given how well Liu Xuande treats his soldiers, if he fights to the death, the odds of him pulling off a back-to-the-river victory are high. At that point, we'll be in a difficult position."

"It's not a problem. If we find ourselves near the Ji River and the situation becomes what you fear, we'll simply retreat. In a nighttime battle, where friend and foe are hard to distinguish, we can withdraw without suffering heavy losses. Even if we don't rout Liu Xuande, we can still inflict significant damage," Xun You said confidently.

Xun You had also considered the possibility of Liu Bei camping with his back to the Ji River. Such battles, where victory or defeat hinged on a razor's edge, were the most difficult to control. A step forward could lead to a rout, but once Liu Bei's army was cornered by the river, they might fight desperately for survival, potentially turning the tide.

For battles where the outcome was so precarious, Xun You preferred not to engage. If they couldn't defeat Liu Bei before reaching the Ji River, tonight's battle would be a mere minor victory.

"Very well. A nighttime battle where friend and foe are indistinguishable—if we reach the Ji River, we'll retreat. But I'm concerned that Liu Xuande might pursue us," Cao Cao sighed.

"Then we'll leave a blocking force near the Ji River. If Liu Xuande stubbornly pursues us, we'll crush him," Xun You said coldly.

"Good. That's how it should be. The outcome will be decided tonight! If Liu Bei's reinforcements arrive, Zhongde, lead your forces out of Pengcheng and join me in a pincer attack!" Cao Cao ordered Cheng Yu.

"Understood!" Cheng Yu saluted with a bow. After all, he was a strategist who could serve as a general, and his martial skills were not to be underestimated.

"What's the status of the Danyang soldiers?" Cao Cao shifted topics, asking Cheng Yu, who was handling the matter.

"Although they've surrendered, their morale and enthusiasm are still low. As of now, we've only managed to recruit about five thousand of them," Cheng Yu sighed. "It will take at least a month to fully integrate them."

"Five thousand it is, then. We'll take it slowly," Cao Cao sighed.

As the sun set and darkness fell, Zhang Fei and Wei Yan, under the guidance of Guo Jia, quietly led five thousand infantry and cavalry across the Ji River. Li You, accompanied by Zhao Yun and Chen Dao, took a similar force across the Yellow River under the cover of dusk. Liu Ye, along with Gan Ning and Taishi Ci, led an equal number across the Bian River, while Guan Yu, accompanied by Guan Ping, circled around to the outskirts of Pengcheng.

"Military Advisor Guo, where are we heading?" Zhang Fei asked in a low voice, passing his wine jug to Guo Jia.

"We're going to end Cao Cao. The key to this plan lies in fighting with our backs to the river and coordinating between the generals. Jia Wenhe aims to decide the outcome in one battle, and only we can time our moves correctly. As for fighting with our backs to the river, Jia Wenhe is betting that Cao Cao won't dare risk letting us turn the tables. If everything goes according to plan, our victory hinges on how well we execute our roles," Guo Jia replied solemnly, draining the wine in one gulp.

Meanwhile, Li You carefully calculated their positions and ordered Zhao Yun and Chen Dao to conceal their forces in the darkness.

Liu Ye gazed up at the sparse stars in the sky and the crescent moon. Indeed, it was a perfect night for murder and arson.

"Tonight, Cao Mengde will meet his end," Liu Ye remarked with a cold smile.

It wasn't that Liu Ye underestimated Cao Cao, but rather that he saw no way out for him. The most terrifying aspect of an ambush on all sides was that it left the enemy disoriented and defenseless. In the end, when soldiers didn't know their commanders, and commanders didn't know their soldiers, there was only one path left—defeat. Moreover, Jia Xu had chosen a terrain that made it clear he had no intention of letting Cao Cao escape alive.

Jia Xu folded the map and stood up slowly. Using himself as bait was a joke. If two thousand Taishan soldiers were defeated on a forty-mile stretch of road, he might as well slit his own throat.

Jia Xu merely wanted to test Liu Xuande's courage. He had simulated this battle six times, and each time, there was no way out for Cao Cao. Unless a meteor fell from the sky and wiped out at least two of the ambushing forces, Cao Cao, with his disorganized troops, would meet his end at Pengcheng.

At midnight, Liu Bei led Xu Chu as the vanguard, with three thousand men, to raid Cao Cao's camp. Xu Chu wielded a massive, dark blade that slashed into the Cao camp, making it clear that tonight's mission was a full-scale assault. He bellowed as he led three thousand soldiers through the breach.

As soon as they charged into Cao Cao's main camp, enemy troops swarmed from all sides. Fortunately, Jia Xu had forewarned Xu Chu, so there was little panic. Xu Chu's massive blade cut down dozens of enemies, and he turned his horse to protect Liu Bei and make a retreat. However, before they could escape, a flurry of drums signaled the arrival of Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Yuan from the flanks. Xu Chu parried Xiahou Dun's spear, while Wu Anguo's massive hammer deflected incoming arrows aimed at Liu Bei.

"Hahaha, I've encountered a worthy opponent!" Xiahou Dun exclaimed, his body buzzing with excitement despite the numbing impact of their weapons clashing.

"Face my blade!" Xu Chu roared, swinging his massive sword at Xiahou Dun, dark energy swirling around it.

"Stop hiding behind arrows!" Wu Anguo bellowed, swinging his enormous hammer to block Xiahou Yuan's attack.

"Wu Anguo, I didn't expect to see you here," Xiahou Yuan narrowed his eyes at Wu Anguo, the top-tier warrior who had survived a duel with Lu Bu at Hulao Pass, now fighting under Liu Bei's banner.

"Kill!" Liu Bei showed no signs of panic. Before the battle, he had prepared himself for the possibility that Cao Cao might be ready for them. Ambushed, his fury only intensified as he fought his way through the Cao army with his male sword, protected by his guards.

"Release the arrows!" Cao Cao laughed. "Liu Xuande, you've come personally! Seize him!"

"Lord, retreat quickly!" Xu Chu bellowed, driving Xiahou Dun back with a mighty blow. Wu Anguo shielded them from the arrows with his massive hammers, while Xu Chu escorted Liu Bei out of the camp.

Liu Bei's troops were far more elite than Cao Cao's, and since they hadn't penetrated too deeply into the camp, they soon managed to break free. By then, the sound of hooves could be heard in the distance.

"Reinforcements have arrived! Soldiers, charge!" Liu Bei laughed as he gave the order.

In Pengcheng, Cheng Yu had been waiting on the city walls, listening for the sound of hooves. When he finally heard them, he turned and began descending the walls. Pengcheng had been entrusted to Zhao Yan; now it was time for Cheng Yu to lead his troops out of the city and join the battle. Tonight, the outcome would be decided.

"Kill!" Hua Xiong led his three thousand Xiliang cavalry with a fierce momentum, directly charging into the rear of Cao Cao's army, which had surrounded Liu Bei's forces. In an instant, chaos ensued, and the Xiliang cavalry carved a path of destruction, cutting through Cao Cao's encirclement with brutal efficiency. The sheer destructive power of the Xiliang cavalry was fully unleashed in that moment.

"Form a wedge and break through!" Hua Xiong commanded, leading his Xiliang cavalry as they trampled over the bewildered Cao soldiers. Soon, they regrouped with Liu Bei.

"Lord, follow me and break out!" Hua Xiong called out as he directed the Xiliang cavalry's energy. The red glow of their aura flared out, forcing back the advancing Cao generals, including Cao Hong.

"Rear guard to the front, retreat!" Liu Bei ordered his messengers. The night raid had failed, and now it was up to Jia Xu's five-pronged plan to decide the battle.

"Don't let Liu Bei escape!" Cao Cao roared as he saw Cheng Yu ignite the fire-soaked wood they had prepared. In an instant, the sky lit up with flames.

"Hmph!" Hua Xiong showed no fear as he confronted Cheng Yu's approaching forces. Although the leading troops were revealed to be Danyang soldiers, Hua Xiong knew that no force in the Han Empire could match the Xiliang cavalry's sheer power. Historically, any army that dared to stand in their way had been crushed to dust.

"Break through them!" Hua Xiong roared, leading his Xiliang cavalry in fragmented wedge formations directly into the Danyang soldiers.

In an instant, dozens of Xiliang cavalymen fell, but far more Danyang soldiers were sent flying. The massive shields they held were shattered by the cavalry's charge. Under Hua Xiong's command, the already demoralized Danyang soldiers were quickly routed.

"It's the Xiliang cavalry!" the Danyang soldiers shouted, recognizing the fearsome force that had fought alongside them in the past. As soon as they made contact, the veterans who had fought in the Western Liang campaign called out for their comrades to fall back.

These soldiers had no real loyalty to Cao Cao; they had only been mustered to bolster his forces. But now, facing Hua Xiong's Xiliang cavalry, the most devastating force in the Han Empire, they knew that resisting would only lead to their deaths.

Hua Xiong continued to trample the infantry in front of him, the red aura of the cavalry tinged with blood as they carved a path through the battlefield.

The Xiliang cavalry lacked the speed and flexibility of the White Horse Volunteers and the versatility of the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry. What they possessed was unparalleled destructive power. The massive warhorses of the Western Liang carried a momentum that crushed anything in their path. No other unit could withstand their charge—except, perhaps, for another Xiliang cavalry.

"Lord, move quickly!" After breaking through, Hua Xiong had no time to mourn the loss of veteran soldiers. He shouted for Liu Bei to follow, while Xu Chu instinctively led the Tiger Guard to cover their retreat.

As Hua Xiong's Xiliang cavalry brutally cut through the blocking forces, Xun You couldn't shake a feeling of unease. But before he could dwell on it, Cao Cao, flanked by the Xiahou brothers and the rest of his forces, charged out of the camp.

"This Xiliang cavalry..." Cheng Yu and Xun You exchanged worried glances as they followed Cao Cao.

"My uncle's vision surpasses mine. Indeed, to rule the north, one must have a cavalry force. Compared to the agile and mobile White Horse Volunteers, the Xiliang cavalry's sheer power has an overwhelming impact on both enemy morale and our own," Xun You sighed.

After witnessing three thousand Xiliang cavalry break through over ten thousand infantry, Xun You had fully embraced his uncle's view. While many of the enemy troops were the demoralized Danyang soldiers, there was no denying the Xiliang cavalry's devastating charge.

"Very well. After we defeat Liu Xuande and return to Yanzhou, we'll unite our opinions and fully persuade the lord," Cheng Yu agreed.

Liu Bei's forces retreated, and Cao Cao pursued them relentlessly. In Liu Bei's main camp, a fierce battle raged as they fought their way out. The morale of Cao Cao's troops soared, but they were still unable to capture Liu Bei. They chased him all the way to the Ji River, where the thunderous roar of the river could be heard, but they still couldn't finish him off.

Seeing that there was no way forward, Liu Bei had no time to blame Jia Xu for his incomplete plan. He turned and shouted, "There's no retreat ahead. Why not fight to the death, soldiers!"

Upon hearing this, Liu Bei's troops rallied, with Xu Chu leading the charge. Under the cover of their aura, they cut down dozens of enemies, and Liu Bei's forces fiercely attacked, causing chaos in Cao Cao's vanguard.

Cao Cao sighed and, following the plan he had discussed with Xun You, ordered a retreat back to camp. Liu Bei's forces pursued them in the dark, but soon found their path blocked by the rear guard Xun You had set up earlier.

As they retreated, they traveled only about ten miles before Zhang Fei appeared on the left and Wei Yan on the right. Both forces charged into the Cao army, causing chaos among the retreating troops. Cao Cao gathered the Xiahou brothers and his relatives to protect Xun You and Cheng Yu as they fought their way out.

After a bloody retreat for another ten miles, a sudden drumbeat signaled the arrival of Zhao Yun on the left and Chen Dao on the right. Their forces attacked, leaving the battlefield littered with Cao soldiers' bodies and rivers of blood.

After traveling only a few more miles, Taishi Ci and Gan Ning led three thousand men from both flanks, launching a brutal assault on the remnants of Cao Cao's army. Terrified, Cao Cao pushed forward, desperately fleeing towards Pengcheng.

"Did you catch Cao Cao?" Guo Jia asked Zhang Fei and Wei Yan as a formality.

"That rabbit Cao Cao ran too fast! I didn't even see him," Zhang Fei grumbled in frustration.

"Any progress?" Li You asked Zhao Yun and Chen Dao.

"We did catch a glimpse of Cao Cao, but the main force blocked us!" Chen Dao sighed, slapping his left hand in frustration.

"Cao Cao is still alive?" Liu Ye glared at Gan Ning and Taishi Ci.

"We did corner him, but the Xiahou brothers fought desperately, and we couldn't take him down," Gan Ning admitted with some embarrassment. He had been thrown off when Xiahou Dun gouged out his own blinded eye and ate it—an incident that had unnerved him during the battle.

"None of you managed to finish off Cao Cao?" Jia Xu asked as he arrived, having broken through the rear guard to pursue them. Seeing the three of them looking sheepish, he was genuinely surprised. "That shouldn't be. Although the central forces were blocked, after enduring six waves of ambushes, how could Cao Cao's troops still have any fighting strength?"

"Now that you mention it, it does seem odd," Li You remarked with a frown. After being ambushed six times in the pitch-black night, Cao Cao's forces should have collapsed by now. How could they still have any combat effectiveness?

"Cao Mengde's leadership shouldn't be underestimated. However, General Guan led the largest force of infantry and cavalry, stationed outside Pengcheng. Cao Mengde should meet his end there," Liu Ye speculated. "After this, we'll peacefully take over Xu and Qing provinces. We won't need to worry about food supplies anymore."

"Start paying attention to the Yuan family. Without Cao Cao, I have no faith in Lu Bu. Once the Yuan family reunites the north and south, the only one who might struggle is Gongsun Bogui. The rest will likely 'surrender' in no time," Guo Jia remarked nonchalantly.

The whole group fell silent. After a long pause, Jia Xu spoke, "The Ji province is indeed the essence of the north. We'll be able to sweep through the land even faster."

Chapter 376: Having Done What Needed to Be Done, Survival Is Destiny!

As dawn broke, the expressions of Guo Jia and the others relaxed significantly. There was little doubt now—Cao Cao was doomed. Unlike the chaotic night battles that required strategists to rely on their instincts to seize opportunities, once daylight emerged, commanding generals could handle the battlefield situations on their own.

"Cao Mengde won't be so lucky this time," Jia Xu sighed. "We stationed Yun Chang there because he's the most capable general under Xuande, with a well-rounded skill set that ensures minimal errors. With the advantage of resting his troops and now fighting in daylight, plus the fact that Yun Chang recognizes Cao Cao, there's no way he'll let him escape..."

Jia Xu smirked. At this point, Guan Yu didn't even need to set up another ambush. He could just lead his troops to crush Cao Cao's forces and find him for the kill.

For this group, the ones who had the deepest impression of Cao Cao were Liu Bei and Guan Yu. For the rest, Cao Cao was either someone they had never met before or just a vague memory from the past. Jia Xu didn't believe that with Guan Yu targeting Cao Cao, given all the advantages they had, Cao Cao could still escape.

"If he does, you can go jump into the river," Guo Jia teased. "By the way, why didn't we capture any of Cao's officers?"

"They're all his clan members, so I ordered a kill-on-sight approach," Li You sneered. "If Cao Cao somehow escapes, at least I've taken out a few of his relatives. Besides, those people would never surrender."

"...I didn't see any. Did you kill them all?" Liu Ye asked, surprised as he looked at Li You.

"At that moment, it was hard to tell who was who. Except for the two Xiahou brothers, who were noticeable, who knows who else I might have killed," Guo Jia said with a side glance at Liu Ye. During the chaos of battle, it was impossible to identify everyone.

"Good point. When we bury the bodies, we should take a closer look. Maybe we did get a few," Li You nodded.

"Let's wait for Yun Chang's report. By the end of the last ambush, there should have been no need to seize the moment—just defeat Cao Cao's troops and finish him off. If Yun Chang still lets him escape, then all I can say is that it was Cao Cao's destiny to survive, and this battle would have been a waste," Jia Xu remarked casually. If Guan Yu, with all the advantages on his side, failed to eliminate Cao Cao, then it truly was a matter of fate.

"Why do I have this feeling that Cao Cao might not die?" Guo Jia joked, seemingly trying to tempt fate.

"If Cao Mengde escapes, we'll beat you up first, you jinx!" Jia Xu and the others glared at Guo Jia. If, under these circumstances, Cao Cao still survived, it would mean that fate itself was on his side, and they would have fought a pointless battle.

"Just kidding, just kidding," Guo Jia quickly backtracked, then changed the subject. "I noticed that Wei Yan is quite good at leading troops."

The three others glanced at Guo Jia and all sneered. The reason Jia Xu had them accompany the generals across the river wasn't because they were excellent commanders, but because they were the only ones capable of choosing the best moments to act in the pitch-dark conditions, coordinating the ambushes effectively. The strategy was all about timing, and their presence ensured that, even in the absence of solid information, they could still strike at the right time. As for leading troops in battle—what a joke. Even Liu Yan had more self-awareness than to think he could manage that.

"I wonder how the epidemic at the rear is faring," Li You changed the topic after a moment of silence. "Cao Mengde's excessive killing and grave desecrations, coupled with the warming weather, make an outbreak more likely. I hope Doctor Hua can handle it."

"It shouldn't be a big problem. According to Zichuan, as long as the affected areas are isolated and Doctor Hua provides the right prescriptions, it should be manageable. Besides, we've got so many herbs that we're using baskets to carry ginseng—what's there to worry about?" Liu Ye recalled the hurried conversation he'd had with Chen Xi.

"I think I've heard Doctor Hua say that ginseng shouldn't be used when someone has a fever," Li You mused as he gazed at the sky. "But then again, ginseng is called the king of herbs—maybe it's beneficial for everything. Or maybe I'm remembering it wrong."

"I remember Taishi Ziyi giving Gongsun Bogui ginseng powder when he had a fever, and now Gongsun Bogui's temper has become quite volatile," Liu Ye added nonchalantly as he followed Jia Xu back to Liu Bei's camp, leaving the generals to round up the remnants of Cao Cao's army.

"This is really unfortunate news," Guo Jia remarked gloomily. "We'd better not mention this to the lord."

Li You felt a pang of regret. The only person in the world he considered a true comrade, Gongsun Bogui, had been driven mad by medicine. Meanwhile, Xuzhou had effectively fallen into their hands. With Cao Bao dead, Zuo Rong toppled, and Que Xuan destroyed, Chen Deng was on their side, and the Mi family had allied with the Zhao family. Whether they made a move or not, Xuzhou was theirs. Now they just had to wait for Tao Qian to pass away quietly and preserve some dignity.

"It seems we're surrounded by enemies on all sides now," Jia Xu sighed from up ahead. Being surrounded was never a good thing.

"When pursuing hegemony, who needs comrades?" Liu Ye replied nonchalantly.

Back at the camp, Jia Xu found Liu Bei waiting with a smile on his face.

“Wenhe, this victory is all thanks to you! Just when it seemed we were doomed, you turned the tide in an instant!” Liu Bei laughed heartily, grabbing Jia Xu's hands.

“All credit goes to your bold leadership and the efforts of all our soldiers. I merely followed the plan,” Jia Xu replied calmly, showing no pride in his achievement.

Jia Xu knew very well that this battle was impossible to lose. At most, it would have turned into a night-long struggle. Another reason he had stationed Guo Jia and the others where they did was to prepare for the possibility that Cao Cao might recklessly charge through Liu Bei's forces, even at great cost.

In a situation where there was no communication, no reports, and everything relied on guesswork, things could easily go wrong. To prevent that, Jia Xu had placed Guo Jia—who was highly sensitive to shifts in battle—nearby. This way, even if Cao Mengde attempted a reckless assault, they would have time to save Liu Bei.

“Haha! Wenhe, no need to be so modest. Although our soldiers fought valiantly, without your ten-sided ambush, how could we have crushed Cao Cao in a single night?” Liu Bei laughed, waving off Jia Xu's humility. “I've already prepared a banquet to await Yun Chang and the others. Wenhe, Fengxiao, Wenru, Ziyang, please join me!”

It was clear that, after this battle, Jia Xu's status in Liu Bei's eyes had risen significantly. Although Liu Bei had always heard from Chen Xi that Jia Xu was incredibly talented, this was the first time he had seen it in action. Normally, Jia Wenhe preferred to keep a low profile, but this time, he had shown his brilliance. Five divisions of over fifty thousand men were defeated in one night—this was no ordinary feat.

Chapter 377: A Slim Chance of Survival

Cao Cao's forces had been repeatedly ambushed, and his fifty thousand troops were now scattered and fleeing in disarray.

Just as Jia Xu had predicted, Guo Jia, Li You, and Liu Ye had each, without any prior intelligence, seized the perfect moments to launch their ambushes, nearly causing the complete collapse of Cao Cao's army each time.

However, Jia Xu hadn't accounted for Cheng Yu's spiritual talent—one that bolstered resilience, endurance, and adaptability. Under the influence of Cheng Yu's talent, although repeatedly ambushed, Cao Cao's forces managed to maintain some semblance of order.

After Tai Shici and Gan Ning were held off by the Xiahou brothers, Cao Cao, along with Xun You and Cheng Yu, fought their way desperately toward Pengcheng.

"My lord, it seems that returning to Yanzhou may no longer be feasible," Xun You said calmly, his mind clearer than ever despite the exhaustion of his troops. The relentless pressure seemed to have sharpened his focus rather than cloud it.

"It cannot end like this! My grand ambitions are yet unfulfilled—I refuse to perish here! I will lead us out of this," Cao Cao declared, his determination unwavering despite the dire situation.

Little did Cao Cao know that if not for his spiritual transformation after slaying Cao Bao, the relentless blows he had suffered might have already broken him. If not for his unyielding heart, he might have succumbed to despair like so many before him.

Cheng Yu, initially stunned, found clarity upon seeing the resolve in Cao Cao's eyes.

"My lord, this is a trap known as the 'Ten Sided Ambush.' We've already missed our chance to escape. This strategy was designed to bury us here—there's no escape through the rivers as we thought," Xun You explained bitterly, unwilling to give up that last sliver of hope.

"Now that daylight has broken, the flat plains of Xuzhou offer no cover for an ambush. The final assault will surely be swift and overwhelming," Cheng Yu added, his face grave.

"Haha! Then we'll fight our way out! Even if the path is filled with thorns, I, Cao Mengde, will carve my way through!" Cao Cao laughed boldly, displaying a newfound sense of power despite his disheveled appearance.

"It won't be easy," Cheng Yu warned. "The final ambush will likely be led by Liu Bei's strongest general and tactician, commanding his most powerful troops. We're exhausted and outnumbered. If we can't

break through in one strike, death is the only outcome!" Cheng Yu glanced at Xun You, and the two shared a knowing look.

"My lord! I have a plan that can get us out of this!" Xun You said, nodding at Cheng Yu before addressing Cao Cao.

"Speak, Gongda!" Cao Cao turned to him.

Thud! Cheng Yu struck the back of Cao Cao's head, knocking him out cold.

"Cheng Yu, what are you doing?!" Cao Cao's bodyguard, Qin Shao, roared as he lunged at Cheng Yu, followed closely by Cao Hong and Cao Chun.

"There is no other way to save our lord!" Cheng Yu replied tersely.

Qin Shao paused, then quickly understood. Without hesitation, he stripped Cao Cao of his golden armor, took up his Yitian Sword, and mounted Cao Cao's famous horse, Zhaohuang Feidian. "I entrust our lord's safety to you both."

Cao Hong and Cao Chun were momentarily stunned but soon realized what was happening. They saluted Cheng Yu and Xun You. "Our brother is in your hands."

"No more words. Success or failure depends on Bainan," Xun You said curtly. "If I'm not mistaken, the final ambush will be led by Guan Yun. The strategist behind this plan is meticulous and will likely want to personally ensure Cao Cao's death. Among Liu Bei's forces, only a few people can recognize our lord, and of them, only Guan Yun knows him well enough to be certain."

"Zilian, Zihe, we're not done yet! We'll split the troops in two—one to hold the enemy while the other flees to Yu Province. We'll fight with all we've got, to buy time for Bainan and draw the enemy's attention away!" Cheng Yu said solemnly. "We have less than the time it takes for an incense stick to burn before Liu Bei's forces catch up. Let's gamble everything!"

"At your command, Strategist!" Cao Hong immediately agreed, with no hesitation despite the dire situation.

"Then let's turn back and fight! The more fiercely we resist, the more pressure we put on the enemy, and the more time Bainan will have. The longer the ambushers focus on Bainan, the greater the chance our lord will escape alive!" Xun You urged. "Prepare to meet the enemy!"

"Then I will lead the charge!" Cao Hong shouted as he mounted his horse. With a final roar, he led his troops back into the fray, determined to hold off the pursuing army.

Facing Chen Dao, who had led the pursuit, Cao Hong swung his blade with reckless abandon, fueled by desperation. His raw force drove back the attackers momentarily, but soon enough, reinforcements led by Wei Yan joined the fray, overwhelming Cao Hong's forces.

"Get out of my way!" Xiahou Dun, bloodied and enraged, crashed into the battlefield, rescuing Cao Hong just as he was about to be overwhelmed. Behind him, Gan Ning and a handful of troops pursued relentlessly.

Chapter 378: Certain Death, No Escape

"Did you capture Cao Cao?" Gan Ning asked Chen Dao and Wei Yan.

"No, we didn't," the two replied, cupping their hands toward Gan Ning.

"Keep chasing! We've been killing all night and just managed to kill a guy named Cao Chun. Before I could order the capture of that small unit, Xiahou Yuan interrupted! These bastards keep breaking through! Which one is Cao Cao anyway?!" Gan Ning was frustrated. He and Tai Shici had spread out their forces to capture prisoners, but after all this time, he still didn't know who he had killed.

"General Guan recognizes Cao Cao. Let's continue slaughtering the Cao soldiers. Capturing many soldiers is also a great achievement," Wei Yan suggested respectfully. Despite being close in age to Gan Ning, he greatly admired Gan Ning's strength, abilities, and courage.

"Fine, let's capture prisoners..." Gan Ning buried his head in his horse's mane. "Damn it, I don't know what Cao Cao looks like! How am I supposed to catch him? The only Cao soldier I recognize is the one I blinded, Xiahou Dun. The rest could run right past me, and I wouldn't know!"

"General Gan, you said you blinded Xiahou Dun's left eye?" Chen Dao asked.

"Yeah, I hit him in the left eye. He plucked it out and ate it—what a savage!" Gan Ning rubbed his face against the horse's mane before lifting his head.

"But I saw him just now. His face was covered in blood, but he had both eyes intact," Chen Dao said, horrified.

"He's a warrior of the highest caliber. Who knows if he just shoved someone else's eye into his socket? What a freak!" Gan Ning quickly pieced it together, shuddering at the thought. "That's disgusting."

"What should we do now?" Wei Yan and Chen Dao looked to Gan Ning.

"The army's in chaos, spread out all over the place capturing prisoners. We should do the same. If General Guan, with more regular troops and knowing Cao Cao's face, lets him escape, I'll lose all respect for him!" Gan Ning replied in his typically blunt manner.

"General Guan will not make any mistakes. If Cao Cao faces him head-on, there will be no escape from death," Wei Yan said firmly. Then, as if remembering something, he added, "General Gan, you mentioned encountering Xiahou Yuan. Why didn't you chase him down?"

"I was chasing Xiahou Dun. Xiahou Yuan is Tai Shici's target. Tai Shici is furious right now. He managed to shoot Xiahou Yuan through the chest, but Xiahou Yuan's personal guards mostly took the hit. So, I left Xiahou Yuan to Tai Shici and came after Xiahou Dun. As you saw, after losing one eye, Xiahou Dun somehow became stronger than me," Gan Ning sighed as he recalled the earlier events.

"Indeed. Even though Xiahou Dun ambushed us, that one strike swept both of us aside. He grabbed someone, who might have been a Cao general, and smashed the ground with such force that dust flew everywhere. I can't match his strength," Chen Dao said gravely.

"It doesn't matter. They're all doomed. They're heading toward the direction where General Guan's ambush lies in wait. Our military achievements have slipped away," Gan Ning said with a sigh.

"Surrender, and you won't be killed!" Gan Ning shouted.

The fleeing Cao soldiers hesitated for a moment but continued to run for their lives, driven by the fear that Liu Bei had ordered their complete annihilation. The rumor of a massacre had become a key motivator for their desperate resistance.

"..." Gan Ning was left speechless for a moment before charging into the scattered Cao forces, capturing stragglers as he went.

Elsewhere, Xiahou Dun was galloping with Cao Hong towards Pengcheng. Just as they neared the city, Xiahou Dun suddenly veered left.

"Why are we turning here?" Cao Hong asked, confused as he clung to Xiahou Dun.

"We need to regroup with the strategist!" Xiahou Dun kicked a soldier off his horse and threw Cao Hong onto it.

"Are you alright?" Cao Hong asked, seeing Xiahou Dun's bloodied face.

"I won't die. I encountered the two strategists during the breakout. I told Xiahou Yuan to protect the lord while I led Gan Ning and Tai Shici away. Now that they haven't caught up, we must hurry to regroup with the strategist," Xiahou Dun wiped the blood from his face, his remaining eye gleaming red.

"Good. I bought Bainan a lot of time. He should be fine now. Let's hurry and regroup," Cao Hong said as they sped after Xiahou Yuan's trail.

"Zihe is gone," Xiahou Dun said mournfully.

"What?! How is that possible? The strategist's disguise should have made them overlook or ignore that small group!" Cao Hong exclaimed in shock.

"He ran into Gan Ning! In the chaos, Zihe and Gan Ning started fighting. By the time I got there, it was too late. I had to lead Gan Ning away, and I let Xiahou Yuan go to protect the strategist's group," Xiahou Dun said. Though lacking a strategist's mind, his loyalty drove him to make the right decision. If he hadn't drawn Gan Ning away, the Liu Bei forces would have continued to gather and overwhelm them.

"Gan Ning..." Cao Hong's eyes filled with rage.

"We must quickly rescue the lord. I fear Tai Shici may soon realize the truth!" Xiahou Dun said no more, urging his men to pursue Xiahou Yuan.

Meanwhile, Qin Shao, having bought time with Cao Hong's delaying actions, arranged his troops into a wedge formation for a desperate charge at the final ambush.

Qin Shao felt fortunate. Thanks to the civil settlements Cao Cao established in Yanzhou, the people had a slim chance of survival. Because of this, the soldiers of Yanzhou were fiercely loyal to Cao Cao. It was similar to Liu Bei's troops, who, after being pushed to the brink, fought with renewed vigor. For them, Cao Cao had given their families a chance at life.

"One more ambush remains ahead! Soldiers, fight to the death! Our fate will be decided here!" Qin Shao roared as he raised the Yitian Sword high.

"We'll follow the lord to the death!" the soldiers echoed, their voices fierce.

Humans are inherently prone to follow, and with Cao Cao having given these soldiers a lifeline, they were deeply loyal to him. The old saying, "A drop of water in need should be returned with a spring in deed," echoed true for them. Even with Cheng Yu's spiritual boost, they wouldn't have been so loyal if not for Cao Cao's great kindness.

With their loyalty and the belief that Liu Bei would slaughter them without mercy—something reinforced by the brutal actions of Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun—the soldiers, red-faced and roaring, merged into one voice: "We'll follow the lord to the death!"

"Forward!" Qin Shao, disguised as Cao Cao, shouted as he led the charge toward Pengcheng. Even if they were to die here, they would drag their enemies down with them. Five thousand soldiers, unafraid of death, could hold the line for at least an hour.

As Qin Shao's voice rang out, the Cao army erupted in a cloud of blood-red mist. The desire to live and the will to repay their benefactor merged, and with a tragic resolve, they charged toward Pengcheng.

Chapter 379: The Spoils of War

From a distance, Guan Yu saw a cloud of blood-red mist surging toward him. His sharp eyes immediately caught sight of Cao Cao, heavily guarded by a mass of his elite soldiers.

Seeing the disheveled yet resolute Cao soldiers, Guan Yu couldn't help but feel a tinge of admiration.

Lifting his Green Dragon Crescent Blade, a set of armor that gleamed like serene, green water materialized on Guan Yu's body, glowing brilliantly in the first light of dawn, giving him the appearance of a god descended to earth.

"Where are Guan Ping, Zhou Cang, and Pei Yuanshao!" Guan Yu shouted without turning his head.

"Here, General!" The three men stepped forward in unison, bowing to Guan Yu.

"Form ranks with me! We will annihilate Cao Cao!" Guan Yu roared, planting the Green Dragon Crescent Blade firmly into the ground. A dragon's roar echoed, and a clear radiance enveloped the entire Guan Yu army. As Guan Yu's aura surged, a coiling dragon became vividly visible above their formation.

"Soldiers, charge with me! Victory or defeat will be decided here!" Cao Cao shouted, leading his troops in a charge toward Guan Yu.

"Foolish!" Guan Yu slightly opened his eyes, a cold light flashing through them. Was Cao Cao truly so reckless as to charge at him like this?

"Kill!" Without another word, Guan Yu spurred his horse forward, accelerating like an arrow loosed from a bowstring.

"Die!" Guan Yu fearlessly charged into the midst of Cao Cao's army, the Green Dragon Crescent Blade in hand. When he was about a hundred paces from Cao Cao, he slashed out with a massive blade of energy.

Such foolishness from Cao Cao was unbecoming of the hero Guan Yu remembered from their fateful encounter at Hulao Pass. Guan Yu decided to offer Cao Cao a swift death, striking with his most powerful attack as a final courtesy.

"Splatter!" Blood sprayed over Cao Cao, even though he was shielded by the cloud of energy surrounding his army. Despite the protection, the force of Guan Yu's strike broke through, killing nearly a hundred of Cao Cao's bodyguards. Only the quick reflexes of Cao Cao's horse, Yellow Thunder, saved him from certain death.

"Hmph, a fine horse!" Guan Yu narrowed his eyes, stroking his beard. Behind him, the Guan Yu army surged forward, engulfing the faltering Cao soldiers. Guan Yu, undeterred, continued his pursuit of Cao Cao, cutting down anyone who stood in his way.

Though the Cao soldiers were strong, determined, and prepared to die, the gap in strength was too vast. Guan Yu's presence on the battlefield meant he was confident in the outcome. Concepts like "fighting with one's back to the wall" or "morale boosting" held no sway against the overwhelming power of Guan Yu, who cleaved through these ideals with his blade.

Even under the suppressive force of the cloud formation, Guan Yu pressed forward, undisturbed, relentlessly pursuing Cao Cao. Under his leadership, the Guan Yu army swiftly cut through the Cao formation, scattering it to the wind. The energy cloud above the Cao soldiers began to dissipate.

"Lord, you must flee!" Shouted a few of Cao Cao's personal guards. They turned to face Guan Yu, charging at him in a desperate attempt to buy time.

A flash of Guan Yu's blade was all it took. The guards fell one by one, as Guan Yu continued his relentless pursuit.

"General, Cao Cao's horse is fast, and his guards are sacrificing themselves to protect him. It will be difficult to catch him," Zhou Cang reported after leading a squad to take down several enemy officers.

"Don't worry about it. Keep driving Cao Cao east. I have Yuanjian positioned there in ambush," Guan Yu replied calmly.

"Understood!" Zhou Cang bowed and led his troops in the direction indicated, while Guan Yu pursued Cao Cao, slicing through the disorganized Cao soldiers like a hot knife through butter. In just a short time, the enemy's formation was entirely broken, with the energy cloud dissipating almost entirely. Despite the soldiers' bravery, their morale and determination were nothing more than fleeting obstacles in the face of such overwhelming strength.

Qin Shao, disguised as Cao Cao, was eventually left with only a dozen bodyguards as Guan Yu hunted him down.

"Die!" Liao Hua, who had been lying in wait outside the battlefield, saw this ostentatious golden-armored general and immediately sensed his luck had arrived. Drawing his bow, he aimed at Cao Cao and let loose an arrow. The arrow struck, and "Cao Cao" fell from his horse.

"Capture Cao Cao alive!" Liao Hua shouted, leading a hundred soldiers out of their trench and charging toward "Cao Cao" with spears at the ready.

"Die!" Qin Shao, gritting his teeth, yanked the arrow from his side, his eyes red with fury as he slashed at Liao Hua.

"Crack!" Liao Hua instinctively leapt back as his well-used spear was sheared in half by the Yitian Sword.

Qin Shao fought like a madman, slashing wildly with the Yitian Sword. Though his martial skill was only second-rate, the sharpness of the blade allowed him to kill several soldiers before he was grievously wounded.

Seeing Guan Yu approaching on horseback, Qin Shao stopped his mad assault. "Hahaha! To die under such a well-laid ambush, I have no regrets!"

"Splatter!" He placed the Yitian Sword against his neck, and with a swift motion, he slit his throat. His lifeless body fell to the ground, a final mocking smile directed at Guan Yu.

Guan Yu dismounted, looking down at the bloodied and self-slain "Cao Cao," a hint of sorrow on his face. If not for the massacre at Xu Province, how could it have come to this? The hero of Hulao Pass—what had he become...

"Yuanjian, prepare Cao Cao's body for burial," Guan Yu ordered Liao Hua.

"Yes, General," Liao Hua responded, pleased. Although he had not captured Cao Cao alive, killing him was still a significant achievement.

When Guan Yu returned to the outskirts of Pengcheng, the battlefield had already been thoroughly cleared. It had to be said that Pei Yuanshao was incredibly thorough. Having always been frugal, he was extremely efficient at cleaning up after battles. Guan Yu had grown accustomed to his diligent ways.

"What are our losses?" Guan Yu asked the army's scribe, Zheng Jun.

"We lost about eleven hundred soldiers, with another twenty-three hundred wounded and seventy permanently disabled. The Cao army lost about thirty-seven hundred, with the remainder all injured," Zheng Jun, a descendant of Zheng Xuan, reported without arrogance or timidity.

"Give the dead proper burials. Though they were our enemies, their loyalty and righteousness were unwavering. Treat the wounded with care," Guan Yu said, frowning slightly. "Double the compensation for our troops. If the supplies we captured are insufficient, I will cover the difference."

"Understood," Zheng Jun responded, bowing to Guan Yu.

"Ping, accompany me to take control of Pengcheng," Guan Yu said, turning to his son Guan Ping after Zheng Jun left.

Guan Yu, carrying his banner, led Guan Ping and Zhou Cang to the gates of Pengcheng. Before he could shout for the gates to be opened, the city gates swung open, and Xu Sheng emerged, escorting Zhao Yan toward Guan Yu. "Greetings, General Guan."

Guan Yu glanced at Xu Sheng. "You've done well. Are the Danyang soldiers still in Pengcheng?"

"Currently, there are still over twenty-four thousand Danyang veterans stationed in Pengcheng," Xu Sheng replied, bowing his head.

"Good," Guan Yu said, allowing a rare smile to surface.

Chapter 380: Deciding Victory Again

After securing Cao Cao's body in a coffin, Guan Yu ordered Zheng Jun and Guan Ping to lead five thousand troops to guard Pengcheng while he personally took Cao Cao's body back to report the situation.

On the other side, Taishi Ci watched helplessly as Xiahou Yuan and Xiahou Dun escaped. Although neither of them could defeat him in a one-on-one fight, capturing them in the heat of battle proved difficult. Furthermore, with Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Yuan working together, Taishi Ci had no choice but to let them go.

When Taishi Ci reunited with Gan Ning, seeing Taishi Ci empty-handed, Gan Ning sighed, "I figured you didn't succeed either."

"It's mainly because you let Xiahou Dun get away. He ended up running to my side. Otherwise, with a few more hours, I could have taken down Xiahou Yuan," Taishi Ci responded, frustrated but also familiar enough with Gan Ning to speak candidly.

"Don't kid yourself. If you want to kill someone at the level of inner qi manifestation, unless you have Lu Bu's strength and a top-tier horse like Red Hare, there's no stopping them from escaping if they decide to run," Gan Ning replied with a helpless shrug.

"So, you didn't go all out when chasing Xiahou Dun?" Taishi Ci asked, exasperated.

"I did, but I couldn't catch him. His horse is better than mine," Gan Ning sighed again. "At least I ran into a guy named Cao Chun."

"These horses are a real problem," Taishi Ci muttered, looking down at his own yellow steed. While decent, it was nowhere near the quality of top-tier mounts like Red Hare or the Jade Lion.

"Yeah, it's tough to find a good horse. I want one too. Riding a great horse, sailing big ships, fighting fierce battles, and looting supplies—that's the life!" Gan Ning said, letting his less-than-noble ambitions slip.

"Those things are rare, and it's a matter of luck whether you encounter one or not," Taishi Ci sighed. "Did General Guan manage to capture Cao Cao?"

"He's dead," Gan Ning replied, mimicking a cutting motion with his hand.

"It seems the matter in Xuzhou is settled," Taishi Ci said, though his tone was somewhat melancholic.

Gan Ning shook his head slightly. Though he often appeared simple-minded, as a member of a prominent family from Shu, he understood the complexities of the conflicts between noble families and warlords. While Taishi Ci believed the matter was resolved, Gan Ning knew there was still much left unsettled—at least until the power structure in Xuzhou was fully redefined.

However, Gan Ning wouldn't voice these thoughts. He preferred to maintain his facade of foolishness, one that had served him well. It was also why he respected Chen Xi—Chen Xi saw through his act and acknowledged his true abilities.

If Gan Ning knew the history of Wu, he would understand why Chen Xi regarded him so highly. In the peculiar environment of Jiangdong, where Sun Ce and the four great generals of Wu all met untimely deaths, and even Taishi Ci perished under mysterious circumstances, Gan Ning, as a top-tier general, managed to avoid a similar fate. This could easily lead one to suspect that his "foolish" persona was merely a protective guise.

Liu Bei looked down at Cao Cao's body inside the coffin and sighed. He recalled their earlier days at Hulao Pass, where they had boldly declared their intentions and supported each other. Back then, he had thought Cao Cao would be his comrade in arms, helping to restore order to the chaotic times. Yet, before the chaos had even been quelled, the man he had once regarded as a kindred spirit now lay dead at his feet.

"Ah, Cao Mengde, you went too far," Liu Bei muttered in anger, leaning on the coffin. After a long pause, he continued, "Cao, rest in peace. I will care for your family and wives, and I will help fulfill the dreams you could not achieve."

After speaking, Liu Bei sighed and quietly left the tent where Cao Cao's body was kept. He was not the kind of tyrant who would extend his wrath to the families of his enemies. Nor did he wish to pursue the wrongs that Cao Cao had committed in life.

"Order the body to be sent to Yanzhou, Chenliu," Liu Bei instructed as he stepped out of the tent, letting out another sigh.

"Report! Urgent news from the strategist!" A messenger on horseback galloped over.

"Read it!" Liu Bei said calmly.

"Lord Xuande, if you have defeated Cao Mengde, please send troops north of Pengcheng immediately. There have been reports of disease outbreaks. The plague is already rampant in Donghai Commandery. Although Physician Hua has formulated a remedy, we lack sufficient medicine. I fear that if Cao's army did not handle the corpses properly, a plague might have already begun in northern Pengcheng," the messenger read aloud, his hands trembling and face pale with fear.

"This matter must not be disclosed!" Liu Bei cast a sharp glance at the messenger.

"Understood!" The messenger bowed his head even lower.

Unbeknownst to him, Chen Xi had also felt a chill run down his spine when he considered the possibility of what might happen north of Pengcheng. Historically, the plague in Xuzhou had swept through Qing,

Yan, Xu, and Yu provinces, four central provinces with a combined population exceeding ten million. The plague, compounded by consecutive years of disaster, had decimated half of the population.

To be frank, Cao Cao's massacre might have killed tens of thousands at most, but the subsequent plague caused by improper handling of corpses was the real issue. This was why Chen Xi had felt an unsettling sense of having forgotten something when he went to dispatch troops.

Historically, the plague that erupted in Xuzhou had severely weakened the province, stripping it of its status as the grain-producing hub of the central plains. The surrounding provinces, also affected by the plague, suffered a significant decline.

"Order Zilong to lead the White Horse Cavalry north of Pengcheng to investigate. Command Gan Ning and Taishi Ci to seal off the two rivers, and Guan Yu and Zhang Fei to seal the borders of Pengcheng. The rest will stay here with me," Liu Bei instructed his secretary Li You.

Li You frowned as he quickly recorded Liu Bei's orders. "My lord, it would be wise to also send a letter to Tao Gongzu, informing him of the situation in Pengcheng. I believe he will agree to our actions."

Liu Bei glanced at Li You but said nothing. He could already sense the thoughts of his subordinates, but as Li You suggested, it would be best to communicate the situation with Tao Qian directly. Tao Qian would surely agree.

"Come, let's go celebrate our victory with the troops," Liu Bei said with a hearty laugh, sweeping away the gloom from his brow as if nothing had happened.

Meanwhile, Xiahou Dun, Xiahou Yuan, and the remnants of their forces escorted Xun You westward toward Yuzhou. Of the tens of thousands of veteran soldiers they once commanded, only a few hundred remained. The group of officers and strategists was now reduced to a handful of survivors.

"Zhongde, you didn't need to knock me out," Cao Cao said to Cheng Yu after regaining consciousness.

"My lord..." Cheng Yu lowered his head, remaining silent.

"Zihe, Boren, Bojian, Gongliu, Yuansi..." Cao Cao scanned the faces of his remaining officers. "And Wenlie..."

Everyone lowered their heads.

"Zhikai and Wenruo are still in Yanzhou. What do I have to fear? Liu Xuande, you may have won today, but the day will come when we settle this once and for all!" Cao Cao took a deep breath and stood, his expression resolute.

"My lord, we must hurry to Yuzhou and join forces with Wenruo. If we remain out of contact for too long, I fear chaos will ensue in our territory," Cheng Yu urged.

"Send word to Wenchan to abandon Fanyang and retreat to Yanzhou," Cao Cao sighed, issuing his order. His officers exchanged uneasy glances.