

Mythical 401

Chapter 401: Breaking the Momentum

"Let's not do that. If we act too deliberately, it might be noticed by Xun You and Tian Yuanhao," Chen Xi shook his head and said.

"Too much of anything is harmful. Forget it. In that case, we'll leave this matter to Wenru. After all, if Wenru plans carefully, very few people can withstand his schemes. Let's see how Wenru handles this," Jia Xu sighed. He was also a bit excited; engaging with a master strategist always invigorated him mentally.

"Strategic planning indeed," Chen Xi mused, recalling some unpleasant events. "If Xun Wenruo (Xun You) had already been plotting against Chen Gongtai (Chen Gong), how would this situation be resolved? Oh, and speaking of which, the strategy Kongming (Zhuge Liang) gave to Cao Mengde (Cao Cao) might drive Cao Cao mad. It seemed feasible at the time, but now it's just an illusion, like flowers in a mirror or the moon in the water."

"I remember you mentioning Kongming's strategy. It seemed highly feasible, but in reality, it was undermining the foundation. Zhuge Kongming isn't that kind-hearted," Jia Xu shook his head. "The plan appeared flawless at first glance, but upon closer inspection, it's riddled with hidden dangers. Cao Mengde might not see it in the heat of the moment, but he would understand once he calmed down."

In fact, Jia Xu underestimated the situation. At that time, Cao Cao was already furious, and after reading the plan, he was even more enraged, tearing Zhuge Liang's letter to shreds. Although he remembered that Zhuge Liang's strategy was excellent, he didn't want to dwell on that painful memory, and thus never reexamined the strategy. As a result, in Cao Cao's mind, Zhuge Liang still remained a wise and extraordinary strategist.

"You can't fool people, I knew that. To truly deceive someone of that caliber, you'd need someone like you who's willing to take risks. Otherwise, a letter alone won't withstand scrutiny," Chen Xi sighed. That letter was meant for Zhuge Liang to showcase his intellect, to make Cao Cao regret his decisions. As long as it confused him momentarily, it was enough to demonstrate Zhuge Liang's wisdom.

"There's no helping it. Leaving aside Xun Wenruo, Xi Zhicai, and others, Cao Mengde himself is one of the most astute individuals in the world," Jia Xu sighed. "As for the scenario you mentioned, I've thought about it again and again. There's only one possibility."

Hearing this, Chen Xi also had a bitter expression. Considering Chen Gong's character, Lu Bu's personality, Xun Yu's caution, Cao Cao's ambition and appreciation for talent, and the composition of Cao's strategists, he deduced that there was indeed only one possibility.

"Did Zichuan (Chen Xi) figure it out too?" Jia Xu sighed. He had always been curious about Chen Xi—sometimes he seemed clueless, yet at other times, his intelligence was on par with anyone's.

"Xun Wenruo plans three steps ahead; how can you compete with that?" Chen Xi said helplessly. "If this is the only possibility, then there's nothing more to say. It's an inevitable situation, and we can only accept it."

"Hahaha, you say Xun Wenruo plans three steps ahead, but aren't you doing the same? Besides, so far, Xun Wenruo's strategies have always been forced by your maneuvers. You often forget to account for yourself, Zichuan. Xun Wenruo plans ahead just like you, but he's been pushed to the limit by you," Jia Xu laughed.

"It's not that simple. Whether we admit it or not, Cao's army is indeed growing stronger. Even though we defeated them soundly this time, they're still far more powerful than they were when they returned from Hulao Pass. Xun Wenruo has been strengthening the Cao army all along," Chen Xi shook his head. Xun Yu, whom Cao Cao referred to as "my own Zhang Liang," was indeed difficult to deal with. His presence was crucial for stabilizing Cao Cao's rear.

"However, after this defeat, it will be hard for Cao Mengde to rise again. Lu Fengxian (Lu Bu) won't give him another chance. After over three months of intense fighting, Cao Mengde can't hold out any longer. Once the summer harvest comes, Cao Mengde will be in trouble," Jia Xu said calmly.

"Cao Mengde listened to Zaozhi and Xun Wenruo, opening up barren land in Yanzhou for large-scale farming. Now, almost all of Yanzhou is in Lu Bu's hands, with 90% of the farming areas under his control. This is truly a case of being trapped by one's own actions," Jia Xu shook his head repeatedly, not wanting to comment further on Cao Cao's bad luck.

Chen Xi sighed deeply, not wanting to say more. If Cao Cao hadn't attacked Xuzhou, Yanzhou would have had a bountiful harvest this year, giving him the resources to launch a western campaign. But now, all his resources had been handed over to Lu Bu. If Lu Bu doesn't use them to overwhelm Cao Cao, it would be surprising. Chen Gongtai was indeed ruthless, and Xun Wenruo had nerves of steel.

"Originally, Xun Wenruo's plan should have been to use Lu Fengxian and Chen Gongtai to expose all the internal conflicts in Yanzhou. Then, whether he dealt with them himself or used Lu Bu's hand, Yanzhou would have become solid as a rock," Chen Xi sighed. "And Xun Wenruo was confident that Cao's army would lose this battle against us in Taishan, and that Cao Mengde would recognize his mistakes."

"He would realize the gap between us and then turn back to fight Lu Bu, who now holds most of Yanzhou. Lu Bu would surely lose," Chen Xi said with a hint of admiration.

"Cao Mengde is a man of great courage. Once he sees the gap between us, he will surely find a way to subdue Lu Bu. Moreover, with Chen Gongtai's personality, if Lu Bu seeks to save his own life, Cao Mengde, if he overlooks past grievances and acknowledges his mistakes, will likely accept his surrender. Lu Bu would then never rebel again," Jia Xu said with deep emotion.

"Abandoning Yanzhou was meant to purify his forces and force Cao Cao to return to Yanzhou. If he had succeeded in subduing Lu Bu, Xun Wenruo would have suggested marching into the central plains, and the Xiliang cavalry would have been incorporated into Cao's forces. But now, it's just an illusion, like flowers in a mirror or the moon in the water."

"It won't be that easy to fail," Jia Xu shook his head. "Although Cao Cao may be unable to withstand Lu Bu in the plains, if he's pushed to the limit and defends Chenliu and the strategic passes, Lu Bu will struggle to drive him out of Yanzhou."

Chen Xi didn't respond. Historically, when Cao Cao first fought Lu Bu, it went just as Jia Xu predicted—Cao Cao was no match for Lu Bu. However, when a locust plague hit, Lu Bu's summer harvest was completely lost, giving Cao Cao a chance to regroup and eventually defeat Lu Bu.

"My concern now is that if Xun Wenruo finds a way to gain control of the central plains and incorporate the Xiliang cavalry, it would be bad for us," Chen Xi sighed. Xun Wenruo planning three steps ahead was no joke. While he could imagine Xun Wenruo's reaction upon learning of Cao Cao's defeat, he also believed that this situation wouldn't leave Xun Wenruo without options. Historically, Cao Cao had faced even more dangerous situations.

"We'll take it one step at a time. Our priority is to strengthen ourselves; that's always more important than weakening others," Jia Xu said calmly. "As long as we maintain our current strength, we need not fear any strategy. Just breaking through with superior power is what you're best at."

Chapter 402: A Tragedy Foretold

Chen Xi turned his head to look at Jia Xu, "Wenhe, I always thought you were a master of intrigue. Why the sudden change? Breaking the momentum is the essence of an open strategy. Have you switched your tactics?"

Jia Xu glanced at Chen Xi, "Whether it's intrigue or open strategy, a good plan is one that can be used effectively. Intrigue is easier and more efficient, achieving a lot with little. Open strategies are straightforward and unstoppable. The two should be combined, not separated."

Chen Xi shrugged. He wasn't good at scheming; his strength lay in straightforward strategies—no matter how the opponent maneuvered, he would break through with sheer force.

"But once intrigue is exposed, it loses its value and can easily be turned against you. So, it's unwise to base major plans on intrigue alone. At the same time, there are situations where open strategies can't be applied. As long as it's practical, it's a good plan," Jia Xu said with a peculiar expression.

"Another pragmatist," Chen Xi shrugged. "Open strategies are indeed useful, especially in our current situation where we hold the momentum."

After Liu Bei left, the aristocratic families of Xuzhou began to stir. Li You, however, appeared indifferent to their actions, almost deliberately allowing them to run unchecked.

Li You smirked as he watched the various reactions of the Xuzhou family heads during their first meeting after Liu Bei's departure. Except for Chen Gui, who made Li You slightly cautious, the others could be easily dealt with.

As the Xuzhou family heads bickered amongst themselves, Li You calmly sipped his tea, hiding his expression. Little did the Xuzhou families know that while they were plotting to divide Xuzhou's wealth, Li You, sitting in the governor's seat, was already planning how to divide their estates. Even Chen Gui, who intended to be cautious around Li You, hadn't anticipated that the middle-aged scholar sitting at the head of the table harbored such ambitions, nor that he had the ability to execute them.

Meanwhile, Lu Su had received urgent news from Qingzhou. The Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou were once again gathering, and it looked like they were amassing an army of a million. Upon receiving the report, Lu Su immediately sent word to Xuzhou and relayed the information to Guan Yu, who had just returned to Taishan.

When Guan Yu and his troops withdrew from Xuzhou, Liu Bei had already made preparations according to Chen Xi's plan. If the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou made a move first, the Taishan army would cease their rest and Guan Yu, with Guo Jia and Liu Ye as his strategists, would sweep through Qingzhou within a month.

The strategy was simple: if the Yellow Turbans stayed put, they would be dealt with slowly, pacifying them while establishing new settlements with the captives. But if the Yellow Turbans acted first, they would be swiftly crushed to prevent other warlords from exploiting the situation. After defeating them, they would reorganize the region.

"My lord, I am willing to go and persuade the current Yellow Turban leader, Guan Hai, to surrender," Liao Hua knelt before Guan Yu, who was preparing to march. The more he understood Taishan, the more Liao Hua realized how fragile the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans were. Especially now that they were gathering again, if Guan Yu were to get angry and unleash his fury, blood would flow in Qingzhou.

"Yuanjian, do you know what you are asking?" Guan Yu opened his eyes slightly, and a cold light flashed across Liao Hua.

"Lord, I beg you to give the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou a way out. They are only acting out of hunger, having been misled by others. They long for the life in Taishan. Please, my lord, grant them mercy," Liao Hua knelt on the ground, tears streaming down his face for the first time, not for the hardships he had endured, but for the fate of his former comrades.

"Please, my lord, give the Yellow Turbans a way out..." Zhou Cang also knelt before Guan Yu. Once the army set out, it would not return without bloodshed—such had always been the rule.

"How confident are you?" After a long silence, Guan Yu finally spoke.

"Thank you, my lord. We will do everything in our power to persuade Guan Hai. He has always wanted to join Taishan but never had the opportunity. I am willing to convince him," Liao Hua said, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Taishan can accept the Yellow Turbans, but we won't accept the leader of a rebellious million-strong army. Tell him to make his choice!" Guan Yu's words were blunt, something Guo Jia and Liu Ye would never have said. They would have quietly dealt with Guan Hai after subduing the million Yellow Turbans.

Liao Hua's eyes filled with tears. "My lord, the Yellow Turbans only seek a stable home. They were deceived. I am willing to try and persuade them."

"Then go," Guan Yu said calmly. "Be careful."

"Liao Hua will not fail you," Liao Hua said, his eyes red with determination. He swore that even if it cost him his life, he would not let Guan Hai lead the million Yellow Turbans into the abyss.

"Go," Guan Yu said softly.

Liao Hua left, discarding his armor and donning the ragged clothes of his Yellow Turban days. He wrapped a yellow scarf around his head, mounted a horse, and set off for Beihai.

Guan Hai was a stubborn man. Once he set his mind on something, no one could change it. He had been a leader under Zhang Jue, and now, for the sake of the million Yellow Turbans, Liao Hua felt he had to try. The people of Qingzhou were on the verge of a better life, and now this happened. Knowing the suffering of the Yellow Turbans, Liao Hua was willing to risk his life.

Guan Hai, unaware of the trouble he had caused, was still pleased with his plan to surround Beihai and give Kong Rong a scare. He believed that once he surrounded Beihai, the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans would be able to surrender to Liu Bei and become good citizens within a month.

"The grand commander is indeed wise. Our brothers working on infrastructure in western Qingzhou have sent word that Taishan is preparing to destroy us. Hahaha, when they come, we'll surrender, and then we'll be citizens under Lord Xuande's rule," a Yellow Turban leader shared the news after the alliance meeting, feeling triumphant.

"Hahaha, if that's the case, there's no need for more bloodshed. We'll just surround Beihai without attacking, like a performance at Taishan's theater," Guan Hai laughed. He was proud of his leadership, guiding the Yellow Turbans toward a brighter future.

Chapter 403: The Divine Stone Creates History...

"Alright, we will all follow the orders of the Grand Commander!" The smaller commanders all agreed. They didn't want to leave a bad impression on Taishan in their final moments, and Guan Hai indeed accelerated their path to joining Taishan. Because of this, they were happy to recognize Guan Hai as their leader in these last days.

"Then it's settled, brothers. We'll surround but not attack, waiting for Taishan to come and fight us. Once they arrive, we'll all surrender together!" Guan Hai shouted.

"Agreed! We will follow the Grand Commander's orders!" The smaller commanders shouted in excitement. To them, a bright future was within reach. As for whether Taishan would kill them, after observing the lives of Zhou Cang, Pei Yuanshao, and Liao Hua, they believed that as long as they surrendered, they would be fine.

When Chen Xi received this intelligence, he was speechless. Guan Hai was digging his own grave. If they had waited just a month, they would have been dealt with anyway—why rush it? He had even considered recruiting Guan Hai, after all, he was someone who took over thirty rounds for Guan Yu to defeat. But in this world, with Guan Yu's current strength, Guan Hai wouldn't last a single round if he didn't possess the power of "Internal Energy Released."

"Sigh, what a pity. Guan Hai is doomed," Chen Xi sighed. "A brave general who charges into battle, but once his brain fails him, he's finished."

"Just another Yellow Turban remnant," Jia Xu sneered.

"But it's a pity for a Yellow Turban remnant who reached the level of 'Internal Energy Released,'" Chen Xi said, shaking his head.

"Internal Energy Released?" Jia Xu was stunned. "Since when did warriors at that level become so common? How did even the Yellow Turbans have one?"

"This is a golden age for warriors; there's no helping it. You'll see more and more warriors at that level in the future," Chen Xi shrugged. He couldn't help but recall that even someone like Cao Hong could hold his own against Ma Chao in the later stages, going fifty or sixty rounds before retreating. It seemed that warriors with "Internal Energy Released" wouldn't be rare in the future.

"This shouldn't be!" Jia Xu frowned. "You may not know, but I've come across records from the imperial palace about warriors through the ages. 'Internal Energy Released' is supposed to be the pinnacle of a warrior's abilities, and there shouldn't be so many. In fact, since the Qin and Han dynasties, there has only been one—Xiang Yu. No one else has reached that level!"

Chen Xi was stunned. "That doesn't make sense. How could there have been no one with 'Internal Energy Released' for centuries?"

"The palace records state this clearly. That's also why Wang Yue, a mere swordmaster, became an imperial teacher—he was the first to reach 'Internal Energy Released' since Xiang Yu. After him came Tong Yuan, and then Huang Hansheng (Huang Zhong)," Jia Xu slowly revealed the hidden information he had uncovered in the palace archives.

"This doesn't make sense. There are already many warriors at that level now. How could it be that none appeared for over four hundred years?" Chen Xi frowned. From what he knew, reaching 'Internal Energy Released' was difficult, but not to the point where no one could achieve it for centuries.

"This is a fact. More accurately, even Lu Bu has just taken the first step beyond the peak of 'Internal Energy.' Others, including Wang Yue and Tong Yuan, merely reached the pinnacle of 'Internal Energy.' However, they developed many secret techniques, ultimate skills, and forbidden arts to enhance their strength," Jia Xu explained, combining his knowledge from the palace records with information from Lu Bu.

"So you're saying that Tong Yuan and Wang Yue might be able to defeat Lu Bu in battle, but in terms of true mastery, they're not at his level?" Chen Xi was stunned. This defied all logic!

"Yes, that's exactly the case. Lu Bu disdains secret techniques and such. His goal is to break through the limits and reach an even higher level. To him, secret techniques are nothing more than distractions—he seeks stable and balanced combat power, not temporary bursts of strength," Jia Xu said solemnly.

Chen Xi silently reflected on this.

"But what about the previous centuries? How could so many legendary generals have failed to break through?" Chen Xi wondered, frowning. Even the Yuntai Twenty-Eight Generals under Liu Xiu (Emperor Guangwu) should have had a few who reached 'Internal Energy Released.'

"According to the Han dynasty records, none of them did. In fact, most of the great generals of the early Han barely reached the level of 'Refined Qi into Steel,'" Jia Xu said, his expression becoming increasingly strange.

"Really? What about later? If that's the case, then Xiang Yu seems highly unusual. And isn't our current situation even more illogical?" Chen Xi asked, curious.

"The Divine Stone appeared twice, not just once, Zichuan. The 'Annals of Emperor Guangwu' records, 'At night, a meteor fell in the camp, during the day, a cloud encircled the mountain, and the meteor fell, dissipating a foot from the ground, causing the soldiers to prostrate themselves in fear,'" Jia Xu revealed a fact that Chen Xi had never known.

"Isn't that a record of the Battle of Kunyang?" Chen Xi muttered. He remembered it as a battle where a small force of ten thousand faced an army of four hundred thousand and won through seemingly impossible means—comets, meteor showers, and even a great flood wiped out the enemy...

"Wait, are you saying that meteor had the same effect?" Chen Xi finally grasped what Jia Xu was implying.

"Yes, that meteor had an effect. When it fell, it partially melted, releasing energy that elevated the Yuntai Twenty-Eight Generals to the peak of 'Refined Qi into Steel.' It also granted Emperor Guangwu's ten thousand soldiers 'Internal Energy.' However, unlike the previous Divine Stone, this one solidified with a shell instead of slowly dissipating," Jia Xu explained the details recorded in the archives.

"And what happened to the Divine Stone afterward?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"No one knows. It wasn't in the palace, and there's no further record of it in the archives," Jia Xu sighed. The imperial palace's forbidden grounds had been thoroughly searched, but to no avail.

"If the current Divine Stone disappeared like the previous one, that could explain the current situation. It's clear that the second stone's effects were much stronger than the first. This is a major issue..." Chen Xi mused, his thoughts drifting far and wide.

Chapter 404: The Divine Stone is a Minor Issue

Jia Xu's words made Chen Xi realize that the problem might not just be about the Divine Stone but also about the "Child of Destiny." Wang Mang was clearly a time traveler, yet even with his grasp on power, he was ultimately defeated by the Child of Destiny...

Cough cough, this wasn't good news. If there really was such a thing as inevitable causal correction, it would be troublesome. Although the world could still be unified, the difficulty would escalate from hard mode, skip over hell and nightmare modes, and go straight to war god level. Inevitable causal correction!

Chen Xi rubbed his temples as he thought about this.

Chen Xi was speechless as he pondered.

Chen Xi frowned and contemplated deeply.

He thought about many things, but in the end, he had to stop his thoughts. There wasn't much information on this subject, and there were few examples to draw from. Relying solely on speculation was too uncertain.

Chen Xi estimated that if he hadn't hit a nerve yet, there were still many ways to maneuver.

Chen Xi's expression improved significantly.

"Zichuan, why did you seem so uneasy just now, almost distracted?" Jia Xu asked, puzzled. "Isn't it just another Divine Stone? As the strength of the generals increases, so does ours, right?"

"It's nothing, just some thoughts," Chen Xi replied, his eyes showing a trace of helplessness. Some things could only be carried by oneself. Even if many minds were better than one, Chen Xi knew it was best not to share these matters with others. If he told Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei that all their efforts were predestined by fate, even the most resilient person might feel a sense of defeat.

"Fighting against the heavens is truly exhilarating," Chen Xi muttered with a faint, unfathomable smile. At this point, what more could be said? Liu Bei's ideals intertwined with his own—they were comrades in the truest sense. There was no turning back. This world must be unified under Liu Bei!

Jia Xu looked at Chen Xi in confusion. What was this all about? He had just made such a cryptic statement out of nowhere.

"Wenhe, don't worry about it," Chen Xi said, opening his fan to hide his expression with a light chuckle. "Just some old memories. We'll need your strength more than ever. We must unite and challenge the warlords of this land, making them submit to our overwhelming power!"

"Alright..." Jia Xu responded weakly, seeing the fervor in Chen Xi's eyes. He muttered to himself, "It seems Zichuan and the Lord enter a fervent phase every now and then..."

Jia Xu didn't know the term "chuunibyou," or he might have realized that Chen Xi was perfectly embodying the concept right now.

Chen Xi, whose hearing was quite sharp at times, heard Jia Xu's muttering word for word, which made him a bit embarrassed. Annoyed, he swung his folding fan at Jia Xu.

"Hehehe~" Jia Xu chuckled darkly, blocking Chen Xi's fan with his own, then countering with a strike of his own. The two of them ended up playfully dueling with their fans inside the carriage.

Two days after Liu Bei received the intelligence about the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans, Yuan Shao's side also received the same information.

"Those Qingzhou Yellow Turbans really go big, don't they? Another million-strong army! And under the leadership of a Yellow Turban commander!" Yuan Shao laughed heartily. He had been looking for a way to trouble Liu Bei, and now, it seemed, fate had handed him an opportunity.

"My Lord, we can use Guan Hai to stall Liu Xuande. If the million Yellow Turbans stay united and make random attacks, Liu Xuande will find it difficult to incorporate Qingzhou," Xu You immediately stepped forward, bowing to Yuan Shao.

"Zi Yuan is right," Shen Pei said, glancing at Xu You. Although their political views often clashed, the Yuan Shao faction was still united at this point, and they hadn't started sabotaging each other. "The Qingzhou Yellow Turbans lack food, but we in Jizhou do not. We can use grain to manipulate them."

"Guan Hai is not one of Liu Xuande's subordinates. He surrounded Beihai because of a lack of food. So, using grain to influence them is the wisest course of action. We can also grant the Yellow Turban commanders titles, appointing them as prefects of various counties in Qingzhou," Ju Shou added.

"Since you all agree, then let's contact the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans. Tell Guan Hai that if he can hold out until June, I, Yuan Benchu, will grant him one million shi of grain. We can give him one-tenth of that now as a gesture of good faith. Additionally, I will petition for him to be appointed Governor of Qingzhou, with full control over its affairs," Yuan Shao decided after a brief consideration. Ever since the rise of the Taishan Chamber of Commerce, the concept of a deposit had become widespread.

Yuan Shao, with his abundant resources, didn't care about giving away a hundred thousand shi of grain. To show his sincerity, he even ordered Meng Dai to lead a thousand soldiers to escort the grain to Beihai in Qingzhou.

Sometimes, a person's ambition determines their altitude. Regardless of the outcome, Yuan Shao was determined to deliver the grain to Guan Hai. After all, according to Yuan Shao's intelligence, Guan Hai was bound to clash with Liu Bei. Even if they didn't cooperate, Yuan Shao was happy to cause trouble for Liu Bei.

Chapter 405: The Yellow Turbans

When Liao Hua arrived at Beihai, none of the Yellow Turbans stopped him. Even as he approached the main camp, there was no resistance. It wasn't until he reached the inner camp that two Yellow Turban guards finally barred his way.

"Tell Guan Hai that a former Yellow Turban has arrived," Liao Hua said.

Having rushed all the way there, and after receiving a lecture from Guan Yu, Liao Hua became increasingly aware of the Yellow Turban army's weakness. There were no scouts, no patrols, no sentries, and no way to check for infiltrators. They relied purely on raw courage, which could only lead to a disastrous defeat.

"Hahaha, Brother Liao, you're here!" Guan Hai's loud voice boomed from within the camp. "Why are you stopping him? He's one of us, a fellow Yellow Turban. If it weren't for him, Zhou Cang, and Pei Yuanshao scouting ahead for us, we'd still be hiding in Qingzhou, never daring to surrender to Taishan."

"What! Guan Hai, you say you plan to surrender to Taishan?" Liao Hua exclaimed in shock. "If that's the case, why have you gathered a million people to besiege Beihai? Kong Beihai has already sent a plea for help, asking General Guan to send troops to exterminate you!"

"Don't worry, don't worry," Guan Hai said nonchalantly.

"Don't worry? The fire is about to reach your eyebrows! General Guan is ready to send troops to wipe you out. If you plan to surrender, why do this? You're playing with the lives of a million Yellow Turban brothers!" Liao Hua shouted in anger.

"Liao Yuanjian, explain yourself! Who's playing with the lives of a million Yellow Turban brothers?" Guan Hai angrily demanded. "You don't know the hunger we face. We've been waiting eagerly for Lord Xuande to accept our surrender. But when the infrastructure teams in western Qingzhou vanished, we were left with nowhere to turn. If I hadn't gathered the brothers to figure something out, we'd all starve!"

"Your method is wrong! You should have surrendered, not led the brothers to besiege Beihai!" Liao Hua shouted back, his face dark with anger. "Do you realize that your actions have completely disrupted Taishan's plans? In a month, General Guan would have marched, and as long as you surrendered then, he would have accepted you and built cities on the spot! Do you know what building cities means?"

"A month! Have you considered what time of year it is? It's early spring. We have no surplus grain. In a month, tens of thousands of brothers will have starved to death!" Guan Hai roared at Liao Hua. "If I didn't gather the brothers, would Taishan march now? Would they?"

Liao Hua fell silent, knowing Guan Hai spoke the truth. A month later, the Yellow Turbans might still number over a million, but tens of thousands would never wake up again.

"I gathered a million people, restraining them from attacking, just to force Taishan to act. The more men we have, the more Lord Xuande will value us. When they arrive at Beihai, I will lead the million Yellow Turbans to surrender," Guan Hai said, his eyes bloodshot.

"I never wanted to dominate a region. The Yellow Turbans have suffered, and no one cares about us. No matter how many die, we're just called bandits. Now, we finally have a chance to farm, to live in homes, to have families—this chance is right in front of us. How could we not cherish it?" Guan Hai gripped Liao Hua's shoulders as he spoke, his words echoed by the tearful nods of the surrounding Yellow Turban leaders.

"Guan Hai..." Liao Hua whispered, a bitter taste in his mouth.

Indeed, only the Yellow Turbans knew their own suffering. Guan Hai was fighting against fate, and he wasn't wrong. He just wanted to lead his brothers to a better life. Gathering a million people was his desperate attempt to bring that day closer. He had waited for Liu Bei to take Qingzhou, waited until he could wait no longer, and was forced into this risky strategy.

"Yuanjian, go back and tell General Guan that as soon as he arrives, we will surrender," Guan Hai said solemnly, placing a firm hand on Liao Hua's shoulder.

"Guan Hai, I'll stay here for now. There are some things I need to tell you," Liao Hua replied bitterly. For the Yellow Turbans to live peacefully, there could be no leader, no figure of immense prestige. Such a person could not survive.

"Hahaha, then stay here. We're all old friends, no need for formalities. You know our situation," Guan Hai said casually. For the Yellow Turbans, who had only ten days of rations left, saving food was a priority. Guan Hai couldn't afford to be wasteful.

With that, Guan Hai led a group of people to take Liao Hua away. The usual banquet to welcome a guest was skipped. In these times, extravagance was a luxury the Yellow Turbans couldn't afford. They would settle for a simple wild vegetable dumpling for dinner.

"Here, take this." After fetching his horse, Liao Hua pulled a piece of dried mutton from his saddlebag and tossed it to the gaunt-looking Guan Hai. "Eat it. It's not easy for an old brother like you."

"Good stuff!" Guan Hai caught the meat, inhaling its scent deeply as saliva nearly dripped from his mouth. But he still put it away. "Tonight, I'll chop it up and add it to the porridge for everyone."

"Sigh..." Liao Hua sighed. Seeing Guan Hai's actions, he couldn't help but feel a strange sense of foreboding. He leaned closer and whispered, "I need to speak with you tonight."

Guan Hai nodded without saying much, leading Liao Hua to the main tent and sitting down wherever they found space. "Come, Yuanjian, tell us about the current situation in Taishan. Among us, only you are familiar with it. The most we've heard are rumors from the infrastructure teams in Qingzhou. Tell us what you've seen with your own eyes so we can put our minds at ease."

"Yes, Liao, tell us! We've all heard that Taishan is rich and provides a way out for us Yellow Turbans. But what kind of wealth is it, really? We're anxious to know. Is it true that we'll have wives, land, and homes?" a small Yellow Turban leader asked, while the others eagerly looked at Liao Hua.

The Yellow Turbans had pinned all their hopes on Taishan, but they needed to know if it was just hearsay or the real deal. They trusted that Liao Hua, as a former brother, wouldn't deceive them.

Seeing their hopeful eyes, Liao Hua slowly recounted everything about Taishan. As he spoke, the light in their eyes grew brighter, and they longed to join Taishan as soon as possible.

"Can we really learn to read and write?" Guan Hai asked in a hoarse voice. "Will Taishan really teach us? Yuanjian, can you read now?"

"I've learned some. The teacher said I have talent, and I've already mastered the Thousand-Character Classic. The lord even recommended that I study military strategy," Liao Hua said, scratching his head, a bit embarrassed but also full of admiration for Guan Yu.

Liao Hua was proud of his literacy. He had started learning with Zhou Cang and Pei Yuanshao under Guan Yu's recommendation. Zhou Cang could now barely write his name, and Pei Yuanshao had learned about two hundred characters. Liao Hua, however, had completed the Thousand-Character Classic and was now studying military texts with Guan Yu and Guan Ping.

Chapter 406: I Wish I Didn't Know

"Hahaha! I never thought we Yellow Turbans would one day produce a scholar!" Guan Hai laughed heartily. "Once we surrender in a few days, I'll go learn to read too! Come, come, write my name for me. I've been called Guan Hai for so many years, but I don't even know how to write those two characters. Yuanjian, write it down for me!"

For common folk, becoming literate was no easy feat. Someone like Liao Hua, who could now read military texts, was indeed an anomaly.

As Liao Hua wrote Guan Hai's name on the ground with his hand, a group of Yellow Turban leaders eagerly gathered around, their faces full of envy.

"Our late leader, Xuan Gao, sacrificed his life to give us this opportunity. Lord Xuande has already promised to teach the people under his rule how to read," Liao Hua said, his eyes reflecting admiration as he thought of the leader he had never met.

"No wonder Lord Xuande is so respected! I've never called anyone 'lord' so naturally before," Guan Hai said as he looked at the two characters on the ground, vaguely recognizing the shapes. He vaguely recalled that Zhang Jiao had written his name in a similar form before.

"Liao, help us write our names too. We've never seen our names written down," another leader chimed in, and the rest quickly echoed the sentiment.

"No problem," Liao Hua nodded. He proceeded to write down the names of everyone present, and they all gazed at the ground with excitement, newfound respect for Liao Hua in their eyes. Literacy always inspired admiration.

That night, Liao Hua brought a gourd of strong alcohol for disinfecting wounds and a dried chicken as he entered Guan Hai's tent. The Yellow Turbans didn't have many tents; many of them simply gathered some branches and leaves to sleep on, with no blankets to speak of.

"Yuanjian, you have something to say to me, don't you?" Guan Hai's mouth watered as he saw the food Liao Hua was carrying. After eating nothing but vegetable dumplings for so long, he couldn't help but drool at the sight of dried chicken.

"Eat first, then we'll talk," Liao Hua said, handing the dried chicken and gourd of wine to Guan Hai.

Guan Hai accepted the food and wine but hesitated, then sighed and put them down. "Yuanjian, speak your mind. The brothers can't even fill their bellies with vegetable dumplings. I can't eat this. I'll chop it up and make porridge for everyone."

If it weren't for the loyalty and camaraderie among the Yellow Turbans, they would have scattered long ago. The fact that the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou had survived without internal conflict was due to the strong leadership and the bond among them.

"Sigh, Guan Hai, do you realize the trouble you've caused?" Liao Hua opened the gourd and poured two cups of wine.

"What trouble?" Guan Hai asked, puzzled. "If it's about my siege of Beihai, I'll just surrender when the time comes. There's nothing to worry about."

The aroma of the wine was tempting, and seeing Liao Hua pour him a cup, Guan Hai picked it up and took small sips. He couldn't even remember the last time he had tasted alcohol, but this wine was exceptionally good.

"Do you remember our late leader, Xuan Gao, the disciple of the Celestial Master, Zhang Jiao?" Liao Hua sighed.

"How could I forget? He was a hero of the Yellow Turbans. We still honor him with sacrifices throughout the year," Guan Hai replied indignantly. "If it weren't for him, could you be in Taishan right now, learning to read and write?"

"I remember. Without our leader, we Yellow Turbans would have been trapped and eventually exterminated in Qingzhou. He used his life to pave a bright future for us," Liao Hua's eyes welled up with tears. Now that he could read, he understood things he hadn't before.

"Yes, without him, we Yellow Turbans would have no path but death," Guan Hai said somberly as he drank. "But why did he have to die? I used to think it was because Taishan wouldn't accept Yellow Turban leaders, but you and Yuanfu are fine. Why did our leader have to die?"

"Because as long as the leader lived, the Yellow Turbans would always be seen as a threat. If he called for a fight, the Yellow Turbans would rise again. That's a risk that no one could ignore. Neither Yuanfu nor I have that kind of influence. Do you understand?" Liao Hua explained solemnly.

"I don't understand," Guan Hai shook his head. "The leader did so much for us. If he asked for our help, wouldn't it be right to give it? Wouldn't you, Liao Yuanjian?"

"Of course, we'd repay such kindness a hundredfold," Liao Hua said earnestly.

"That's what I thought. The leader did so much for us; it's only right we help him in return," Guan Hai said, clapping Liao Hua on the shoulder. "That's the way it should be."

Looking at the strong man in front of him, Liao Hua felt a deep sense of sorrow for the first time. Guan Hai simply couldn't understand the bigger picture.

"We should repay him, but as long as the leader lived, the Yellow Turbans would never be trusted. Lord Xuande would always see us as a threat. Imagine you're Lord Xuande, and after unifying the land, there's someone who could ruin everything at any moment. What would you do?" Liao Hua tried to explain.

"That wouldn't happen. If the leader were alive, he wouldn't do something like that," Guan Hai replied, his thinking simple and direct.

"It's about preventing that possibility. As long as the leader lived, we wouldn't have the life we want. The Yellow Turbans would always be seen as a danger," Liao Hua said heavily.

This time, Guan Hai didn't respond immediately. He nodded slowly, half-understanding.

"So, Yuanjian, what are you really trying to say? I still don't get it," Guan Hai asked after a while, picking up his cup and only realizing it was empty after taking a long sip. He scratched his head, confused.

"Sigh, it seems I can't make you understand quickly," Liao Hua sighed. He couldn't bring himself to say, "Only your death can save the remaining Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou."

"Hehehe..." Guan Hai chuckled dryly. "What can I say? I'm a simple man, not as smart as you. I'm just like Zhou Cang—a good fighter but not too bright."

Liao Hua said nothing more, just looked at Guan Hai with a sigh.

That night, Guan Hai tossed and turned, thinking about what Liao Hua had said until he finally fell asleep. But within an hour, he jolted awake. His muddled mind suddenly grasped the full meaning of Liao Hua's words. In an instant, he understood what Liao Hua had been trying to say but couldn't bring himself to say outright.

With bitterness swelling in his chest, Guan Hai thought to himself that he would have preferred to remain ignorant.

Chapter 407: I Am Not Willing to Accept This

Guan Hai looked at his hand gripping the spear. As he gazed at the promising future that seemed within his grasp, he had believed that surrendering would absolve everything. Yet, reality proved otherwise. Was this fate?

A suffocating feeling welled up in his chest, but he couldn't find the voice to release it. As these thoughts churned in his mind, a vicious glint flashed in his eyes. The late leader was a saint, but he, Guan Hai, was not. He couldn't do it—he didn't want to die!

The next day, Guan Hai walked out of his tent, looking dejected and sporting dark circles under his eyes. He glared at everyone he encountered, a stark contrast to his usual demeanor. His mood puzzled the Yellow Turban leaders and Liao Hua—everything had been fine before, so why was Guan Hai acting like this? Had someone offended him?

"Liao, what did you say to the boss yesterday? Why is he like this today?" one of the smaller leaders nudged Liao Hua with his elbow.

"I didn't say anything," Liao Hua replied, equally confused. Yesterday, Guan Hai clearly hadn't understood the implications of their conversation. If he had, with his temper, he should have been furious, not like this.

Guan Hai glanced at Liao Hua, saw the confusion on his face, but said nothing. He handed out vegetable dumplings to everyone, ate his portion, and then set out to inspect the camp with a few guards.

Over the next few days, every time Liao Hua tried to talk to Guan Hai in private, Guan Hai either became impatient, made excuses, or avoided him entirely, leaving Liao Hua baffled as to what was going on.

On the sixth day of Liao Hua's stay in Beihai, Guan Hai called for a meeting with all the Yellow Turban leaders, just as he had done before, and didn't exclude Liao Hua.

"Boss, why did you call us together?" one of the smaller leaders asked as he casually found a seat. The others also looked at Guan Hai, curious.

"We only have one day's worth of food left," Guan Hai said helplessly. Food had always been a problem for the Yellow Turbans—they never had enough.

The group, though aware that time was running out, hadn't expected it to be this soon. They were shocked into silence.

"What do we do now?" one of the leaders jumped up. "Without food, how are we supposed to maintain the siege on Beihai? There's no grain left nearby. It's not like Kong Beihai will lend us any!"

"Yuanjian, when will the Taishan army arrive?" Guan Hai asked, his head lowered so that no one could see his expression.

"Probably five days after the grain arrives," Liao Hua said with a bitter smile. "The army never moves without ensuring the supply lines are secure. If we had known the Yellow Turbans would surrender, the grain could have been used for relief rather than preparations for war."

"Five days..." The entire camp fell into despair.

"We need to find a way to solve the grain issue. Otherwise, even if the Taishan army arrives and we surrender, it could still cause big problems. Yuanjian, you mentioned that we disrupted Taishan's plans..." Guan Hai trailed off, but everyone understood what he meant.

"I've already sent word back. In the letter, I made it clear that the Yellow Turbans of Qingzhou are willing to surrender. I trust Governor Lu will make the necessary arrangements in advance," Liao Hua said, standing up. But he couldn't help glancing at Guan Hai.

Guan Hai didn't catch Liao Hua's look, but he felt the weight of his gaze linger on him. When Liao Hua mentioned the Yellow Turbans' willingness to surrender, Guan Hai felt a pang of unease. He thought about the dire situation of the Yellow Turbans and felt a wave of sorrow followed by a surge of anger.

Guan Hai silently cried out in his heart. He really didn't want to die, but he understood now that unless he did, no one would ever feel safe accepting the million Yellow Turbans of Qingzhou. He was now in the same position as their late leader.

"Report!" A Yellow Turban guard burst into the meeting. "Great news, great news!"

"What news?" Guan Hai asked with a gloomy expression. "Has the Taishan army arrived?"

"No, no! It's not that. A messenger from Yuan Shao has arrived, offering us a friendship along with ten thousand shi of grain. Ten thousand shi of grain!" the guard said excitedly.

"What?" Guan Hai roared as he stood up.

The others were startled by Guan Hai's reaction, but the mention of ten thousand shi of grain quickly shifted their focus. They, too, leapt to their feet in excitement, momentarily forgetting everything else. Ten thousand shi of grain, even rationed among the million Yellow Turbans, could last seven or eight days. With that buffer, everything would be easier to manage.

Guan Hai looked up and sighed, feeling a strange sense of emptiness.

Guan Hai had an uneasy feeling after making his decision. He knew something wasn't right, but his survival instincts suppressed those thoughts. He couldn't afford to waver now—the Taishan army was approaching. Or maybe he feared that if he thought too much, he might change his mind.

"Let's go welcome the grain," Guan Hai laughed. "It seems we can hold out a little longer."

As he traveled, Meng Dai's opinion of the Yellow Turbans dropped lower and lower. Seeing this ragtag group, lacking even basic weapons, Meng Dai felt confident that a mere thousand cavalry could easily crush them. How could such a force be worth ten thousand shi of grain?

When Meng Dai finally met Guan Hai and the other leaders, he was even more disappointed. These haggard, demoralized Yellow Turban leaders—how could they possibly hold back Liu Xuande's development? It was laughable.

As he pondered, Meng Dai recalled Feng Ji's suggestion before he left for Qingzhou. The plan seemed more reasonable now: take advantage of this gathering of Yellow Turban leaders, kill them all, and then use the grain to incite the remaining Yellow Turbans into becoming bandits, wreaking havoc around Qingzhou and Taishan. That would hurt Liu Bei far more.

Meng Dai licked his lips. To him, these Yellow Turban leaders were practically defenseless. If he acted quickly enough, he could slaughter them before they even knew what was happening. Then, by using Yuan Shao's authority to appoint spies within the Yellow Turbans, success seemed entirely possible.

Chapter 408: Hitting a Stone with an Egg

As these thoughts crossed Meng Dai's mind, he gestured to his personal guards. They quickly relayed the orders to the soldiers transporting the grain, preparing them to execute the secondary plan. After witnessing the weakness of the Yellow Turbans, Meng Dai had considered implementing Feng Ji's plan, and he had made the necessary arrangements just in case.

When Guan Hai noticed the cold smirk on Meng Dai's face, he was initially taken aback. Then, he quietly heightened his vigilance.

"Brothers, be careful. Yuan Benchu might not have good intentions. This guy is up to something!" Before Guan Hai could say anything, Liao Hua's voice echoed in the ears of the Yellow Turban leaders.

"Yuanjian speaks sense. Everyone, stay alert. If they make a move, show no mercy," Guan Hai's voice followed, and unlike Liao Hua's warning that required a moment of consideration, the leaders immediately smiled and quietly prepared for a potential fight.

These Yellow Turban leaders had never had the opportunity to access proper martial training, but those who had risen to leadership positions had all survived countless battles. Their natural talents often surpassed those of most warriors at the same level, but for various reasons, they could not advance further.

For example, Guan Hai, despite struggling to find enough food, had managed to cultivate his Qi to the peak of "Refined Qi into Steel," just one step away from reaching the pinnacle of martial arts, "Internal Energy Released."

This demonstrated Guan Hai's extraordinary talent. Unfortunately, due to his humble background, he never had access to advanced martial techniques, and he had missed the best time to train. Although Zhang Jiao had provided some methods, they were merely adequate.

"You must be Guan Dashi," Meng Dai said, a slight smile playing on his lips. "My lord, Yuan Gong, sympathizes with the plight of the Yellow Turbans and wishes to lend you ten thousand shi of grain."

"Yuan Gong is truly benevolent," Guan Hai thought to himself with a cold laugh, but outwardly he put on a look of deep gratitude. "General Meng, please, come this way."

"Hahaha, no need, no need. I'm just here to deliver the grain. I can't stay long, so please, inspect the goods first," Meng Dai said with a courteous gesture. Guan Hai, still smiling, walked over to the supply convoy.

Meng Dai lowered his head, laughing inwardly, oblivious to the cold gleam in Guan Hai's eyes.

The Yellow Turban leaders followed Guan Hai, wiping their hands clean and resting them on the hilts of their weapons, joking and laughing as they went. There was no fear of battle. These were men who had fought for food countless times, so much so that warfare had become a part of their daily lives.

Guan Hai casually opened a sack, grabbed a handful of rice, and began chewing on it. After a long pause, he finally spoke. "Good stuff. Thank Yuan Gong for me!"

"Hahaha, you're joking, Dashi. How could we deceive you with inferior rice? Bring the rest of the grain for Dashi to inspect!" Meng Dai laughed, and with that, a thousand of Yuan Shao's soldiers gathered, surrounding Guan Hai and the others.

"Not bad, not bad. It's all good rice," Guan Hai said after tasting a few more handfuls. He then walked over to Meng Dai.

"Is Dashi satisfied?" Meng Dai asked with a fawning smile.

"Very satisfied," Guan Hai said as he slowly moved closer to Meng Dai, signaling the other Yellow Turban leaders to prepare themselves.

"If you're satisfied, then it's time to go! Take them down!" Meng Dai shouted. The grain had been sent to an area with fewer Yellow Turbans, and now that Guan Hai and his men were surrounded, he had no more qualms.

"I knew this guy was up to no good!" Yellow Turban leader Du Yuan shouted as he pulled a brick from his robe and hurled it at Meng Dai's face, leaving him bloody and battered. Du Yuan then drew a dagger and swiftly struck down several soldiers, breaking through the still-forming battle lines.

"You think I'm easy to deal with?" Guan Cheng, a gaunt Yellow Turban pirate, drew his fork and attacked the soldiers around him, stabbing and slashing his way through.

"Looking for death!" Huang Shao, wielding a sword he had stolen from a scholar, performed a swift roll to evade the enemy's attack, then leaped up and decapitated several soldiers with a single strike.

Jiang Gong, Qu Gong, Li Tiao, Sima Ju, and the others all drew their weapons and began fighting the soldiers. Although they were somewhat suppressed by the formation, each of them could easily take on ten opponents.

These Yellow Turban leaders had all survived the harshest environments and the bloodiest battlefields. The strongest among them, like Guan Hai and Zhou Cang, were just one step away from reaching the level of "Internal Energy Released." Those who were slightly weaker, like Liao Hua, Guan Cheng, and Du Yuan, were nearly at the peak of "Refined Qi into Steel." Even the lower-ranked leaders like Pei Yuanshao and Huang Shao had reached "Refined Qi into Steel."

Meng Dai's thousand soldiers were attacking roughly twenty well-known Yellow Turban leaders, along with another forty or so lesser-known leaders. In other words, a thousand soldiers, most of whom couldn't even harness internal energy, were trying to take on seventy experts at the level of "Refined Qi into Steel." Did they think they were led by Ju Yi's elite assault troops?

In less than the time it takes for an incense stick to burn, Du Yuan retrieved his half-brick, dragged the barely-breathing Meng Dai over by his collar, and threw him at the unscathed Guan Hai. Then, he tucked his half-brick back into his robe.

"How... how can you be so strong..." Meng Dai gasped.

"Hahaha..." Sima Ju laughed so hard he almost cried as he pointed at Meng Dai. "Are you stupid? Do you even know what kind of life we Yellow Turbans have lived? Without strength, we'd have been wiped out long ago. We Yellow Turbans have at least seventy leaders at the 'Refined Qi into Steel' level. Even your lord, Yuan Benchu, who has hundreds of warriors under his command, doesn't have more experts at our level!"

"We're the survivors of the most brutal battlefields, the harshest conditions!" Sima Ju's words resonated with the other Yellow Turban leaders, who all wore somber expressions. Their lives had been so harsh that they yearned for the comfort of Taishan.

As Sima Ju spoke, Guan Hai couldn't help but feel a pang of inner turmoil. He thought of the peaceful life in Taishan that Liao Hua had described.

"Dashi, you're spacing out again," one of the more observant Yellow Turban leaders remarked.

"It's nothing. There's so much grain! Let everyone feast today!" Guan Hai shouted, shaking off his thoughts. The entire camp erupted in cheers, and the Yellow Turbans besieging Beihai joined in the celebration when they heard the news, leaving Kong Rong, already weakened in spirit, even more terrified.

Chapter 409: The Flame of Righteousness Will Not Extinguish

Amid the cheers around him, Guan Hai looked up at the sky, as a yellowish-brown internal energy began to emanate from his body. Gradually, the energy's color faded until it became colorless, and the martial aura that had surrounded him dissipated, leaving him appearing ordinary.

Guan Hai couldn't help but mock himself. There was no great joy in achieving "Internal Energy Released." Instead, he felt only calmness.

"The duty of righteousness, even in death, leaves no regrets." This phrase echoed in his mind, and the bitter smile that had once graced his face disappeared. Someone had to bear the burden, and Guan Hai had come to understand that it was his turn.

In that moment, Guan Hai realized the transformation happening within him. His mindset had changed, and he had let go of his attachment to life.

"Take the grain!" Guan Hai's newly acquired ability to project his voice through internal energy allowed his words to reach all corners of the camp.

The Yellow Turban leaders erupted in cheers. Even the least observant among them realized that Guan Hai had reached the pinnacle of martial arts, achieving "Internal Energy Released."

"Congratulations, Dashi! Congratulations!" The leaders rushed forward, bowing to Guan Hai with faces full of excitement. It was unimaginable that someone from the Yellow Turbans had reached such a level.

"Hahaha..." Guan Hai smiled calmly. Death no longer frightened him. Compared to the future of the million Yellow Turbans, his own life seemed insignificant.

Guan Hai handed out steamed buns to each of the Yellow Turbans, then found a spot to eat his own. There were no other dishes, but for the starving Yellow Turbans, nothing was more satisfying than a simple bun.

"How refreshing!" one of the leaders exclaimed after devouring two large buns in just a few bites. He eyed the steaming basket, tempted to take another, but sighed deeply and sat back down.

"This reminds me of when I was working on the infrastructure projects in Taishan. Having steamed buns to eat was such a luxury," Jiang Gong said as he broke his bun into pieces and ate slowly.

These Yellow Turban warriors had all reached the level of "Refined Qi into Steel." If not for their background as Yellow Turbans, each of them could have lived in comfort, eating lavish meals every day. In fact, they could have easily hidden their identities and joined any warlord, who would likely overlook their past and accept them.

But the Yellow Turbans who had survived to this point were burdened by the presence of women, children, and the elderly under their care. They couldn't abandon them, and so they sought a ruler who would accept them all, rather than just taking the able-bodied and leaving the rest to starve. This was why they were drawn to Liu Bei, the only leader who didn't mind caring for those who couldn't contribute much.

"It won't be long now," Guan Hai said calmly. He no longer felt sorrow, only peace—he had come to terms with everything.

"Yuanjian, come with me," Guan Hai said after finishing his bun, addressing Liao Hua, who had just divided a bun into four pieces to share with Du Yuan and the others.

"Alright," Liao Hua replied. He had intended to joke around with Du Yuan, Sima Ju, and Guan Cheng, but Guan Hai's request put an end to that. He handed out the remaining pieces of his bun and then followed Guan Hai.

"What is it, Guan Hai?" Liao Hua asked curiously as Guan Hai led him to a remote spot.

"Is Guan Yu a man of righteousness and trust?" Guan Hai asked as he leaned against a stripped tree.

"General Guan is indeed a man of loyalty and righteousness," Liao Hua replied, sensing the seriousness of Guan Hai's question. He recounted everything he knew about Guan Yu.

"That's good," Guan Hai said, a small smile forming on his lips. "When you return, tell Guan Yu that I am willing to follow in the footsteps of our late leader. But unlike him, I can't be as calm. I want to die by Guan Yu's blade. I want to see what the peak of 'Internal Energy Released' is truly like."

"Guan Hai?" Liao Hua was startled, immediately standing up.

"Don't be surprised," Guan Hai said as he leaned back against the tree, gazing up at the clouds. "I used to be unwilling, but I've come to understand. The Yellow Turbans don't need a hero who can rally the masses; they need a peaceful life, a piece of land to farm, and food to eat."

As Liao Hua listened to Guan Hai's casual words, he felt a wave of sadness well up inside.

"Yuanjian, I won't see the life the Yellow Turbans will have in the future, but I know many of our leaders will still go to war. I hope General Guan can look after them a little because of my sacrifice," Guan Hai said calmly, delivering his last words without fear or regret.

"We Yellow Turbans only ask to be treated like ordinary people. Tell Guan Yu that if he agrees to this, I will give Taishan the assurance they seek, just like our late leader did. But I have more influence than he did—Chen Bai and Fu Yun only had small groups following them, while I have seventy loyal leaders under me." Guan Hai's face showed a glimmer of hope as he felt he finally understood the righteousness and kindness of their late leader.

"Guan Hai, I..." Liao Hua knelt before Guan Hai, fully aware that this iron-willed man was willing to die for the million Yellow Turbans. His resolve filled Liao Hua with admiration—another hero had emerged among the Yellow Turbans.

"Go and tell Guan Yu all of this. Let him know that even if he can't fulfill my request, I will still give my life. The life you described in Taishan seems worth dying for to give the Yellow Turbans a chance at it," Guan Hai said with a wry smile. He didn't have the leverage to negotiate with Guan Yu, but for the sake of the million Yellow Turbans, he was willing to die, just like their late leader.

"Guan Hai, I, Liao Yuanjian, swear to relay your words to General Guan without omission. I will use my own life to plead for this!" Liao Hua vowed, tears streaming from his eyes as he knelt before Guan Hai.

"Go, hurry and tell Guan Yu what I've said. Someone needs to step up when the Yellow Turbans face death. Last time, it was our late leader; this time, it's me, Guan Hai. The flame of righteousness will not extinguish... the flame of righteousness will not extinguish..." Guan Hai murmured to himself. He had earned the right to say these words.

"I'm going. I'll tell General Guan everything about the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou. Guan Hai, wait for my message. Even if you die by General Guan's blade, I will look after the brothers in your place. We Yellow Turbans of Qingzhou are fortunate to have had both our late leader and you, stepping up in our darkest times," Liao Hua said as he knelt and bowed three times before standing, his voice filled with both bitterness and determination.

Chapter 410: Seeking Righteousness and Finding It, A Twist of Fate

Guan Hai watched Liao Hua's figure gradually disappear into the distance, then sighed quietly as he looked up at the sky. He had reached the pinnacle of martial arts, "Internal Energy Released." If he wanted to leave, hardly anyone could stop him. Yet, he knew that only his death would truly leave the million Yellow Turbans without a leader.

The moment Guan Hai's return was reported, Guan Yu received the news and immediately summoned Guo Jia and Liu Ye to discuss the information that Liao Hua had brought.

Liao Hua, with bloodshot eyes, recounted everything that had transpired in Beihai to the three of them. Guo Jia and Liu Ye exchanged glances, both surprised by the situation.

"Truly a righteous man!" Guan Yu stroked his beard, his phoenix eyes narrowing slightly as he gave rare praise to a person. Unlike Zang Ba's performance, Guan Hai's self-sacrifice for righteousness deeply resonated with Guan Yu, who valued loyalty and honor. "I finally understand Zichuan's words, 'Righteousness often lies with those who are rough around the edges.' It's no joke."

Guo Jia and Liu Ye felt a bit awkward. Though Guan Yu had been tactful, they had heard Chen Xi joke about that phrase before. It had been funny then, but now, hearing it from Guan Yu made them feel embarrassed.

"General Guan, please grant Guan Hai a chance at life," Liao Hua quickly pleaded while Guan Yu was in a good mood.

"Impossible!" Guo Jia and Liu Ye said in unison.

Guan Yu sighed. "Yuanjian, you've read many books by now, so you should understand why this must be. Guan Hai must die. Like the former Yellow Turban leader, he is a hero. But only his death can bring closure to this matter."

Guan Yu admired Guan Hai. More accurately, Guan Yu admired those who upheld loyalty and righteousness, and Guan Hai embodied those virtues perfectly. Guan Yu wanted to find a way to save Guan Hai, but he knew it would be extremely difficult.

After all, if Guan Hai lived through this ordeal, he would become the Yellow Turbans' new spiritual symbol. If he didn't die, the situation could become problematic. Unlike Zang Ba, who could be discredited, Guan Hai's influence couldn't be easily dismissed or forgotten.

"Yuanjian, go and tell Guan Hai that I agree to all his requests. I, Guan Yu, swear to treat the Yellow Turbans of Qingzhou with equal fairness. Their past transgressions will be forgiven. Also, let him know that if he has any other demands that do not violate righteousness, I will fulfill them as well. I respect him as a true man," Guan Yu declared solemnly as he stood up.

"Thank you, my lord!" Liao Hua's form of address reverted to the respectful "my lord" rather than the more distant "General Guan," reflecting his gratitude and renewed respect.

"Go quickly," Guan Yu urged, gesturing for Liao Hua to deliver the message to Guan Hai as soon as possible.

After Liao Hua left, Guan Yu turned to Guo Jia and Liu Ye for advice. Although he believed most of what Liao Hua had said, he didn't want to appear autocratic in front of them.

"What do you two strategists think?" Guan Yu asked, half-closing his eyes. Despite his pride, he respected Liu Bei's advisors and valued their counsel.

"Though it sounds surprising, based on what I know of the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans, their desire to surrender seems genuine. Given that, it's possible Guan Hai truly intends to follow in the late leader's footsteps," Guo Jia sighed. "He is indeed a righteous man. It's a pity."

Liu Ye nodded, also expressing his admiration for Guan Hai's selflessness and agreeing that Liao Hua's account was likely true.

"In that case, could Guan Hai be spared...?" Guan Yu began, relieved that Guo Jia and Liu Ye shared his view.

"No," Liu Ye replied firmly. "Though Guan Hai's righteousness moves us, if he lives, he will become a new symbol for the Yellow Turbans. We cannot allow that to happen."

Guo Jia lowered his head in silent agreement. He admired Guan Hai's actions, but saving him from this predicament would be extremely difficult. More importantly, it would require Liu Bei's approval. Without Liu Bei's agreement, even rescuing Guan Hai wouldn't be a good idea.

Guan Yu sighed deeply, his expression darkening as he waved his hand, signaling the end of the discussion. He was frustrated. As a man who valued loyalty and righteousness, Guan Hai's sacrifice touched him deeply.

That night, Guo Jia visited Guan Yu's tent to explain the nuances of the situation. Guan Yu then ordered Wei Yan to ride his prized horse, the Steed of Yellow Flashes, to Xu Province and return with Liu Bei's response within three days. Without that horse, completing this task within three days would have been impossible.

After reading the letter Liu Bei had entrusted to him, Chen Xi looked at Wei Yan. "You've done well, Changwen. Now, please hurry back to Qingzhou and tell General Guan to follow Fengxiao's plan."

"Understood!" Wei Yan bowed to Chen Xi, took Liu Bei's letter, and rushed back to Qingzhou.

"Do you think there are always people like this in every era, Wenhe?" Chen Xi asked as he settled back into the carriage and turned to Jia Xu.

"Some people live by their own principles. While they may seem foolish, they often gain unexpected rewards," Jia Xu replied calmly. Though he was also struck by Guan Hai's decision, he understood that self-sacrifice for righteousness had been honored throughout history, even if few could truly achieve it.

"Yes, they seem foolish. But Lord Xuande and Guan Hai's choices..." Chen Xi sighed.

At that moment, Liu Bei opened the carriage door, smiling at Chen Xi. "Do I seem foolish too, Zichuan?"

"Sigh..." Chen Xi exhaled. Though he didn't speak, his expression revealed his thoughts.

"I know you understand my reasoning, Zichuan. Guan Hai's righteousness moved me. A man willing to die for a million Yellow Turbans is not one to challenge my authority. If I were to exploit the Yellow Turbans like officials of old, then Guan Hai would be justified in rallying against me," Liu Bei said calmly.

"People like that may seem foolish, but they embody true righteousness. Such people keep their word. The Yellow Turbans' demands are modest. Since I can give them what they want, I choose to trust Guan Hai," Liu Bei continued, radiating confidence. "If I cannot win over someone like Guan Hai, how can I hope to conquer the world and restore the Han dynasty?"

"Fine. Guan Hai certainly surprised me. People like him would be heroes in any era. A hero shouldn't meet such an end," Chen Xi said with a sigh, finally agreeing with Liu Bei's decision.