

Mythical 381

Chapter 381: A Huge Haul

Cao Cao was stunned, his face growing even more somber. Little did he know that at this moment, Yue Jin was already surrounded by Lu Bu's forces in Fanyang. If it weren't for his duty to defend the town, Yue Jin would have already retreated. Upon receiving the news of Cao Cao's defeat, he would certainly retreat to Chenliu.

"Out of sixty-three thousand troops, only fewer than fifty remain..." Cao Cao murmured to himself. These sixty-three thousand soldiers represented all the grain reserves of Nanyang, the wealthiest region in the land. They were veteran soldiers trained over more than a year of continuous battles with Yuan Shu, and they were Cao Cao's trump card, painstakingly cultivated with all his effort—only to be lost in a single stroke.

"Master, we can recruit more soldiers, and weapons can be forged again. As long as we return to Yanzhou, Wenruo will surely handle these matters," Cheng Yu said, immediately bringing up Xun Yu. At this point, only Xun Yu could save the situation; no one else had a chance.

"Let's go back to Yanzhou!" Cao Cao said, with little else to say. Cheng Yu was unaware of the full situation and still believed Nanyang had grain reserves. But Cao Cao knew all too well.

Xun You's heart was filled with bitterness. Over sixty thousand battle-hardened veterans, fully equipped, all lost on the plains of Xuzhou.

Cao Cao, leading the way on horseback, felt a deep pain in his heart. Over sixty thousand battle-hardened soldiers... Xun Wenruo had recruited a full one hundred thousand new troops, constantly replenishing the numbers during their repeated clashes with Yuan Shu, always keeping the count at one hundred thousand. Now, of the seventy thousand or so that remained, only about one thousand were left with Cao Ren to defend Wancheng, three thousand with Yue Jin at Fanyang, and the remaining sixty thousand had perished at the hands of Liu Bei.

Realizing this, Xun You felt a sense of despair. In Yanzhou, they had at most fifteen thousand veteran soldiers left. As for the so-called hundred thousand strong in the farming militia, they were merely numbers on paper—barely even capable of serving as auxiliary troops on the battlefield.

Cao Cao looked up at the sky with a bitter expression. He silently prayed for good weather this year. Otherwise, he would have no choice but to abandon most of Yanzhou. With no troops to defend it, he lacked the manpower to hold even Nanyang, Chenliu, and Yingchuan.

Xun You, after considering all the possibilities, could only reluctantly give up. As he had said, with no troops left, Yanzhou was utterly defenseless.

Cao Cao's face was pale. Even if he drained the resources of the Wei clan in Hedong and the Wei clan in Chenliu, there was no way to support a three hundred thousand strong army. Not to mention the need for training, purchasing new weapons, and maintaining existing equipment. He now deeply understood that it would take over a year before he could regain his strength.

Xun You furrowed his brow. In the past, he hadn't paid much attention to it, but now he wondered—how did Liu Bei manage to sustain an army of 130,000?

Liu Bei was entirely unaware of Xun You and Cao Cao's concerns. He was currently hosting a banquet to celebrate his victory. For Liu Bei, having slain Cao Cao, captured over forty thousand of his soldiers, and seized enough weapons and armor to equip an additional sixty thousand troops, he could now easily raise a new army of over sixty thousand men, fully armed and ready for battle.

Unlike Cao Cao, Liu Bei's farming militia was also subjected to intensive training, albeit at half the level of his regular troops. However, with tens of thousands of these farming soldiers at his disposal, Yu Jin could quickly select the fittest among them for further training. In just over a month, he could merge these six thousand new recruits into his veteran units and reorganize all his forces. By using two-thirds of his veterans as the backbone of his new units, Liu Bei could ensure that his army's combat effectiveness would not diminish. In other words, thanks to Cao Cao's blunder, Liu Bei no longer needed to worry about the equipment and training of his regular troops—he could draw six thousand men from his farming militia to form a new army.

Meanwhile, Tao Qian, bedridden and weak, listened to Chen Deng read the reports. He waved his hand, signaling Chen Deng to leave.

At this point, Tao Qian had already come to terms with many things. Cao Cao clearly hadn't received his message, and Liu Xuande had truly come to fight Cao Cao because he couldn't stand the man's actions, not to interfere with Xuzhou's affairs.

Tao Qian, lying on his bed, realized he didn't have much time left. He thought with a hint of guilt. As death approached, he found clarity in his thoughts. No longer concerned with anything else, he now focused solely on his family's future. Why not go with the flow and hand Xuzhou over to Liu Bei? Since Liu Bei also disapproved of the aristocratic families who treated the common people like livestock, their ideologies didn't conflict.

Tao Qian's eyes gleamed coldly. He had long restrained the aristocratic families of Xuzhou, but now, as death loomed, he wouldn't allow these scourges to plague his successor.

Tao Qian sat up in bed, his body weak but his eyes shining with determination. The aristocratic families of Xuzhou had hindered him for years; he would not allow them to continue making trouble for his successor.

Chapter 382: The Onset of the Plague

A few days after Liu Bei left Donghai County with his army, Chen Xi, who had just finished organizing the troops, found himself overwhelmed by the worsening plague in the rear. When he returned with the deployment orders, he discovered that the epidemic in Langya and Donghai had begun to spread.

Fortunately, whether due to Tao Qian's change of heart or Chen Gui's attempt to show goodwill towards Chen Xi, the Xuzhou troops had arrived before the Taishan militia could be mobilized.

"How are things progressing lately?" Chen Xi asked, rubbing his temples after taking a sip of strong tea. He motioned for someone to pour Chen Gui some tea as well.

Whether it was a misconception or not, Chen Xi felt that ever since they started fighting Cao Cao in Xuzhou, his mental strength seemed to grow at a much slower pace, almost stagnating. He had consulted Hua Tuo about it, and after examining Chen Xi for a long time, Hua Tuo had said, "You're probably just reaching adulthood..."

At that moment, Chen Xi almost spat out his tea. Was he really not considered an adult before? Was this some kind of joke?

What Chen Xi didn't know was that if the people under Tao Qian's rule hadn't begun to accept Liu Bei, his mental strength wouldn't have stopped growing. After all, this situation was akin to expanding territory. However, with the spiritual support from Taishan and Qingzhou, these newly added regions

didn't even require the use of the reserved free-floating spiritual energy, leading to a strange balance. Unfortunately, this balance also meant that Chen Xi's mental strength stopped increasing.

"In Langya, Donghai, and several nearby counties, the people have been relocated from high-risk plague areas and are being quarantined. The tents from Taishan have arrived, and the deep wells you've requested have been dug at each relocation site," Chen Gui reported in detail after taking a sip of tea. It seemed he had fully integrated into Liu Bei's administration.

Chen Gui had great admiration for Chen Xi's methods. Since the discovery of the plague, the series of actions taken had effectively controlled the situation. Even if they stopped managing it now, at most, only about ten thousand people would die.

"Is there any panic? Has anyone tried to stir up trouble?" Chen Xi asked.

"None so far," Chen Gui replied, shaking his head. "We've informed the people that they need to relocate due to the potential plague, and we provided them with plenty of tents. For those who had already lost their homes, this was a relief. As for troublemakers, I've dealt with them. As per your instructions, we've also attributed the blame to Cao Cao."

"Those are minor issues. What about the medical supplies? Are they sufficient? And can Hua Tuo's treatments be simplified any further?" Chen Xi waved dismissively. Hua Tuo had developed an effective treatment for the plague, but the issue was the same as in history—it couldn't be widely distributed. Hua Tuo had made the prescription public, but one of the ingredients was too rare and expensive to be mass-produced.

"Hua Tuo has already developed three different formulas that can cure the plague," Chen Gui sighed, feeling that Chen Xi was being too demanding.

Chen Gui was at a loss for words. In his view, Hua Tuo was already a miracle worker. He had lived through dozens of plagues, big and small, and had never seen anyone come up with a cure. Once a plague struck, there was nothing to do but accept fate. Yet Hua Tuo had developed a cure, and Chen Xi was still pushing him to simplify it further. Was this even humanly possible?

Chen Xi was frustrated. He was baffled by the medical practices of this era—why did a single herb have twenty different names? And why were there multiple herbs with the same name? How was he

supposed to deal with that? To make matters worse, without illustrations, who knew what any of these plants looked like? He knew that something like Ge Gen Tang could cure the plague, but how was he supposed to know what Ge Gen looked like? And what was it called a thousand eight hundred years ago?

"I can't take this anymore!" Chen Xi muttered, watching dozens of people die every day. It was frustrating and disheartening. He had gathered so many medicinal herbs, yet people were still dying by the dozens daily. It was driving him crazy.

Chen Xi knew that if things continued like this, the plague would eventually pass with fewer than ten thousand deaths. Compared to the plague in history that killed millions, his efforts were practically a monumental achievement.

But as a modern person, it was unbearable for Chen Xi to watch ordinary people die powerlessly before his eyes, knowing he could save them but being unable to do so due to certain constraints. The frustration was overwhelming.

"Please calm yourself, Chen Hou. Let me finish my report on the plague situation," Chen Gui said humbly. He found Chen Xi's behavior puzzling—sometimes, Chen Xi seemed to have everything under control, and other times, he acted like an impatient child.

"Go ahead. What else is there?" Chen Xi said, trying to regain his composure.

"Recent intelligence indicates that the plague has resurfaced in Yinping and Changlu," Chen Gui reported with his head bowed.

"What? Didn't I relocate the people from those areas? How could the plague still spread?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled.

"It's believed that refugees from Pengcheng may have carried the disease with them," Chen Gui speculated.

"Cao Mengde, even in death, you leave us such a mess!" Chen Xi muttered, furrowing his brow.

Due to the protective effects of cloud energy in the army, there was no risk of infection within the military, so Chen Xi hadn't worried about the plague spreading from Cao Cao's camp. He assumed that any outbreak would be manageable after defeating Cao Cao. But now, it seemed the displaced population fleeing from Cao Cao's forces had brought the plague with them, creating a potentially deadly situation.

"It appears this is our fault. Because of the war, the people fled from Cao Cao, and among the tens of thousands of refugees, some must have carried the plague. This is disastrous! Quickly send a letter to Xuande, informing him of the situation, and include detailed instructions on how to prevent the plague," Chen Xi ordered, slamming the table and rising to his feet.

Chen Xi was utterly frustrated. He hadn't even fully dealt with the outbreaks in Donghai and Langya, and now, if things got out of control in Pengcheng, all their efforts in Xuzhou would be for nothing. What he feared most was a repeat of the plague that had devastated four provinces, leaving them in ruins.

"Chen Hou, please wait," Chen Gui said, nodding before instructing someone to fetch paper and ink.

"You can send the letter under my name. I'll go check on Hua Tuo. If this situation doesn't improve, I may need to take matters into my own hands!" Chen Xi said grimly.

Rather than allow history to repeat itself with a plague ravaging four provinces, Chen Xi would rather personally oversee the testing of all available herbs. Even if it meant risking a few hundred lives, it was preferable to losing millions.

Chapter 383: One Wrong Step Leads to Another, a Broken Game in the Middle!

While Chen Xi was going mad with frustration, Hua Tuo's research on Qinghao Decoction was nearing its conclusion. Hua Tuo had always been capable of treating plagues, but the persistent issue was that his prescriptions were difficult to distribute widely. Now, thanks to the vast variety of herbs Chen Xi had provided, Hua Tuo had more opportunities to experiment, enabling him to develop three different formulas in a relatively short time.

"Physician Hua, how's the progress on the prescription?" Chen Xi asked as he entered Hua Tuo's tent, greeted by the strong scent of medicinal herbs.

"I've made some headway with the Qinghao Decoction. I should be able to finalize it in a few days, but it might differ from what you recall," Hua Tuo replied with a bitter smile. He had discovered that with the abundance of herbs available, there were many possible substitutions, leading to some unusual outcomes that he hadn't encountered before.

"That's good to hear. Please keep me informed once it's ready. By the way, I've arranged for a large batch of earthenware pots to be produced on-site for boiling the medicine. If you need more, just have your guards fetch them. Focus on developing the prescription; everything else can wait," Chen Xi reminded Hua Tuo, fearing a repeat of the previous incident.

In the past, Hua Tuo had managed everything on his own. When he ran out of pots for boiling medicine last time, he went searching for more himself, wasting precious time that could have saved lives. Such delays were unacceptable, especially in life-or-death situations.

"Understood. I'll notify you once I have it figured out," Hua Tuo replied without looking up, his focus entirely on his research. As he continued working with more herbs, he began to notice patterns in their properties. Although these patterns weren't always reliable, they provided enough guidance for him to confidently say that he'd solve the problem in a few days.

"It seems the situation isn't as dire as I feared, but the consumption of medicinal herbs has been substantial. We'll need to restock soon," Chen Xi muttered to himself as he watched cartloads of herbs being transported from the rear camp.

Chen Xi had a peculiar tendency when it came to problem-solving: he could remain calm when issues didn't affect him directly, but when they did, he sometimes overlooked crucial details. For instance, he focused on the fact that people from Pengcheng had migrated to Donghai's Yinping and Changlu counties, but in his concern, he neglected to consider whether people had migrated elsewhere as well.

Little did he know that in Yu Province, which bordered Xuzhou's Pengcheng, refugees displaced by the Cao-Liu conflict—driven away by Cao Cao—were also carrying the plague with them. The Yu Province authorities, indifferent as usual, ignored the influx of refugees, leading to a small-scale outbreak that worsened with the warming weather.

Similarly, a few people from Xuzhou had entered Yanzhou through Fan County. However, with Wei Xu and his men guarding Yanzhou, they didn't allow anyone to pass through, sparing Yanzhou from the outbreak.

As for Taishan, anyone attempting to enter had to wait at the border for a period. When illness broke out among the migrants, Lu Su immediately sealed off the area, preventing any further movement and began a thorough inspection of Taishan, following the guidelines for epidemic prevention.

Xun Yu's face darkened as he read the reports coming in from Xuzhou. While rumors were spreading like wildfire in Chenliu that Cao Cao was dead and his sixty thousand troops had been wiped out in Xuzhou, Lu Bu was launching fierce attacks on Yanzhou, having already captured most of it. The people under Cao Cao's rule were in a state of panic. If not for Xun Yu's calm handling of government affairs and the desperate defense against Lu Bu's assaults, chaos would have ensued long ago.

"What are you doing, Xiubo?" Xun Yu asked with a grim expression, watching as Fan Qin packed his belongings.

"With Cao Mengde dead, I need to find a new lord. Liu Xuande seems like a good option—plus, my brother-in-law is there, and he's loyal to the Han Dynasty. Why don't you join me in defecting to Liu Xuande?" Fan Qin shamelessly suggested, genuinely considering switching sides.

"My lord isn't dead yet," Xun Yu replied, his face growing darker. "And the situation isn't as hopeless as it seems!"

"Impossible! The reports from Xuzhou say that Guan Yunchang has already secured Cao Mengde's body and sent it over. If nothing else, Guan Yunchang wouldn't mistake someone else for him," Fan Qin said, frowning.

"That was Qin Bernan. He resembles our lord by about seventy percent. Once he dons our lord's armor, mounts Zhaohuang Feidian, and wields Yitian Sword, even we would be fooled," Xun Yu explained with a sour expression.

"How can you be so certain it's not Cao Mengde?" Fan Qin asked, puzzled. "You're not one to make baseless claims."

"My spiritual ability only functions when our lord is alive. Since my ability is still active, it means our lord has escaped," Xun Yu said, feeling both relieved and conflicted. His talents relied on having a lord to serve; without one, he was only marginally more capable than others.

Fan Qin frowned, pondering Xun Yu's words, then suddenly grinned mischievously. "Even so, we're in trouble. Our lord lost everything up front, and now people in the rear are practically handing over supplies and soldiers to the enemy!"

Xun Yu's face turned even darker. When he learned that Cao Cao had ordered a massacre in Xuzhou, he knew things would turn bad. He had planned to recall Cao Cao and had hoped to steer him away from further mistakes. The eastern part of Yanzhou had always been a strategic weak point for Cao Cao—something Xun Yu had considered a burden rather than an asset. His plan was to distance them from both Yuan Shao and Liu Bei, keeping them from being dragged into conflict. Allowing Lu Bu to take over as a buffer seemed like a good idea at the time, so he had turned a blind eye to Chen Gong's meddling.

On top of that, Zhong Yao's recent letter about the situation in Chang'an had given Xun Yu much to consider. It prompted him to revisit old plans, ones he had shelved for a while. After all, compared to infantry, Xun Yu believed that the undefeated Xiliang Cavalry was the true key to winning the world.

Everything had been carefully arranged. Xun Yu had even planned for how to deal with Liu Bei, securing a candidate to act as a counterweight in Yanzhou. All that was left was for Cao Cao to return with his army, and they could begin executing their grand strategy—subduing Sili, securing the Xiliang Cavalry, and welcoming the Emperor. But instead, Cao Cao had given him a nasty surprise.

All of Cao Cao's hard-earned advantages were now gone. Forget about securing Sili, acquiring the Xiliang Cavalry, or welcoming the Emperor—if they didn't find a way to stop Lu Bu soon, everything would fall apart!

For the first time, the usually composed Xun Yu wanted to curse out loud. He had accounted for everything except for the possibility that Cao Cao could lose his entire army in Xuzhou. Damn it, Cao Cao! You should change your title to Quartermaster General instead!

Chapter 384: I'm Out of Options, Do as You See Fit...

To be honest, even though Fan Qin was making fun of Xun Yu, he had been shocked when he first guessed Xun Yu's strategy. Xun Yu's plan was flawless, accounting for everything. When Fan Qin realized the full scope of the strategy, he couldn't help but respect Xun Yu's brilliance.

However, no matter how meticulous the planning, fate still had the final say. Xun Yu never anticipated that Cao Cao would lose all his soldiers in one fell swoop on the plains of Xuzhou. As a result, all of their plans became a joke.

"Xiubo, do you have any good ideas?" Xun Yu asked, regaining his composure. "As a loyal subject of our lord, don't hold back."

"There's nothing I can do," Fan Qin said with a helpless shrug. "At this point, words are meaningless. Unless Yuan Benchu is willing to lend us troops, we're no match for Lu Bu. This isn't about strategy anymore; it's purely a matter of strength. But Yuan Benchu..."

Xun Yu frowned, already knowing what conditions Yuan Shao would likely demand. It would involve sending their entire family to Ye and becoming Yuan Shao's subordinates. That was unacceptable.

"If we hold the cities, we can manage for a while, but we won't last long," Fan Qin said, his expression one of exaggerated concern, which only deepened Xun Yu's displeasure.

"Our biggest problem right now is that we have no troops. Unlike Yuan Gonglu's infantry-focused army, Lu Bu's Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry makes it impossible for us to fight in open battles," Xun Yu sighed. Lu Bu didn't have many soldiers, but his cavalry was a deadly threat to Yanzhou. Other units could be held back with effort, but the Wolf Cavalry was too much to handle. Could they afford to abandon most of Yanzhou's cities?

"It's not that we can't fight in the open; it's that our new recruits can't handle it," Xi Zhicai said as he walked in, his expression grim. "We still have sixty thousand veterans. With some effort, we could surround and defeat the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry. But right now, can our new recruits even stand up to a probing charge from them without breaking?"

"Zhicai, you're well?" Xun Yu asked, surprised.

"Well or not, I had to come down. If I didn't, there'd be nothing left of Yanzhou but Chenliu," Xi Zhicai replied, frowning.

"Do you have any good ideas?" Xun Yu sighed, not expecting much.

"No great ideas. We need to hold off Lu Bu for now. Our Yanzhou militia may not be good for battle, but they can still work the fields. If that's the case, we can dig trenches and channels to hinder the Wolf Cavalry's speed. It's a stopgap measure, but it's better than nothing," Xi Zhicai said with a bitter smile. He was running out of options. Without troops, what could he do?

"That's all we can do for now. We'll have to draw some soldiers from Wancheng, but that will leave Nanyang vulnerable," Xun Yu sighed, feeling the strain of their stretched resources.

"We'll take it one step at a time. If we can't stop Lu Bu and Chen Gong, then all is lost," Xi Zhicai said, shaking his head. "If things get worse, we might have to turn to Yuan Benchu. What a waste of a good situation!"

Xi Zhicai's tone was one of frustration. He had only been away from Cao Cao's side for a few months, and now that he was back, everything had gone wrong. The situation was so dire that it nearly made him vomit blood.

Knowing Xun Yu well, Xi Zhicai could guess what his original plans were. But now, no matter how brilliant those plans were, they were useless. Cao Cao had successfully squandered everything—experienced soldiers, weapons, and all the assets they had built up for their future.

"This was my mistake," Xun Yu sighed.

"It's not about mistakes. We never imagined things would go this badly. What were Gongda and Zhongde thinking? Six thousand troops, not elite, but still veterans—how could they be utterly defeated? Even if they lost to Liu Xuande, they shouldn't have been routed like this. Now it's a total collapse!" Xi Zhicai said, barely containing his anger. He couldn't understand how Cao Cao's forces, which had been so well-prepared, could suffer such a devastating defeat.

"..." Xun Yu could only offer a bitter smile. He couldn't understand it either. With Xun Yu and Cheng Yu as strategists, Zhao Yan managing logistics, Cao Cao commanding the troops, Xiahou Yuan leading the vanguard, Xiahou Dun at the center, and generals like Cao Hong, Cao Chun, Cao Xiu, Mao Jie, Lu Qian, Shi Huan, and Han Hao, how could they lose so badly? No matter what strategy Liu Bei employed, they should have been able to counter it.

"Let's not dwell on it. Maybe they were too eager for victory," Xi Zhicai sighed. "I'll focus on slowing down Lu Bu's advance. You work on keeping order internally and strengthening the militia's training. We'll have to rely on the Wei family for grain. This is a tough situation, Wenruo. Be prepared."

Xun Yu remained silent. They had indeed miscalculated. While others thrived, Cao Cao had suffered a devastating blow. The road ahead would be difficult, even if they managed to fend off Lu Bu. It would take at least a year or two to recover to where they had been before marching on Xuzhou.

After giving Xun Yu his instructions, Xi Zhicai left immediately. There was no time to waste; every moment counted. Whether they could withstand Lu Bu's assault depended on how well Xi Zhicai could prepare. But without enough troops, it was a daunting task.

Meanwhile, Cao Cao finally began his journey back from Yuzhou's Pei County. Unfortunately, just as he thought he had escaped danger, he learned through rumors that most of Yanzhou had already fallen to Lu Bu.

The news hit Cao Cao hard. Already reeling from his losses, he felt a wave of dizziness. Though the information came from fragmented rumors, he pieced together enough to realize that Yanzhou was indeed in deep trouble.

Left with no other choice, Cao Cao abandoned his plan to return to Yanzhou's Shanyang Commandery and instead made his way toward Yuzhou's Yingchuan, where he still held territory. There, he would assess the situation and plan his next move.

At the same time, Yuan Shu's only son, inspired by tales of his father's youthful heroism in aiding disaster victims and determined to demonstrate his own chivalry and concern for the people, set out for Yuzhou's Pei County with a group of escorts. He brought along a cart full of medicinal supplies—ginseng, deer antler, bear bile, all kinds of tonics—ready to save lives.

"Young Master, we shouldn't go to Pei County. The plague is rampant there. It's no place for someone of your noble status," one of his escorts warned, trying to stop the determined Yuan Yao from entering the county.

"Hmph! Don't worry. I've inherited Brother Bofu's internal energy. I'm in excellent health now," Yuan Yao boasted, waving his sword in satisfaction. Having been frail for most of his life, Yuan Yao was thrilled

to have gained inner strength, thanks to Sun Ce's teachings. His admiration for Sun Ce had only grown since then.

Chapter 385: The Two Yuans Deploy Their Forces

Sun Ce naturally had no idea that after his internal energy reached a certain level, he kindly performed a minor energy infusion for the often sickly and frail Yuan Yao, who constantly referred to him as "brother." As a result, Yuan Yao, who had previously been unable to cultivate due to his weak body, now possessed the internal energy of a low-tier martial artist. With his newfound strength, Yuan Yao joyfully ran off on his own, even venturing into areas affected by the plague. Though his internal energy generally protected him from harm, this would still cause Sun Ce great anxiety if he found out later.

Yuan Shu, on the other hand, knew that Yuan Yao had regained his health thanks to Sun Ce and was greatly pleased with Sun Ce's actions. The previously postponed idea of adopting Sun Ce as his son was brought up again, much to Sun Ce's embarrassment.

As a result, Yuan Shu readily agreed to Sun Ce's proposal to subdue Jiangdong and even allocated eight thousand well-armed soldiers for the task. He also appointed Zhou Yu as the deputy commander of the Jiangxia navy, with Yuan Shu himself holding the title of commander in name only, leaving Zhou Yu in charge of most operations.

"That guy, Cao Mengde, attacked Xuzhou... Well then, I'll just give him a taste of his own medicine with a 'relieve the siege of Zhao by attacking Wei' strategy!" Yuan Shu gleefully arranged his military affairs, then ordered someone to find Yuan Yao. He intended to have his only son begin to take on some responsibilities, as Yuan Yao's health had improved enough to start learning military duties.

"Would you like to join me in this campaign to capture Yangzhou, Gongjin?" Sun Ce didn't hesitate to invite Zhou Yu to join him in subduing Jiangdong.

"Sure, but that would leave Jingzhou somewhat vulnerable. If Lord Yuan summons General Ji to assist with the campaign against Nanyang, Xiangyang might be left exposed to Liu Biao's schemes without a strong commander," Zhou Yu replied, agreeing without hesitation but expressing concern over the defenses at Xiangyang.

"You're right. That Huang Hansheng is tough; I couldn't best him even after dozens of exchanges," Sun Ce said, looking troubled. Xiangyang was crucial to Yuan Shu, and they couldn't afford to lose it.

"Bofu, I suggest sending Dong Yuan and Liao Gongyuan to Xiangyang. With Liao Gongyuan's wisdom and capability, he can easily gain recognition there," Zhou Yu suggested after some thought. "As for defending Jiangxia, leave that to Gu Yuantan and Ling Gongji. While they may not excel in offense, they can certainly hold the line in defense."

"Let's do it!" Sun Ce decided without a second thought. "I'll write the transfer orders myself. Lord Yuan said I could issue orders for up to three thousand troops on my own."

Zhou Yu silently acknowledged this, showing no visible reaction.

"Now, Gongjin, come take a look at the map. I want to take them down, so give me some ideas." After quickly handling the orders, Sun Ce spread out a map, pointing at Lujiang County's administrative center.

"The Lu family?" Zhou Yu immediately remembered. This was the same family that refused to acknowledge Yuan Shu's authority, stubbornly claiming to be loyal servants of the Han dynasty and calling Yuan Shu a rebel. They had infuriated Yuan Shu, but he had been too preoccupied with relocating his capital to deal with them at the time.

"Send troops under the pretext of disaster relief and request provisions from them. It's a justifiable reason to act," Zhou Yu sighed. He had little interest in the remaining territory north of the Yangtze River, preferring to focus on conquering Jiangdong. Still, if Sun Ce wanted to eliminate the Lu family, Zhou Yu had no objections.

"Great! How did Youping collect provisions from them before?" Sun Ce asked someone outside the room, and soon, Zhou Tai entered, looking a bit awkward.

"The Lu family usually just gave money and provisions voluntarily. We've never had to force them," Zhou Tai explained.

"How did we collect provisions from others? Give me a process, and I'll give it a try," Sun Ce said, motioning for Zhou Tai to leave.

Zhou Tai hesitated for a moment but eventually stepped back. In his view, the Lu family consisted of just a few direct descendants. If he and Jiang Qin stepped in to protect them, there was no need to explain the underhanded tactics typically used in these situations to Sun Ce and Zhou Yu. After all, it would be embarrassing to admit how unscrupulous things could get.

Meanwhile, in Hebei, Yuan Shao gazed at Ju Yi, who knelt in the snow before him, and sighed. "Zhengli, rise. I approve of your plan, but you must ensure your safety. Whether quickly or in a few years, I will defeat Gongsun Zan. You need not risk your life."

"My lord, Gongsun Bogui may indeed fall in time as you predict, but if we can defeat him sooner, you will gain the strength to sweep across the land all the sooner," Ju Yi said, standing up without bothering to shake off the snow on his body. Once Ju Yi committed to serving someone, he would devote himself entirely, disregarding his own life.

"Summon Yan Liang, Wen Chou, Zhang He, and Gao Lan to see me immediately!" Yuan Shao commanded, his demeanor turning authoritative as he resolved to follow through with Ju Yi's plan.

Before long, the four renowned generals of Hebei stood before Yuan Shao in his courtyard. "I intend to march north to attack Gongsun Zan. Even if we do not kill him, we will at least force him to retreat west of Youbeiping!" Yuan Shao declared with steely resolve.

"We await your orders, my lord!" Yan Liang, Wen Chou, Zhang He, and Gao Lan responded in unison. Unlike the straightforward Yan Liang and Wen Chou, Zhang He quickly deduced that this plan must have originated from Ju Yi.

"Zhengli, you will lead this northern campaign against Gongsun Zan. You may select the officers, and as for logistics, even if the roads are blocked by snow, I will ensure that supplies reach you!" Yuan Shao said with the full authority of his position. "I will not let the soldiers fighting on the front lines go hungry!"

"With our lord so determined, how could we not join the effort?" Xu You, dressed in a fur coat, approached with a smile, accompanied by Tian Feng, Ju Shou, Shen Pei, Guo Tu, Feng Ji, Xu You, Xin Bi, and Xin Ping—Yuan Shao's council of advisors.

"I didn't expect that the mere mention of Gongsun Bogui would make all of you so cautious," Yuan Shao remarked, feeling a surge of pride as he saw the group gather.

"Strategy is never a trivial matter, and war determines life and death," Xu You said gravely. "Even with a general of Ju Yi's caliber, we must be vigilant."

"Your words are true. Unlike the milder climate of the south, our northern winters are harsh, freezing everything solid. An assault on Gongsun Bogui during such a time would indeed catch him by surprise, possibly leading to the swift victory that Ju Yi describes. However, there is a crucial issue—can our soldiers meet these demands, and how many can do so?" Tian Feng stepped forward, reminding everyone of the harsh realities of winter warfare.

"We have three thousand six hundred men who can meet these conditions, and my goal is to use these three thousand six hundred men to crush Gongsun Bogui!" Ju Yi declared, his eyes gleaming with fervor. He was a warrior who thrived on the chaos of battle.

The courtyard fell silent. Even the falling snow seemed to pause. Three thousand six hundred men to seize Youzhou? How mad could one be?

Chapter 386: Virtue

Ju Yi led 3,000 of the Deadly Vanguard and 600 Great Halberdiers, along with Zhang He, as they set out from Ye City, marching through the snow toward Youzhou. Although many civil officials found Ju Yi's plan to be utterly unbelievable, they all acknowledged its feasibility. A special forces assault on the enemy's leadership would certainly throw the opposing army into chaos if successful.

"Zhengli, Junyi, you two are among the few commanders under my banner who can lead armies," Yuan Shao said as he stood atop the city gate, watching the troops gradually disappear into the snowy distance. Those troops represented the most elite forces under his command, led by one of his most capable commanders, Ju Yi.

"Lord, you need not worry. Although General Ju can be arrogant, he wouldn't have proposed this plan unless he had confidence in it," Tian Feng said, seeing Yuan Shao's concern.

"Ju Yi won't fail, and Zhang He is a cautious man. How could there be any danger?" Yuan Shao dismissed his cloak with a wave and descended the stairs, though he couldn't shake a feeling of helplessness.

Sending these two commanders out like this made him realize that his own strength was still lacking. Otherwise, why would such measures be necessary?

"Pass the order to all military and civil officials: prepare to cultivate the wasteland as soon as spring arrives," Yuan Shao commanded his scribe, Chen Lin, with determination.

"Lord Yuan, I request to resign," Chen Lin said, bowing his head. He had once thought highly of Yuan Shao, but after Yuan Shao intercepted the letter he had written on Liu Yan's behalf, Chen Lin's admiration turned to dissatisfaction.

As a renowned scholar, Chen Lin had always valued his integrity. He believed that if he promised to do something, he must follow through, and if he saw wrongdoing, he had to call it out. That was his principle. But Cao Mengde's outrageous actions, even though Liu Yan asked him not to, Chen Lin would have condemned them once he learned of the matter. But Yuan Shao's interception of his letter left him questioning his purpose.

"Are you determined to leave?" Yuan Shao asked, staring at Chen Lin.

"My reputation was built on my writings, documenting right and wrong in this world. If I witness an injustice and write about it, but it goes unheard, what purpose do I serve?" Chen Lin calmly responded.

If Yuan Shao hadn't intercepted the letter, it would have caused a stir throughout the land, condemning Cao Cao as a butcher. But with the letter intercepted and the truth obscured, most aristocratic families, indifferent to the plight of the common people, simply let the matter slide. Now, Chen Lin no longer wished to pursue it. Knowing the truth was enough for him.

"Where will you go?" Yuan Shao asked, knowing the answer.

"Just as there was once Xiahou An, who acted with generosity and righteousness, there is now Liu Yan, who distributes wealth generously. I will borrow from him by the millions," Chen Lin declared passionately.

Word had spread among scholars across the land that Liu Yan was a man of generosity. Those in need could turn to him, and he would help them without hesitation. So now, Chen Lin planned to pack up and

leave, no longer relying on Yuan Shao's salary. He would stay with Liu Yan for a while, and then find another lord to serve. After all, Chen Lin knew he was just another scribe. To any warlord, his presence wouldn't make much of a difference.

"Is there really no need to stay? Surely you can give me some leniency," Yuan Shao tried to persuade him, even though he rarely made use of Chen Lin.

"Should I show leniency to you, Lord Yuan, who will show leniency to the tens of thousands of innocent lives in Xuzhou?" Chen Lin responded, his expression filled with righteous indignation.

"Sigh. Very well. Would you at least allow me to see you off?" Yuan Shao thought, inwardly cursing. If that letter had gone out, what face would Cao Cao have left?

"Thank you, Lord Yuan," Chen Lin bowed, then followed Yuan Shao out of the city.

Meanwhile, Chen Xi looked at the herbal decoction that Hua Tuo had brought and let out a long sigh of relief. Hua Tuo had indeed lived up to his reputation.

"How effective is it?" Chen Xi asked, pointing to the Qinghao (*Artemisia annua*) decoction.

"It's almost a cure-all. The other herb you mentioned, Gancao (licorice root), also has good results, but compared to Qinghao, it seems less effective." Hua Tuo replied, pulling out some root pieces from his robe. "I never would have thought this could be used medicinally. It seems I need to test every tree and weed I come across."

Looking at the root pieces in Hua Tuo's hand, Chen Xi sighed. He used to brew tea from dried chunks of this herb, but he had never seen it fresh before.

"How effective is this one?" Chen Xi asked, pointing to the root in Hua Tuo's hand. "Does it need to be dried?"

"It's not as effective as Qinghao," Hua Tuo shook his head.

"Then let's go with the Qinghao formula," Chen Xi said, somewhat disappointed. If he remembered correctly, Gancao had been used for nearly two thousand years. Could it be that Hua Tuo's Qinghao formula had surpassed the original?

"No, it's quite the opposite. Gancao is actually more suitable. Although Qinghao is potent, it's not as widely available. Even if we publish the formula, most commoners won't be able to gather all the ingredients. But Gancao can be found everywhere, from the Central Plains to the barbarian territories. It doesn't even need to be dried—just eat it fresh, and it works," Hua Tuo explained with deep emotion.

Then, as if remembering something, Hua Tuo sighed. "It's a pity that the person who first discovered Gancao didn't leave behind a drawing. Otherwise, our people wouldn't have had to suffer so much from illnesses."

Chen Xi forced a smile. Could he tell Hua Tuo that this was a remedy created by Zhang Zhongjing, who was later canonized as a saint for it? That it was developed in 202 AD and used for nearly two thousand years? Despite feeling a bit guilty, Chen Xi decided that saving lives was more important. Surely Zhang Zhongjing wouldn't mind.

"Then let's publish the formula. Since this herb is so widespread, we'll start gathering and storing it. Every medicinal herb needs to be prepared to prevent shortages," Chen Xi declared, making the decision. Compared to the ten years of disaster that would reduce the population from 55 million to less than 10 million, this formula could save tens of millions of lives.

"This is exactly why I'm here. Please, Zichuan, have a skilled artist draw the Gancao plant. We cannot let it be forgotten like before. I will spread this formula across the land, ensuring that no more lives are lost to disease!" Hua Tuo said, his eyes gleaming with a zeal that bordered on fanaticism.

"It won't be forgotten," Chen Xi nodded.

Seeing Hua Tuo's enthusiasm, Chen Xi couldn't help but tease, "Hua Tuo, with this formula, if another plague strikes after Xuzhou, I'm sure you'll have a shrine built in your honor."

At that, Hua Tuo calmed down and sighed. "Once, I too came from a prominent family in Yuzhou. When I was young, Chen Hanyu recommended me for office. Even the Three Excellencies, Huang Ziyang, recruited me. But in the end, I gave it all up. I want to write a medical text, a book that will spare the

people from suffering. If I can't do it in my lifetime, then the next generation will. One generation after another, until it's done."

"Hua Tuo, your ambition is truly admirable!" Chen Xi said solemnly. "If you ever need my help, don't hesitate to ask. I won't hold back."

Chapter 387: Natural Disasters Are Coming

The quarantined areas in Langya and Donghai had already been lifted, but many of the relocated people did not return to their original homes. One reason was the fear of returning to a place where the plague had occurred, worrying that they might get infected again. Another reason was the appeal of the deep wells in the new locations—such wells, which provided water even during droughts, were rare in this era.

"Hua Tuo, come with me to Pengcheng. Although the plague has been brought under control thanks to the medicine, I think it's best we join up with Lord Xuande," Chen Xi said as he watched Hua Tuo tending to the sick among the refugees.

When Chen Xi arrived in Pengcheng, as he had expected, the plague there had already been contained.

Entering the government office in Pengcheng, he found the atmosphere unusually somber, lacking the excitement typically following a great victory. Seeing Chen Xi enter, Liu Bei smiled faintly and said, "We owe much to you this time, Zichuan. The people of Xuzhou have been spared from the plague because of you. No need for formalities, have a seat. I have something to discuss with you."

"What's the matter, everyone?" Chen Xi asked, frowning. "Did something major happen?"

"There's news from Yuzhou—Cao Mengde is not dead," Jia Xu said with a wry smile. "And it seems he didn't die in Yuzhou either. This information has been confirmed by Yuan Shu's son and Ji Ling, who saw Cao Cao accompanied by Xun You, Cheng Yu, and the Xiahou brothers."

"What? Did we kill a decoy?" Chen Xi was stunned.

It seemed Cao Cao's misfortune continued. While others might not recognize a disguised Cao Cao, Yuan Shu was familiar with him, and his son Yuan Yao knew Cao Cao quite well. Although historically Yuan Shu

had once mistaken Qin Shao for Cao Cao, that was an unusual circumstance. Under normal conditions, it was unlikely to happen.

So, when Yuan Yao, who was providing relief in Pei County, spotted Cao Cao from a distance, he hesitated but said nothing. When Ji Ling arrived to escort him back, Yuan Yao suddenly acted, but unfortunately, he misjudged his own strength and failed to capture Cao Cao, though it did cost him some men. Even so, Cao Cao suffered a significant setback, abandoning his plan to return to Yanzhou via Yingchuan and instead choosing to take the more difficult route through Shanyang County back to Chenliu.

"Cao Mengde truly has good fortune," Chen Xi muttered before turning to Jia Xu. "Have we identified their abilities yet?"

"In terms of spiritual talents, Ziyang and I have analyzed the reports from Xingba and the others. Their abilities are troublesome, and one misstep could lead to disaster," Jia Xu said grimly.

"Explain," Chen Xi said, intrigued.

"One of them likely possesses a commanding-type spiritual talent that enhances the army's leadership and resilience. This is evident from the fact that despite six ambushes, Cao's troops did not collapse. As for the other, we've confirmed it—it's a talent that makes others overlook him, rendering him practically invisible. In its most extreme form, this ability turns the user into something as mundane as the road itself. This talent is nearly unbeatable for both ambushes and escapes unless directly confronted," Jia Xu explained with a helpless expression.

"If it's so inconspicuous, how was it discovered?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"It was Xingba who broke through it by killing Cao Chun. Once counterattacked, the effect seems to dissipate. Normally, we would have ignored them, treating them as mere passersby," Jia Xu replied, frustrated. Xun You and Cheng Yu were both brilliant strategists, and the idea of treating them as background noise on the battlefield made Jia Xu shiver.

"If they attack, it's a kill shot," Chen Xi murmured. Such spiritual talents were indeed difficult to deal with. "But if it was discovered, how did they still manage to escape?"

"There were no great generals left with them. I assumed it was just some stragglers, and when the Xiahou brothers arrived, Ziyi and I went after them instead. Who would have thought Cao Cao had no major generals with him at the time?" Gan Ning said, shrugging. There wasn't much he could do about it now. Everyone assumed Cao Cao would be with his top generals, so they focused on taking out the big names, leading to this outcome.

"Forget it. Just be more vigilant next time. With spiritual talents like these, there's not much we can do. We should be grateful they didn't manage to turn the tables on us. If they want to escape, there's little we can do," Chen Xi reassured them. "Cao Mengde, with no soldiers left, won't be able to recover until next year at the earliest. And this year, we should be able to amass enough strength to dominate the Central Plains."

"Yuzhou finally borders us now," Liu Ye said with a knowing smile shared by those who had been to Yuzhou.

"Indeed, Yuzhou is no longer an isolated territory for us," Li You added, reflecting on how their prior groundwork in Yuzhou had finally paid off, making it ripe for the taking whenever they chose.

"But let's not set our sights on Yuzhou just yet. We need to stay under the radar. If we gain another province now, we might provoke a united front against us. Right now, compared to the Yuan brothers, we're not as conspicuous. Let's bide our time and seize the Central Plains in one fell swoop. As Zichuan said, we don't need allies," Guo Jia confidently declared.

Chen Xi simply smiled without commenting. From their position in Xuzhou or Qingzhou, they might not feel it yet, but the rapid climate changes across other provinces were not normal. The good weather from history had ended, and disastrous weather was brewing—droughts, locust plagues, torrential rains after June, followed by freezing disasters and more plagues, all repeating year after year. Crops would barely yield anything, and the relentless natural disasters...

"Xuande Gong, has Tao Gong invited you to Xiapi?" Chen Xi asked.

"I gathered everyone to discuss this matter. Now that Xuzhou has been dealt with, I'm planning to withdraw to Mount Tai and quickly sweep through eastern Qingzhou according to our plan. We've already prepared seeds, tools, and enough food for the campaign. After a few months of providing for the hundreds of thousands of people there, by June, they should be self-sufficient, and we won't have to worry about food supplies anymore," Liu Bei explained. After learning from his strategists for so long, Liu Bei now understood their usual planning methods well.

"Do you have a plan?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"Wenhe suggests that Yun Chang lead Yide, Zijian, and others to escort Fengxiao and the others back to Mount Tai. Xingba and Ziyi will take the navy down the Yellow River to patrol the borders of Qingzhou, while Zilong leaves a garrison here to protect me and Wenhe as we head to Xuzhou for a meeting," Liu Bei said.

"That works. The campaign in Qingzhou doesn't need anyone in particular to lead it. We've already won the hearts of the Yellow Turbans there, so we just need to go and take control. There's no need for the lord to remain in Mount Tai," Chen Xi nodded, agreeing with Jia Xu's plan.

"The lord also hopes that you and Hua Tuo will accompany us to Xuzhou," Jia Xu added. "Tao Gong is critically ill, and for a martial artist of his level, falling ill is a near-certain sign of death."

"Very well, I'll go too," Chen Xi agreed without hesitation. He quickly understood Jia Xu's reasoning. Tao Qian couldn't die before clearing out the troublesome local aristocracy in Xuzhou. Liu Bei's benevolence would play a crucial role in this.

Chapter 388: The Biggest Trouble is Still Yuan Benchu

Liu Bei led a legion commanded by Zhao Yun, along with over 20,000 Danyang soldiers, toward Xiapi in Xuzhou. Liu Bei had returned the weapons and equipment to the Danyang soldiers, and for those who had perished in battle, their weapons and gear were handed back to their respective units.

Speaking of the Danyang soldiers, they were perhaps the most peculiar force in the Han Dynasty. Unlike other troops who often lacked lower-ranking officers, the Danyang soldiers had plenty at every level, but they often lacked a unified command. Perhaps this was because they were conscripted from villages, each unit formed from an entire village.

"Zichuan, are you sure this won't cause any problems?" Jia Xu asked, frowning. "This approach might provoke widespread anger. We could be attacked by multiple forces at once. Although we haven't attracted much attention yet, the biggest threat remains Yuan Benchu. While we both control two provinces, Yuan Shao has two horse-producing regions and one major grain-producing region."

"I never said we should do this right away," Chen Xi replied, shaking his head. "Right now, we can't withstand a joint attack from all sides. Especially if Yuan Shao grants Lu Bu access to Bingzhou—once the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry is replenished, our cavalry, which is hard to replace, won't stand a chance against Lu Bu's forces. At best, we could manage a stalemate."

"I'm intrigued by Chen Gongtai's thinking. If we could win him over, it would make things much easier," Jia Xu sighed. "We've laid too many plans in Yuzhou, partly to seize the province and partly to ensure that, once we move north, we aren't attacked from all sides."

"We can try reaching out to him, but as for Lu Bu..." Chen Xi hesitated. "I wrote him a letter as a fellow native of his hometown during the Battle of Hulao Pass. Overall, he seemed to appreciate the gesture, but his erratic nature makes him hard to predict. Wenhe, what do you think?"

"Kill him," Jia Xu responded coldly. "If we bring him in, he'll be hard to control and difficult to place. Zilong or Zijian can handle cavalry just as well, so we don't need the versatility of the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry."

Chen Xi frowned slightly. There was no denying that Lu Bu was the most formidable in terms of absolute strength. Even Guan Yu wouldn't dare to claim victory over him easily. While Zhao Yun had a speed advantage, defeating Lu Bu was another matter entirely. In fact, Guan Yu might have a better chance than Zhao Yun, even though Guan Yu might not be able to best Zhao Yun at this point.

"His temperament is too unpredictable for us to manage. Zichuan, have you forgotten what happened to Ding Yuan and Dong Zhuo?" Jia Xu said, not even bothering to look up. "By the way, your tea is getting stranger."

Clearly, Jia Xu didn't want to dwell on the matter of Lu Bu, so Chen Xi didn't press the issue. He shifted the conversation to the tea Jia Xu had mentioned, "It's just kudzu root tea. Drink up; this stuff... well, it's something I used to have regularly..."

At this point, Chen Xi stopped talking. Kudzu root had been a staple of his previous life, but in this one, he hadn't had the chance to drink it.

"A treasure that can cure plagues, huh?" Jia Xu took a sip of the tea, finding nothing unusual about it. "Tao Gongzu really seems to be on his last legs, and it looks like he's paving the way for our lord."

"Yes, I've noticed that too. The entire Cao family has been wiped out. All related clans, whether there was solid evidence or not, have been eliminated. Now, the aristocracy in Xuzhou is terrified," Chen Xi sighed.

When Chen Xi saw this intelligence report, he was shocked. Tao Qian's move was brutal—once he decided to act, rivers of blood followed.

To be honest, Chen Xi had initially planned to rein in the Xuzhou aristocracy after taking control, but he had never expected such ruthlessness. He had intended to limit the influence of the aristocracy rather than annihilate them, as stability in Xuzhou would still require their support. Wiping them out completely might lead to even more severe backlash.

"Perhaps this makes things easier for us," Jia Xu said calmly.

"...Why do I feel like this is going too smoothly? How is it that all these troublesome families were taken down by Tao Gong so easily, with ironclad evidence at that? Had Tao Gong been planning this for a long time?" Chen Xi asked, feeling uneasy.

Jia Xu silently perused his documents. He was currently trying to create an opportunity for Yuan Shu. Cao Cao's subordinate with the insidious spiritual talent made Jia Xu feel a constant chill down his spine. Since he wasn't on their side, it was better to eliminate him as soon as possible—the man was too dangerous.

"Zichuan, if you have time, you should pay attention to the situation in Jizhou and Youzhou. Although the current situation with the Zhen family is keeping Yuan Shao preoccupied, I have little confidence in Gongsun Bogui. Ju Zhenli and Xun Youruo, along with Tian Yuanhao, have been particularly active," Jia Xu remarked, flipping through his papers. He didn't have a clear plan for Yuan Shu yet—after all, Yuan Shu was notoriously unpredictable, making it difficult for Jia Xu to manipulate the situation to his advantage.

"Are you suggesting that Xun Youruo might suspect the Zhen family?" Chen Xi asked, furrowing his brow.

"That shouldn't be the case. The Zhen family's position is clearly tied to Jizhou—what benefits Jizhou benefits them, and vice versa. While they've clashed with Yuan Shao and have animosity with the Hebei aristocracy, they need Jizhou to remain stable. Even if the Zhen family does something unreasonable, Yuan Shao would likely see it as mere venting rather than cause for suspicion," Chen Xi reasoned.

"It's not about that. Given the current situation, Yuan Shao might be planning to marry all the Zhen daughters into his family. What I'm saying is, Yuan Shao might be preparing for war," Jia Xu said, emphasizing his last point.

"The Xian Deng and Da Ji Shi? And Xun Youruo and Tian Yuanhao have also disappeared?" Chen Xi's eyes widened as he quickly pieced it together. If Yuan Shao were indeed moving troops, this could mean an incursion into Youzhou—a cold and harsh region, especially in the Han Dynasty, where it might still be snowing in April and May. Launching a campaign there now would mean advancing in temperatures around minus ten degrees Celsius.

"Yes, while the Xian Deng Dead Warriors and the Da Ji Shi are formidable, their limited numbers restrict their operations. At most, they could seize a county and hold the county seat. But the real issue is that Xun Youruo and Tian Yuanhao have also vanished," Jia Xu sighed.

Casually setting aside Yuan Shu's affairs, Jia Xu wasn't overly concerned about Yuan Shu, even though they now shared a border. From the beginning, the only person Jia Xu considered a real threat was Yuan Shao, who dominated the North. Yuan Shao's ambition and power commanded Jia Xu's attention, and so far, Jia Xu had seen no signs of incompetence in Yuan Shao.

"Which other officers have disappeared?" Chen Xi asked, then seemed to recall something. "What is the Black Mountain Army up to these days?"

Chapter 389: The Will of the People

"So, you're saying Yuan Benchu is preparing to consolidate his internal power? That makes sense. If Gongsun Bogui is pushed back to Youbeiping, Yuan Benchu only needs to lock down Yuyang County, and he can effectively ignore Gongsun Bogui," Jia Xu said with a nod.

"That seems to be the case. Yuan Benchu has fought continuously for two years. Even though Jizhou is prosperous, without proper restoration and rest, it could damage his foundation," Chen Xi contemplated. "The biggest problem for both Jizhou and Bingzhou is the Black Mountain Army, entrenched in the Taihang Mountains."

"Defeating the Black Mountain Army could allow him to capture their population and expand his domain, while also eliminating internal instability—similar to how you dealt with the bandits in Mount Tai. However, the Black Mountain Army is larger, and the benefits are greater," Jia Xu frowned. If Yuan Benchu successfully integrated the Black Mountain Army, it would indeed be troublesome for Qingzhou.

"It's clear that Yuan Benchu won't engage us directly until he's consolidated his forces. Meanwhile, we're cautious about Jizhou's power, as any conflict could escalate into a decisive battle," Chen Xi sighed. Based on the intelligence, Yuan Benchu was displaying great ambition and strategy, except for his emphasis on noble birth; otherwise, he was a leader who treated talents with respect.

"Although we've been preparing for a final confrontation in the north, it seems that two years of preparation is still too short. Despite incorporating the forces from Mount Tai, the Yellow Turbans still lag behind Jizhou's natural wealth. Fortunately, we've caught up," Chen Xi remarked as he looked through the documents Jia Xu had handed him, feeling somewhat resigned.

It's remarkable how, in an agricultural era, it only took two years to catch up and even surpass. In an industrial age, this would be impossible without a decade or more.

"Yuan Shao also understands that we're intent on securing Qingzhou and Xuzhou, so he's using this time to strengthen his own position. The biggest problem with the Black Mountain Army is their lack of unified command. They consist of twenty-five different forces, with numbers ranging from three to five thousand for the larger groups to just one or two thousand for the smaller ones. Even if we wanted to help, it would be difficult. Although they're all Yellow Turbans, they lack the cohesion that Qingzhou's Yellow Turbans have," Jia Xu said, frowning. Without a unified command, Jia Xu had little faith in the Black Mountain Army.

Chen Xi couldn't help but smirk. This was the very issue that led to Ju Yi's death in history. Dissatisfied with Yuan Shao's rewards, Ju Yi had helped the Black Mountain Army capture Yecheng, keeping the spoils for himself—a move that ultimately led to his downfall.

"Forget it, let Fengxiao handle this. He seems to be good at dealing with these matters," Jia Xu concluded after some thought.

Although the Black Mountain Army was disorganized, the key difference between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei was that Yuan Shao lacked the people's support among the Black Mountain Army. Over the past two

years, Liu Bei had fully gained the trust of the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou. When Liu Bei marched out of Qingzhou, he would likely encounter little resistance. However, when Yuan Shao moved against the Black Mountain Army, they would fight to the death, even if they knew they couldn't win.

"The Black Mountain Army is not weak in combat. Zhang Yan is also a capable commander, and the terrain there isn't suitable for large-scale battles. If Zhang Yan can unify his twenty-five forces, he could command around 500,000 troops..." Chen Xi's eyelid twitched at the thought. Half a million troops? That's more than all the other warlords combined. The Yellow Turbans truly lived up to their name.

"Their offensive capabilities are limited, but they're more than capable of defending. Does Xuangaogong have any writings or tactics from the great chieftains of the past?" Jia Xu asked curiously. While the Yellow Turbans might not know it, Jia Xu and the others had long suspected that the entire situation was a trap.

"Even if they do, it won't matter. We need to find a way to create a hero among the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans, similar to the great chieftains, so that their indomitable spirit can disrupt Yuan Shao's internal consolidation efforts," Chen Xi suggested, already plotting how to build a hero for the Black Mountain Army.

"Your approach has too many flaws. It might work against the Yellow Turbans, but it won't fool Yuan Benchu. If Xun Youruo or the others expose the truth, the Black Mountain Army, which still has some fighting strength, will completely collapse," Jia Xu immediately dismissed Chen Xi's idea. While it might deceive the Yellow Turbans, it wouldn't stand up to scrutiny from the other warlords who knew the truth.

"...Alright, I'll leave it to Fengxiao," Chen Xi said, resigned.

In Xuzhou, at Xiapi, Tao Qian was nearing the end of his life. Within a short period, even Chen Deng hadn't fully grasped what was happening as the Cao family was exterminated, the Zhao family was stripped of power, the Zhang family was exiled, and only the Chen family, confined to Donghai, remained among Xuzhou's major families.

At the same time, over a dozen smaller families had been wiped out, leaving the entire region of Xuzhou in a state of fear, with everyone dreading that Tao Qian's blade might turn toward their own families.

In this climate, even before Liu Bei arrived at Xiapi, nearly all the families in Xuzhou had sent letters of praise and support, with some even openly expressing their desire for Liu Bei to take over Xuzhou.

At this point, Chen Xi fully understood what it meant to be welcomed with open arms. Liu Bei had already garnered the support of the common people through his actions during the massacre in Xuzhou and the subsequent plague, and now he had won the loyalty of the aristocracy as well. Xuzhou was practically within his grasp.

"Jia Wenhe, I'm increasingly convinced that you had a hand in all of this," Chen Xi remarked as they neared Xiapi. The situation in Xuzhou was becoming clearer, and it was obvious that Jia Xu had played a role. Tao Qian couldn't have acted so decisively on his own, but the fact that no one noticed Jia Xu's involvement was a testament to his skill.

"Tao Gongzu already had plans to deal with certain families in Xuzhou. I merely went along with it. However, the short-sightedness of the Xuzhou aristocracy is remarkable. Their internal infighting and mutual accusations expanded what should have been a limited purge into something much broader. Even the Chen family has been implicated," Jia Xu explained calmly. He had simply planted a few agents at the right time, and the resulting accusations had snowballed into the current situation.

"The Chen family? What did they do?" Chen Xi asked, curious.

"Ballistae. The Chen family has fully functional ballistae, and they possess the complete technology to produce them," Jia Xu said, his expression emotionless.

"...I'm at a loss for words. Ballistae? Possessing even crossbows is a capital offense, but ballistae, and the ability to produce them? The Chen family is something else," Chen Xi said, feeling a mix of admiration and disbelief.

"Is the intelligence reliable?" Chen Xi asked.

"It is. We've already seen the evidence," Jia Xu replied, a cold glint in his eyes. "And where do you think the ballistae used by Zhang Kai to ambush Cao Ju Gao came from?"

"The Xuzhou aristocracy is quite something," Chen Xi said, raising his thumb in acknowledgment. It was clear that even those families not directly involved in the assassination of Cao Song had added fuel to the fire.

"I've already sent messages to Chen Yuanlong and Chen Hanyu. We'll need those craftsmen for our purposes," Jia Xu said calmly. Ballistae, even without the enhancement of cloud energy or internal energy, were more than capable of taking down a general.

Chapter 390: The Divine Plan of the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou

In Jiaodong County, Beihai Commandery of Qingzhou, Guan Hai was gnawing on an unknown piece of meat, chewing and swallowing it with a sense of dissatisfaction.

"Boss, this isn't going to work! Qingzhou's spring comes early, and it seems like they're busy with other things over in Mount Tai—no more road construction. Our brothers are running out of food," said a subordinate named Jiang Qian.

During the winter, many Yellow Turbans had disguised themselves as refugees to work on construction projects in Mount Tai, earning food and money. Even Guan Hai, a leader among the Yellow Turbans and a skilled fighter, had joined in the work. This allowed them to have some spare change for food during the difficult early spring months when there was no work and no grain.

"What's going on with Liu Xuande? Why did he stop attacking after reaching Beihai last year? Now we're stuck in a tough spot," Guan Hai scratched his head, feeling frustrated. He was eager to surrender to Liu Bei, but he couldn't even find him to do so.

"I have no idea," his subordinates all shook their heads. "It's a good thing that during the winter, we got grain and silver from working in Mount Tai. Otherwise, many of our brothers wouldn't have survived. But who knows when they'll start construction again in western Qingzhou this year."

"We should find a way to make them take us in. Right now, we're basically surviving on public works projects in Qingzhou, but we don't have household registrations. We need to ask for household registrations!" Guan Hai said, feeling even more desperate.

No matter how much he thought about it, Guan Hai couldn't understand Liu Bei's strategy. Although the Yellow Turbans had been infiltrating the refugee camps and working on public projects, Liu Bei had turned a blind eye to it. However, he rarely granted them household registrations.

Without a household registration, they had no land and no homes. They were forced to continue living as refugees. Seeing those Yellow Turbans who had ventured out of Qingzhou and been granted basic household registrations by Liu Bei last year, Guan Hai couldn't help but come up with a rather foolish idea.

"Boss, we'll follow whatever you say," his subordinates replied. They were just as frustrated as Guan Hai. For these Yellow Turbans, who had nothing but their physical strength, the prospect of a stable life in Qingzhou, with food, drink, housing, and farmland, was a dream come true.

Of course, this was after a year of observing Qingzhou's policies. It seemed that Qingzhou was genuinely lenient toward the Yellow Turbans, as long as they turned over a new leaf. They could obtain initial household registrations, and even medium-level registrations, with the potential for high-level ones.

From the information Guan Hai had gathered from Zhou Cang, Liao Hua, and others, it seemed that those who had settled down could even send their children to school for free. This news left Guan Hai envious, wishing he could trade places with them. After all, they had all started as commoners, yet those who had joined Liu Bei early now had opportunities for their children to become scholars and officials.

"Let's go attack Kong Rong. We'll surround Beihai with our 1.2 million Yellow Turbans. I refuse to believe that Liu Xuande won't send troops then. Once he does, we'll surrender. I can't believe he wouldn't accept us after that," Guan Hai shared his plan with his subordinates, who all gave him a thumbs-up in approval.

"Boss, we should make this as grand as possible. While we still have some spare change, let's buy up grain, then rally all the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou to surround Beihai. That way, our show of force will be even stronger. And if necessary, with so many people, we could even borrow grain from Kong Rong," one of his subordinates suggested, his eyes gleaming with cunning.

"Good idea! Let's do it. Everyone, use your winter earnings to buy grain, then notify all the other leaders about our plan. Tell them to bring their own grain and join us in the siege of Beihai. Anyone who's late will be left behind," Guan Hai decided. He had been waiting anxiously for Liu Bei to take him in, and his patience was running thin.

"Recently, grain has been selling quickly," Lu Su noted as he reviewed the reports from Mi Zhu. "Is someone stockpiling?"

"I don't know. Their methods are strange, and I haven't been able to catch any leads. As for hoarding grain, we've had two years of good harvests, so it doesn't seem necessary. Grain prices have been falling steadily. In fact, Zichuan has been buying grain to prevent prices from falling too low and hurting the farmers," Mi Zhu said, frustrated by the situation. Despite the high volume of sales, there hadn't been any large transactions to track.

"Lady Zhang, is the same happening with your family?" Lu Su asked Zhang, who sat listlessly in her chair.

"Our family hasn't noticed anything unusual either, but grain is indeed selling quickly. I think if someone's buying, we might as well sell and see what happens. With the amount of grain stored in Mount Tai, there's nothing to worry about," Zhang responded nonchalantly.

With the commercial network of the Zhen family fully established across Jizhou, Zhang no longer felt the pressures of survival. She had become less cautious and more indifferent to financial matters. The Zhen family had entered a golden age.

"Absolutely not! That grain is reserved for our campaign against the remaining Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou. We plan to wipe them out completely, leaving no hidden dangers," Lu Su insisted. He couldn't allow Zhang to act recklessly.

"In that case, I'll try selling a little on my own. Consider it a charitable act. Even if we sell at cost, the Zhen family won't suffer any loss," Zhang replied dismissively, ignoring storage and labor costs.

"I'll give it a try as well," Mi Zhu sighed. He could clearly see the growing financial power of the Zhen family, even without doing the math.

Neither Mi Zhu nor Zhang realized that the grain was being purchased by the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou for stockpiling. The lack of large-scale purchases had kept them from considering this possibility. As a result, the Yellow Turbans quietly bought enough grain to sustain themselves for ten days, preparing to launch their grand siege on Beihai.

After Zhang left, Mi Zhu hesitated for a moment before returning.

"Do you have something else to discuss, Zizhong?" Lu Su asked curiously.

"It's about my younger brother. He's not skilled in either literature or martial arts, but he has a wild streak. I want to send him to the army for some discipline. Can you recommend which general I should approach?" Mi Zhu asked, feeling slightly embarrassed. He was a man of noble character and didn't like asking for favors, but his brother Mi Fang's behavior had left him with no choice.

"Mi Zifang? Don't worry, Zichuan already made arrangements before he left. He said that Zifang has a noble spirit and values loyalty, so he'll achieve great things. Zichuan was very confident about it," Lu Su said. He, too, recalled Mi Fang's carefree nature, but Chen Xi's sharp eye was well-known, so he refrained from criticizing Mi Fang.

Mi Zhu smiled awkwardly, thinking that Lu Su was just being polite. After all, he knew his brother's true nature all too well.