

Mythical 431

Chapter 431: The Fish of the East Sea...

Chen Xi glanced at Taishi Ci and then at Gan Ning. These two individuals had vastly different personalities. Gan Ning could undertake tasks that would terrify most people and enjoy them thoroughly, while Taishi Ci was much more cautious. Although Taishi Ci's martial prowess might even surpass Gan Ning's, and his courage was on par, his cautious nature and reliance on technique contrasted sharply with Gan Ning's wild approach.

Chen Xi didn't intend to change Taishi Ci's style. Every general should have their own distinct methods. If Taishi Ci were to adopt Gan Ning's reckless tactics, it wouldn't be long before something went wrong.

The three chatted for a while, discussing recent events. Chen Xi soon learned that there were no longer any water pirates in the nearby area—Gan Ning had conscripted them all into the navy. Faced with a choice between a good life with money and certain death, and after a few battles against mythical creatures under Gan Ning's command, the pirates had all been subdued. Those who remained defiant had been fed to the sharks. Although the navy still retained some of its bandit-like tendencies, the men had fully submitted to Gan Ning's leadership.

"By the way, bring some soft armor for the strategist. In naval battles, arrows fly everywhere. We might not fear them, but better safe than sorry," Gan Ning said as he eagerly recounted how he had kicked disobedient pirate leaders into the sea to feed the sharks. Recently, Gan Ning had developed a particular fondness for the sharks that followed his ships, always waiting for a meal.

Soon, a soldier brought a piece of soft armor to Gan Ning, who handed it to Chen Xi after testing its sturdiness.

"What kind of material is this? It's incredibly tough," Chen Xi said, tugging at the armor, surprised at its durability.

"Sharkskin," Taishi Ci replied with a wry smile. "Gan Ning is a madman. Last time, he took me to hunt a Kun (a giant mythical fish). When we encountered the Kun, a shark was also hunting it. For various reasons, Gan Ning and I ended up killing the shark—a shark that could fight in the air and was stronger than both of us. But it was too stupid."

"A shark with internal energy at the level of leaving the body? And you killed it?" Chen Xi's eyes widened in disbelief.

"We ate it," Gan Ning said nonchalantly, even showing his teeth. "The meat was incredibly tough. The entire navy shared a bowl of fish soup, and the meat was really chewy. Too bad we only encountered one—it tasted great."

"Yes, it was delicious," Taishi Ci agreed. "After eating it, I felt a slight increase in my strength."

"We made several sets of armor from its skin and sent ten to the lord. We originally intended to burn the fish bones, but they wouldn't burn easily, so we made a bow from them. It works pretty well," Gan Ning added.

Chen Xi shook his head in amazement. This was truly the ultimate in resourcefulness. But then again, a shark that powerful, having reached the level of internal energy through sheer strength and luck, would naturally have a body far stronger than ordinary creatures. It made sense to make use of its remains.

"Oh, I'll wear this armor," Chen Xi said, accepting the armor and testing its flexibility. The toughness of the sharkskin was indeed impressive.

"Hehe, you have some internal energy, right? Try infusing a bit into the armor," Gan Ning suggested with a sly grin. Seeing Chen Xi hesitate, Gan Ning took the initiative and infused some energy himself, then slapped the armor with his palm. "See? It's incredibly tough, almost as strong as refined steel after extensive tempering."

Chen Xi was left speechless. It seemed this sharkskin armor could rival the weapons he had been planning to distribute to the soldiers after extensive forging and tempering. But considering how rare such materials were, Chen Xi quickly abandoned any thoughts of mass-producing this armor.

"What about the Kun you killed? Could its skin be used for armor as well?" Chen Xi asked, thinking of the size of the creature. If it could be used, it would save a lot of effort.

"It can, but only if the Kun has enough cloud energy. We specifically consulted a leatherworker, and it's possible to make armor from it," Taishi Ci nodded. "But those are much harder to deal with. When Gan Ning first encountered one of those mythical creatures, half of his fleet was destroyed."

"The worst part is that its skin wasn't as good as this shark's. And because of its massive size, its destructive power far exceeded that of the shark. When a giant Kun leaped out of the sea and fell onto a ship, the ship simply disappeared," Gan Ning said with a bitter smile. After that experience, he had avoided provoking such creatures.

"The worst part was that after killing one, many large fish followed, eating the remains. The only skin we managed to salvage from the Kun with cloud energy was enough for about a hundred sets of armor. The rest was devoured," Taishi Ci added, shaking his head at the memory.

"Killing smaller ones is easier, but their skin isn't as valuable," Gan Ning sighed. "I'm done with those things. Last time, we encountered a Kun that seemed to be at the peak of the Qi Refinement level. It was massive, floating on the surface of the sea, completely motionless. When an internal-energy-infused shark attacked, the Kun swatted it hundreds of meters away with a single tail swipe."

"After that, we finished off the dazed shark," Taishi Ci said, his face twitching at the memory. That incident had truly terrified him. He now understood what it meant to overcome strength with overwhelming force. The shark had a much higher level of internal energy, but the Kun, with its enormous size and cloud energy, had simply swatted it aside.

"Gan Ning, didn't you think of killing that one?" Chen Xi asked, raising an eyebrow. Given Gan Ning's personality, he would have thought Gan Ning would relish the challenge.

"I did, but we couldn't. It was too big, and the cloud energy negated most of our internal energy. Even if we attacked with full force, we weren't sure we'd even draw blood," Gan Ning said, his expression grim.

Chen Xi wiped his brow. If something could scare Gan Ning, it had to be truly terrifying. Internal energy might be powerful, but it also had its limits, especially when facing such massive creatures.

"Forget it, no need to dwell on those frustrating things. We've only encountered a few of them. Most Kun don't have that much cloud energy. That one was an exception—no idea why it had so much. And

why don't I have cloud energy?" Gan Ning grumbled, clearly annoyed by the giant Kun's overwhelming power.

Chapter 432: The Helplessness of Immortal Nan Hua

Gan Ning had no idea that he had inadvertently discovered a path forward after reaching the level of internal energy leaving the body. Unfortunately, due to his limited understanding, he missed the opportunity. Gan Ning never deeply considered how that Kun fish could simultaneously use internal energy while also being enveloped in cloud energy—two forces that typically cancel each other out.

Imagine if Lu Bu had witnessed this paradoxical behavior of the Kun fish and decided to research the conversion between cloud energy and internal energy. With his cultivation level, he might eventually succeed in mastering this technique. If Lu Bu could wield internal energy within cloud energy, he would become unstoppable, capable of slaying countless opponents. Similarly, if he could use internal energy during one-on-one combat, even Zhang Fei wouldn't stand a chance. However, neither Chen Xi, Gan Ning, nor Taishi Ci understood the nature of that Kun fish.

In the sky above, Immortal Nan Hua floated, his whisk swaying as he gazed down at a small blue island spanning several hundred meters. His brow furrowed deeply, and he couldn't believe how one accident had caused such a massive problem.

Immortal Nan Hua was arguably the most powerful of all the "immortals" of this era—akin to Lu Bu among warriors. His ultimate goal was the transcendence that all "immortals" dreamed of. Unfortunately, despite his extraordinary talent and relentless efforts, thirty-six years ago, Nan Hua realized that he had only six more years left to live, yet he hadn't found any clue about how to ascend. Desperate, he turned to external means.

Nan Hua set his sights on a divine stone—the second one that hadn't yet disappeared. He successfully stole the divine stone but found that no matter what he did, the stone remained unresponsive. Thirty years ago, in a final act of desperation, Nan Hua decided to summon a heavenly thunderbolt and shattered the divine stone over the sea east of Qingzhou. The life essence released when the stone broke extended Nan Hua's lifespan significantly, but the powerful energy wave that swept across the continent also scattered fragments of the stone.

That energy wave made it easier for lifeforms to absorb energy, and the stone fragments, carrying life essence, disappeared. Some were absorbed by humans, others by animals, while some fell into deep mountains and forests, gradually dissipating their life essence into the world.

These lifeforms, having absorbed the stone fragments, found it easier to reach the level of internal energy leaving the body. Some animals, driven by instinct and without any cultivation methods, even reached this level simply by swallowing the stone fragments. After all, internal energy is energy extracted from food and life itself.

As for the sea where Nan Hua now stood, it was the very place where he had shattered the divine stone with a thunderbolt. The life essence that had exploded from the stone was mostly absorbed by the sea creatures here, which explained why strange and powerful beings frequently appeared in these waters.

Gazing down at the Kun fish sunbathing below him, Nan Hua felt a strong urge to kill it. But after considering the creature's immense size, the dense cloud energy surrounding it, and the layer of internal energy that acted like a shield, Nan Hua decided against it. Such a creature was not only difficult to kill, but it could also bring bad luck if slain.

"Sigh, I've caused a huge disaster. When the last divine stone shattered, it didn't have nearly this much impact," Nan Hua muttered bitterly to himself. It was one thing if humans absorbed the stone fragments, but many animals had absorbed them too.

Starting seven years ago, super beasts began appearing across the land. Nan Hua, feeling responsible for the disaster he had caused, went on a rampage, slaying these super beasts. He killed three flood dragons, five giant wolves, one giant bear, two flying tigers, two giant apes, and three Pegasus—though there were originally four, but Chitu, the fastest one, escaped.

Unlike humans, who might pass by the divine stone fragments without noticing, wild animals were instinctively drawn to them and consumed them immediately. For humans, the life essence within the fragments would gradually dissipate, benefiting the surrounding area.

After slaying so many super beasts, Nan Hua eventually realized that he couldn't handle them all on his own. Besides, these super beasts weren't as terrifying as he had initially feared. In fact, he had heard of people riding a super horse that he had failed to kill after chasing it across half the grasslands. When he flew to Chenliu to kill a super tiger, he arrived to find that someone had already made tiger soup and even offered him a bowl.

Having come to this realization, Nan Hua decided to focus on the ten most powerful super beasts, leaving the rest to the various warlords and their armies. After all, there were now many humans with internal energy leaving the body, so the government and military should handle the remaining threats. With this plan in mind, Nan Hua spent a significant amount of energy divining the locations of the ten

strongest super beasts, planning to eliminate them himself. His first stop was the East Sea, home to the weakest of the ten—a super Kun.

As he measured the size of the Kun below him and compared it to his own small frame, Nan Hua sighed deeply. There was nothing he could do about this situation. Even with his power, killing the super beast below him would be a monumental task. And this was the weakest of the ten—there were nine others even stronger.

"I'd better return to my cave and focus on reciting the Nan Hua Sutra. This matter is beyond me now," Nan Hua lamented, casting one last glance at the Kun before flying back toward the mainland. He resolved to withdraw from worldly affairs entirely. If he could ascend, he would; if not, he would live as he pleased.

There was nothing more to be done. If he couldn't even defeat the weakest of the ten super beasts, it was time to retreat to his cave and meditate. Besides, his divination had shown that humanity would eventually triumph, and these ten super beasts would be slain. Since he couldn't kill the weakest one, it was unlikely he could handle the others. So why stay here?

As Nan Hua left, the Kun fish below let out a triumphant roar. Although the giant Kun lacked human intelligence, it had sensed the pressure from Nan Hua's presence above it, which was why it had remained motionless in the water. Now that Nan Hua was gone, the Kun felt an immense relief, joyfully leaping out of the water before diving back in. It resolved never to return to this place again.

Just as Gan Ning and his men were preparing to board their ships, they caught sight of the Kun's enormous body. They watched as it flipped and dived back into the sea, unaware that this would be the last time they would ever see this super Kun.

Chapter 433: Let's See How You Break This!

"So huge..." Zhuge Liang stared wide-eyed at the extraordinarily massive creature. It was the first time he'd ever seen such a colossal being.

"Yeah, it's gigantic," Gan Ning said, patting Zhuge Liang on the shoulder. "Do you want to keep one? I can catch you a smaller one, but forget about that big one."

Zhuge Liang turned to look at the brawny man beside him—one of the most renowned generals in the world, who had made a name for himself during the battle of Ji Province. Yet for some reason, Zhuge Liang couldn't shake the feeling that Gan Ning was nothing like the serious, imposing figure he had imagined. Instead, he seemed a bit... unconventional.

"Xingba, are you sure that Kun won't cause any trouble?" Chen Xi asked worriedly. The size of that whale-like creature far exceeded Chen Xi's expectations. Its massive body, spanning hundreds of meters, was practically a small island.

"It shouldn't cause any trouble. Now that I think about it, these large Kun are quite docile. As long as we don't provoke them, they won't attack us," Gan Ning replied after some thought. "But those big fish can be annoying—they often follow us."

"That's good to know. Just looking at that Kun is terrifying. I can't believe you once considered hunting it. I think it's best if we leave it alone," Chen Xi said, frowning at Gan Ning.

Chen Xi's intuition told him that it was better not to provoke that giant Kun. Its sheer size could crush their ships, and with the cloud-like aura and glowing shield it had, it might as well be a sea monster from the 21st century.

"Don't worry, strategist. I won't mess with it unless I'm confident," Gan Ning laughed. He glanced at the massive waves created by the Kun diving into the water, then turned to his flagship and shouted, "Hoist the sails!"

A loud horn echoed through the air, signaling the fleet's departure. With Gan Ning's warship leading the way, they began their journey southward.

"You guys even have something like that, huh?" Chen Xi chuckled, pointing to the soldier vigorously blowing the horn.

"Heh, heh, heh! I got this from the natives in Zhuya County. They gave it to me, and I liked how powerful and loud the sound was, so I use it to issue orders," Gan Ning replied with a laugh. "Tell the others to pick up the pace! Engage the cloud energy!"

Following Gan Ning's orders, three soldiers each picked up a large horn and blew into them—one long note, followed by two short notes.

Soon, the ships behind them began to close in, and a layer of cloud energy gradually formed around the entire fleet, creating a large "V" formation with Gan Ning's flagship at the front. The fleet's speed noticeably increased.

"How's that?" Gan Ning asked proudly, looking at Chen Xi.

Taishi Ci glanced at Gan Ning, fully understanding his pride. The first time Taishi Ci learned that cloud energy could be used to coordinate the fleet, he had been utterly amazed.

"Impressive, General Gan," Zhuge Liang said before Chen Xi could respond. "This is indeed a clever and practical technique. I'm curious, General Gan, do you have other commands like this?"

Gan Ning raised an eyebrow. He hadn't expected Zhuge Liang to figure out his signaling method so quickly. After all, it had taken Gan Ning a lot of thought, along with an accidental suggestion from Taishi Ci, to come up with this system. During their first drill, Taishi Ci had been so shocked that he nearly worshiped Gan Ning on the spot. Yet, Zhuge Liang had seen through it immediately.

"Hahaha, so you're Zhuge Kongming, right?" Gan Ning laughed heartily and gave Zhuge Liang a thumbs-up. "You're sharp! When Ziyi first saw this, he didn't understand it either, but you figured it out right away. Here, take this as a token." Gan Ning reached into his pouch and handed Zhuge Liang a green pearl.

Originally, Gan Ning had dismissed Zhuge Liang as a mere child, possibly a servant accompanying Chen Xi. But now that Zhuge Liang had demonstrated such keen insight, Gan Ning couldn't help but respect him. Gan Ning had a knack for getting along with capable young people, despite their age differences.

"Go ahead and take it. Xingba often trades with the natives and gets quite a few of these pearls," Chen Xi said with a smile. "By the way, did you create a whole set of horn signals?"

Zhuce Liang, seeing that Chen Xi didn't mind, accepted the pearl. It was the first time he'd ever seen a green pearl like this.

"I've only created the basic signals for now. During naval battles, the enemy won't know our orders, and we won't need to waste time with runners," Gan Ning replied proudly.

After Chen Xi had once asked him how to command a fleet without using runners, Gan Ning had spent a long time solving the problem.

"That's already impressive enough. What about more detailed commands?" Chen Xi asked with a smile. "Like the conversations we're having now—how would you convey those?"

"Huh?" Gan Ning was momentarily stumped. He thought his system was already quite advanced, but Chen Xi's question made it seem even more complex.

"I'm just joking. What you have is more than sufficient. Anything beyond that falls under intelligence communication," Chen Xi said, laughing and patting his own forehead. There was no need to push Gan Ning further—he only needed to know how to command the navy. If they needed to transmit more complex information, they could just use coded messages.

"Intelligence communication?" Gan Ning seemed to have grasped something.

"Never mind. Let's play a game, and you'll understand," Chen Xi sighed. "Zi Fang, do you have a book? Any book will do."

Mi Fang quickly found a thread-bound book and handed it to Chen Xi. "Kongming, pick any word from it. Tell me which page, which line, and which word, then write the numbers down using yin and yang lines."

Chen Xi handed the book to Zhuge Liang, confident that he would understand the instructions. Sure enough, Zhuge Liang hesitated for a moment, then caught on. He picked a word, converted the page, line, and word position into a series of yin and yang lines, and then smiled wryly at Chen Xi.

"I see now. Using this method, no one could crack the code. And if necessary, you could even encode the message using another cipher," Zhuge Liang said, shaking his head with a bitter smile. He realized that all previous codes were now obsolete. Once he had transformed the numbers into yin and yang lines, he understood the full meaning of Chen Xi's earlier words.

By replacing yin lines with short notes and yang lines with long notes, they could encode an entire book using horn signals. As long as the recipient knew how to translate the signals and had the correct reference book, they could decode the message.

"In fact, you could even create a new base text using a random selection from the Qianziwen. No one would be able to crack it," Chen Xi laughed, and soon Gan Ning, Taishi Ci, and Mi Fang joined in. However, it was clear that none of them fully understood what he meant.

"Kongming, I'll leave it to you to explain to them and create a cipher system for the navy," Chen Xi said, seeing their confusion.

"Alright, I'll create a code that even Zichuan won't be able to decipher," Zhuge Liang said, eager to take on the challenge. The idea had clearly sparked his interest, and he was already thinking of ways to make the code even more complex. Let's see how you'll crack this one!

Chapter 434: A Battle is Inevitable

"Go ahead, once you've written it down, just explain it clearly to Xingba and the others," Chen Xi sighed. "As long as they can learn it, that's enough. The lower-level officers can just use numbers to communicate. Xingba and his men should be able to grasp the more complex aspects."

"Don't worry, I already understand the principle you mentioned. Following that principle, I can easily create codes that even you won't be able to decipher," Zhuge Liang said, barely containing his excitement. He was the type to grasp the underlying logic quickly. With the insight Chen Xi had provided, he already knew how to develop further, even beyond what Chen Xi had explained.

"I've realized you're incredibly smart," Chen Xi said with a smile. "I just gave you a starting point, and you already figured out the rest. You even know how to take it further. I'm sure there's never been anyone as intelligent as you."

Zhuce Liang blushed. It was rare for someone to praise him so openly. In the past, others had always complimented him in a roundabout way, but no one had ever been as direct as Chen Xi, who called him unparalleled.

"Haha, I'm just teasing," Chen Xi laughed, and Zhuge Liang's brief moment of joy faded as he looked somewhat frustrated. After bowing to Chen Xi, he left to deal with the task.

"Alright, let's get back to our discussion," Chen Xi said, turning to Gan Ning. "Once Kongming creates the code, you can rest assured that as long as there's no insider betrayal, no one will be able to crack it."

Gan Ning and Taishi Ci exchanged a glance, curious but not asking further questions. After all, Chen Xi had made it clear that the conversation was over their heads, and Zhuge Liang had promised to explain it to them later. Given Chen Xi's approval, they didn't press the issue.

However, they were now more curious about Zhuge Liang. After all, a boy of only twelve or thirteen had understood something so profound that even they couldn't grasp. It was hard not to be intrigued.

"Xingba, how long will it take us to reach the mouth of the Yangtze River? And how long to get to Lujiang?" Chen Xi asked.

"To reach the mouth of the Yangtze, it'll take about six days. As for Lujiang, considering the possibility of battle, I suggest we take four days at a slower pace. Otherwise, if we arrive at the battlefield too quickly, some of the navy might not be battle-ready. We could end up failing the rescue and losing ourselves in the process," Gan Ning replied. Although he had a good relationship with Lu Jun and the Lu family, as a general, his priority was minimizing his troops' losses. He knew how to balance personal feelings with professional responsibilities.

"Let's do it your way. This time, the opponent is also a skilled naval commander. If a conflict arises, it will likely be Zhou Yu, who defeated Huang Zu," Chen Xi nodded, trusting Gan Ning's judgment.

"Zhou Yu?" Gan Ning frowned. While others might not pay much attention to this name, Gan Ning certainly did.

As a naval commander, Gan Ning couldn't ignore Zhou Yu's reputation. Zhou Yu, who had famously defeated Huang Zu, was one of the most dangerous figures in the realm of naval warfare. Gan Ning knew better than to underestimate him.

Even if Gan Ning didn't openly admit it, he knew that his naval skills might not match Zhou Yu's. After all, Zhou Yu had managed to defeat and absorb Jiangxia's navy with just a ragtag group of water bandits—a feat that made him a force to be reckoned with.

"Yes, him. He's incredibly skilled, especially in naval battles. I went through the limited records we have on him. Zhou Yu is particularly adept at using small boats to trap larger ships and then boarding them for combat. He's also very good at sacrificing his own forces when necessary," Chen Xi said with a frown. He didn't like Zhou Yu's willingness to sacrifice his men, something Chen Xi, being soft-hearted, would only do as a last resort.

"Skilled at using small boats to trap large ships and then boarding them for combat, and good at sacrificing his own troops?" Gan Ning frowned. Aside from the part about sacrificing men, the rest sounded a lot like his own tactics from earlier days.

"If that's the case, I think I know how to counter him. Even if he's better than me at naval warfare," Gan Ning said, raising an eyebrow.

While he wasn't entirely sure of Zhou Yu's exact tactics, based on what Chen Xi had shared, Gan Ning was confident that he could catch Zhou Yu off guard. As someone who had mastered similar strategies, he was well aware of their weaknesses.

"That's good to hear. I don't recommend engaging in a prolonged battle with him. Our goal is to rescue people—getting the Lu family and their shipbuilding expertise is enough. As for fighting, we should avoid getting too deep into it. Fighting in enemy territory is too unpredictable," Chen Xi advised, seeing that Gan Ning seemed to have a plan.

Gan Ning nodded, thinking things over. If all went well, he wouldn't need to engage Zhou Yu in battle.

"When we reach the mouth of the Yangtze, Zi Fang, you and Gan Lan can take the captured Cao soldiers to Yizhou. We don't want them getting discovered," Gan Ning said to Mi Fang after a long pause.

"Isn't that a bit too much?" Mi Fang said with a wry smile. "It feels like you're sending me away before the battle even starts. That's not a good look."

"Whack!" Gan Ning slapped Mi Fang on the back. "What nonsense! It's not sending you away—it's escorting the prisoners. Besides, I could take half my men and still beat Zhou Yu. The Cao prisoners are important, and rescuing the Lu family might not even require a fight. Who knows, we might get there before Sun Ce takes Lujiang. We just need to pick them up and head downstream. They won't be able to catch us."

"Really?" Mi Fang nodded. "Alright, then. When we reach the Yangtze, Gan Lan and I will head to Yizhou. Best of luck to you."

"Yeah, without those supply ships slowing us down, we'll be faster. If we move too slowly and get caught in Zhou Yu's trap, a bloody battle will be unavoidable," Gan Ning said seriously.

Although Gan Ning spoke confidently to Chen Xi, he was already preparing for a possible confrontation with Zhou Yu. His instincts told him that a fight at Lujiang might be inevitable.

"You're right," Chen Xi agreed. Then he remembered something else. "Xingba, has General Guan sent anyone to you recently?"

"Hmm?" Gan Ning looked a bit troubled, glancing at Mi Fang and Taishi Ci before sighing and turning to Chen Xi. "To be honest, Strategist, General Guan did send someone to me, along with orders to meet all of this person's requests. He also sent a document from our lord, but didn't tell me the person's identity or allow me to inform others."

Chapter 435: Balancing Work and Rest

"Oh, don't send that person to Yizhou just yet. We might need his strength for this mission; after all, he's a powerful fighter," Chen Xi said after some thought. There was no rush to send Guan Hai to Yizhou right now. In the eyes of the world, Guan Hai was already dead, so as long as they didn't make it too obvious, no one would suspect anything.

"A powerful fighter?" Taishi Ci and Gan Ning exchanged glances. They both guessed that the person must be at the level of an internal energy master. However, unlike Taishi Ci, Gan Ning had already figured out the identity of the person in question.

"Yes. Which ship is he on? I'll go meet him," Chen Xi nodded. "It's good to see him anyway; he's a bit of a special case."

"He's on this ship. I'll take you to him later. But, Strategist, if he doesn't want to fight anymore, please don't force him," Gan Ning said sincerely. After learning the man's identity, Gan Ning, who highly valued loyalty and righteousness, had come to deeply respect the prisoner on board, regardless of his past affiliation with the Yellow Turbans. For people like Guan Yu and Gan Ning, they respected such behavior, and thus they treated him well.

"Don't worry. If he doesn't want to, I'll send him to Yizhou. But if he agrees, he can lend us a hand first," Chen Xi replied with a smile. He wasn't surprised that Gan Ning had figured out who it was. Anyone who underestimated Gan Ning as a simple-minded warrior would likely end up dead. Gan Ning was a man trained by a noble family, with a sharp mind to match, even if he appeared more straightforward.

"Very well," Gan Ning nodded.

After lunch, before Gan Ning had the chance to take Chen Xi to see Guan Hai, Zhuge Liang arrived with his newly created cipher system. He handed the instructions and contents over to Gan Ning. "Look through the first part, and you'll understand! Do you know 'The Book of Changes'?"

"No," Gan Ning shook his head vigorously. He remembered that when he was younger, a master specializing in 'The Book of Changes' had been hired to teach him, but he never understood a word of it. It was simply too difficult.

"Hmm, in that case, just follow the instructions step by step. You don't need to understand it deeply, just go by the book," Zhuge Liang said with a frown. As a top general, not understanding the concepts of yin and yang or celestial phenomena seemed unimaginable to him. Frustrated, he pulled out a copy of 'The Book of Changes' and tossed it to Gan Ning.

Gan Ning felt a bit embarrassed, but he sat down and opened the cipher system Zhuge Liang had written. As he read through it, he remarked, "Kongming, your handwriting is impressive! Well done!"

"Thank you," Zhuge Liang replied, a little embarrassed. Though he had initially looked down on Gan Ning, he felt better after receiving the compliment.

"General Gan, you might want to read 'The Book of Changes' more often. You don't need to master it, but understanding its principles can be beneficial. For example, General Guan often reads 'The Spring

and Autumn Annals,' and General Zhao reads various texts. You could also start by reading 'The Book of Changes' daily. At the very least, it gives you... um, as Zixuan would say, a sense of sophistication," Zhuge Liang suggested.

"Sophistication, huh?" Gan Ning nodded, recalling that Chen Xi had explained the concept of sophistication to him before. It was about earning respect from others through your actions or demeanor, something Gan Ning valued greatly.

After hearing Zhuge Liang's words, Gan Ning decided that whether he understood it or not, he would carry 'The Book of Changes' around with him. At the very least, it would give him a more refined image. Carrying a classic text like 'The Book of Changes' certainly had more gravitas than carrying a steamed bun.

Gan Ning wasn't slow-witted, and Zhuge Liang had written everything in great detail. After just one reading, Gan Ning felt enlightened. The way the cipher was arranged was simply unbeatable. At least, Gan Ning couldn't imagine anyone cracking it. If necessary, the code could be continuously altered, with dozens of base codes prepared in advance.

"Haha, you're really something! Why not join our navy? We need talented people like you," Gan Ning laughed as he crumbled the original cipher instructions into dust. He had already grasped the method and planned to create his own version, so only he would know how to encode the messages.

"No, I haven't finished my studies yet. There's still much to learn, so I can't join the navy," Zhuge Liang replied with a smile, pleased with Gan Ning's cautious approach. In Zhuge Liang's view, a great general should indeed be careful. The earlier carefree attitude Gan Ning had displayed didn't quite fit the image of a top commander.

Gan Ning squinted his eyes and then dropped the matter. He had already guessed where Zhuge Liang's future lay.

As he gazed at the horizon where the sea met the sky, Gan Ning realized that he harbored no envy. He was more than satisfied with his current life, and even if he wanted more, he knew he lacked the necessary intellect.

"Let's go fishing. Time to balance work with relaxation! We'll catch something and make fish soup tonight," Gan Ning said, patting Zhuge Liang on the shoulder.

"Sounds good," Zhuge Liang nodded. It was his first time out at sea, and he was slightly excited. He couldn't focus on reading, so he decided to join Gan Ning for some fishing.

Watching Gan Ning tie a giant hook to a thick rope, then impale a foot-long live fish on it before swinging it around and casting it into the water, Zhuge Liang was left speechless. Was this really fishing?

"What's the matter, Kongming?" Gan Ning chuckled as he noticed Zhuge Liang's wide-eyed expression. This was the same reaction Mi Fang had when he first saw it.

"Is this really fishing?" Zhuge Liang asked with a wry smile, gesturing as he spoke. In his mind, fishing involved a bamboo rod, a thin line, and a bent sewing needle as a hook. What was this?

"Of course, it's fishing!" Gan Ning laughed heartily. As he spoke, he suddenly staggered forward. "See? I've got a bite!"

"...," Zhuge Liang's face twitched. What kind of foolish fish would swallow such a huge hook?

"This one's pretty strong!" Gan Ning was nearly pulled overboard as he braced himself against the side of the ship. The thick rope was stretched taut. "Whoa, this is a big one! Fetch my sword—I'm going to slay it!" Gan Ning called out. He knew that, in terms of raw strength, he often wasn't a match for these giant fish.

Seeing this, Zhuge Liang quickly ran to get help. But before he could take a few steps, he heard a loud crack. The part of the ship where Gan Ning had braced himself broke, and Gan Ning was pulled into the water.

Chapter 436: Zhuge Liang's Realization

"Quick, someone save General Gan!" Zhuge Liang, though startled, remained calm and immediately ordered the nearby soldiers with a commanding presence.

"Oh, is Xingba in the water again?" Taishi Ci looked at Gan Ning, who was surfing on the sea, being dragged by a rope, and clicked his tongue in amazement. "Looks like it's another big fish."

"Does this happen often?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"Every day, more or less. We've reinforced that spot over and over again. If it's a big fish, it'll usually pull Xingba into the water. But don't worry, once the fish tires out, Xingba will drag it back! Lately, his fish soup-making skills have improved, and by the way, these fish taste pretty good," Taishi Ci said nonchalantly. It's one of the few entertainments at sea.

"I have a feeling there's something off about this sea area. Don't you think the fish here are unusually strong?" Chen Xi sighed.

"Hmm, now that you mention it, Strategist, I didn't notice before, but you're right. In this sea area, we've encountered quite a few large fish that are about as strong as Refining Qi into Steel. We've cooked and eaten quite a few, and now many of the soldiers have increased their internal energy. It's not normal. Could there be some treasure here?" Taishi Ci stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"Maybe, but even if there is, it would be hard to find underwater." Chen Xi sighed. "So, most of Xingba's soldiers have internal energy now?"

"Yes, the navy was originally made up of *water bandits, and they were all brave and fierce. About 20% already had internal energy. Now, with regular consumption of these energy-infused fish, nearly half have internal energy. But I think the remaining half might find it difficult to develop internal energy," Taishi Ci said with a sigh.

"Because of their physical condition and age?" Chen Xi asked, already having a good idea. After a certain point, it becomes much harder to develop internal energy. Early life conditions and training determine one's potential later on.

"Exactly. Internal energy ultimately depends on the physical foundation. Those who haven't developed it yet will likely be phased out. Even if they eat the same as the others, they'll always be a bit lacking. While we have this opportunity near the coast, it's a good time to train the navy. A force made entirely of soldiers with internal energy is rare," Taishi Ci said wistfully. With such favorable conditions, he and Gan Ning had discussed the possibility of creating a purely internal energy-based force.

"Yes, I've been working to improve the living conditions of the people in Mount Tai with a similar goal in mind, but the results haven't been as good as I'd hoped. Although the books say that ample food should allow for the development of internal energy, it doesn't seem to work that way in reality," Chen Xi sighed. Despite his efforts to improve the people's living conditions, the number of internal energy practitioners hadn't significantly increased.

"It probably has something to do with this," Taishi Ci said, pointing to his head. "Internal energy is extracted from the body, but the first spark needs to be guided by mental energy. The problem is that mental energy is something vague and difficult for ordinary people to grasp. Soldiers often gain insight through combat, but commoners lead too peaceful lives."

"Forget it. We'll do our best. That kind of thing is hard to define. I remember feeling the presence of internal energy while reading a book. It seems that reaching that threshold requires some kind of realization or stimulation," Chen Xi said, waving his hand dismissively.

"Strategist, you don't need to worry about this. As long as the material conditions are met, even if they don't develop internal energy, the recruits will have strong physiques and solid foundations. On the battlefield, as long as they kill an enemy, they'll likely break through and develop internal energy," Taishi Ci said with a smile.

This was something Taishi Ci had seen on the battlefield. Strong soldiers, once they killed someone, seemed to break through some barrier and naturally developed internal energy. Perhaps, as Chen Xi said, they needed some kind of stimulation.

"Oh, I see." Chen Xi understood after hearing Taishi Ci's words. His guess had been correct—reaching that point required some kind of stimulation or realization. Many commoners never had that opportunity, so even if they ate well, they might never develop internal energy in their lifetime.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang watched Gan Ning surf across the sea, holding onto a rope. Hearing the cheers from the other ships, Zhuge Liang realized that this was a common occurrence. Although he was somewhat displeased, he couldn't suppress his concern. He walked to the edge of the ship and observed Gan Ning skimming across the water. After a long while, he finally confirmed that there was no safety issue.

"Get back here!" Gan Ning felt the speed of the wind around him begin to slow slightly. Having done this many times, Gan Ning knew that the fish pulling him was starting to tire.

At Gan Ning's shout, many sailors appeared on the sides of the ships, cheering him on. A blue-green glow suddenly enveloped Gan Ning, covering him completely.

In an instant, Gan Ning became a glowing ball of light. His arms bulged with muscle, and he stomped hard on the surface of the sea, causing the water around him to form a funnel-like pit several dozen meters wide. Gan Ning then leaped into the air, dragging the fish out of the water.

As the fish emerged from the sea, Gan Ning released the rope and, with a powerful stomp, shot towards the fish like a blur. He kicked the fish hard on the head.

Cheers erupted from the surrounding ships as the fish's head bent unnaturally under the force of Gan Ning's kick. The fish, propelled by the impact, hurtled back towards the sea, but Gan Ning quickly caught the rope and stopped it mid-air.

As the fish plummeted towards the water, the rope pulled taut, and Gan Ning, seemingly defying gravity, hovered in mid-air for a moment before leaping backward, dragging the fish towards his ship.

With a light thud, Gan Ning suddenly appeared in front of Zhuge Liang, holding the rope. Before Zhuge Liang could say anything, the massive fish came crashing towards Gan Ning's head.

With a casual motion, Gan Ning released the rope and caught the fish with ease. The ship trembled slightly as he tossed the struggling fish onto the deck.

"So, Kongming, which part would you like to eat? I'll cook it right away!" Gan Ning laughed heartily, pointing at the still-flailing fish at his feet.

"...", Zhuge Liang was speechless. He finally understood what Chen Xi had meant by saying that traveling a thousand miles is better than reading a thousand books. He had never imagined that fishing could be done this way or that a general could be so wild.

Chapter 437: A Navy Specialty Meal

Gan Ning wielded a large cleaver with such speed that Zhuge Liang could barely see the movements as the massive fish was sliced and placed on a nearby board. The entrails were then unceremoniously dumped into the sea. Meanwhile, Taishi Ci came over, carrying a large pot.

"Clank, clank, clank!" The two of them swung their weapons skillfully, quickly reducing the fish into large chunks. The skin was peeled off and thrown into the sea—cleaning it was just too much effort. By this time, Mi Fang had already arrived, lugging a large jug of fresh water and another filled with various herbs and spices.

"Whoosh!" Water was poured into the pot, followed by the spices and half a jar of salt. Large pieces of fish were tossed into the air, chopped into fist-sized portions with a single swing of Gan Ning's cleaver, and thrown into the pot. Finally, Gan Lan tossed in some freshly made tofu.

"Alright, let it simmer until nightfall, and it'll be ready to eat," Gan Ning said, wiping his cleaver with a cloth before slinging it back over his shoulder. Laughing heartily, he turned to Zhuge Liang, "The flavor is incredible, heh heh!"

"Is this supposed to be dinner?" Zhuge Liang felt his eyelid twitch. Was this really how they cooked?

"Hmph, don't underestimate this method! Even though it may seem rough and wild, the result is quite delicious, heh heh. You'll see, tonight's dinner will be great!" Gan Ning laughed in his signature carefree manner. "We'll eat this with steamed buns for dinner."

"Kongming, don't be fooled by Xingba's wild methods. Though he doesn't care much about manners, he's actually from a noble family. He may not seem like it, but he knows all about fine food," Mi Fang said with a chuckle as he noticed Zhuge Liang's skepticism. "Believe it or not, this fish stew turns out great. I think it's delicious, though the way he makes it is a bit... unconventional. Not sure where he learned it."

Seeing Zhuge Liang's continued doubts, Mi Fang patted him on the shoulder and added, "Don't worry, you'll see for yourself tonight. This method may look crude, but the taste is solid. We have this meal every now and then. Xingba also does grilled fish sometimes, but that's terrible."

"This way of cooking actually tastes good?" Zhuge Liang said with a wry smile. While he hadn't spent much time in the kitchen himself, he was certain that this wasn't how you were supposed to cook. Would it even absorb the flavors properly?

"Trust us, you'll find out tonight. It's actually pretty good," Taishi Ci reassured him. "I remember eating this for twenty days straight with Xingba and not getting tired of it. It's really not bad."

"You all eat like this regularly? No issues?" Chen Xi joined them, eyeing the large pot balanced on a stone platform. Though he had initially suggested this method to Gan Ning, he couldn't help but wonder if it was really okay.

"Don't worry! I've been eating this for a while now, and I'm perfectly fine. We've tried boiling just about everything we can pull out of the sea. Hey, Gan Lan, throw in whatever you just pulled up!" Gan Ning instructed as he pointed at Gan Lan, who was hauling up some seaweed. "It tastes pretty good too, and it helps nourish internal energy."

With that, Gan Ning casually tossed the seaweed into the pot. His cooking method was indeed as carefree as his personality. To him, whatever was thrown into the pot would taste fine. But to Zhuge Liang, this was completely unacceptable—could they really eat this?

Chen Xi didn't say much more. After all, this was all-natural and fresh, and it didn't seem like there was any real problem with it. Gan Ning had been eating this way for quite some time, and it had practically become the navy's standard meal. Still, the wild cooking method made Chen Xi feel a bit uneasy.

After setting dinner to cook, Gan Ning led Chen Xi to the cabin to meet Guan Hai. Though technically a prisoner, once Gan Ning learned his identity, Guan Hai's treatment improved significantly. He ate the same food as Gan Ning, and the guards initially assigned to watch him were dismissed. Guan Hai could escape whenever he wanted, but Gan Ning believed that a man of such honor wouldn't run.

True enough, when Gan Ning arrived, the door to Guan Hai's cabin was wide open, but Guan Hai lay on the floor with no intention of fleeing.

"Guan Hai, I've come to see you," Gan Ning said, appearing suddenly beside him.

Hearing his name, Guan Hai was startled. Before leaving, Guan Yu had specifically told him not to reveal his identity to anyone, including Gan Ning, the navy general who was supposed to take him to Yizhou for a peaceful retirement.

Having survived the chaos and gained newfound clarity, Guan Hai was relieved to know his future was secure. Naturally, he accepted Guan Yu's conditions without hesitation, keeping a low profile throughout the journey. He was just waiting for Guan Yu's further arrangements. He didn't remember ever revealing his name to the familiar-looking man before him.

After all, Guan Yu had been deeply impressed by Guan Hai's loyalty and trustworthiness. After Guan Hai agreed to his requests, Guan Yu promised to find a good position for every Yellow Turban leader and take care of the elderly and weak among them. He assured Guan Hai that he could retire in peace, even leaving a deputy general position for him when he returned. Guan Yu had pledged that any achievements he earned would also be credited to Guan Hai, from the day he left. This sincerity filled Guan Hai with satisfaction over his decision.

Now, as his dream of a good life was within reach—just a few years of keeping a low profile, and he could become a general of the Han, earn merits, rise through the ranks, and eventually receive noble titles, securing a legacy for his family. But now, someone had called out his name. How could this happen?

Guan Hai sprang to his feet, preparing to subdue the two men before him. He needed to silence them before anyone else discovered his identity. If news got out that he was still alive, it could jeopardize Lord Xuande's foundation, especially now that the Yellow Turbans had just been subdued, and his influence was at its peak.

"Wham!" Guan Hai was a man of decisive action, and when it came to matters involving the Yellow Turbans, he didn't hesitate. He leaped up and kicked towards Gan Ning's neck, but Gan Ning blocked it with his left arm and countered with a punch aimed at Guan Hai's abdomen.

"Bang, bang, bang!" A rapid exchange of blows followed, with Gan Ning leaping back slightly disheveled, and Guan Hai also retreating, his eyes now coldly focused on Gan Ning.

"Who are you, and how do you know my name?" Guan Hai asked, his gaze intense. The brief clash had shown him that it wouldn't be easy to take down his opponent, and revealing his identity was not an option. His eyes flickered toward Chen Xi.

Chapter 438: Fa Zheng and His Father

"Lower your guard; it might be fine to keep an eye on me, but there's no need to worry about him," Gan Ning said as he stepped in front of Chen Xi, fearing that Guan Hai might suddenly attack Chen Xi in a fit of rage. "This is Xuande's strategist, Chen Zichuan—you should have heard of him."

Guan Hai, however, remained cautious, his eyes still locked on Gan Ning. He didn't want to be captured due to a moment of carelessness. His current identity could easily be used against him, so he had to stay vigilant.

"I'm Gan Xingba—you should know who I am. You're on my ship; surely, General Guan mentioned my name, right?" Gan Ning continued, pointing at himself.

"I know. General Guan said that if something went wrong, I should find Gan Xingba," Guan Hai replied with a nod. "But how do I know you really are Gan Xingba? How do you prove that?"

"I can't believe this!" Gan Ning was stunned, pulling out his official seal and placing it on the ground before gently pushing it toward Guan Hai. "This is my seal as the Navy Commander—there's only one like it in all of the Han Dynasty."

"I can't read," Guan Hai admitted. He had begun to trust them, but his wariness remained.

"What do you want, then?" Gan Ning asked in exasperation. This was the first time he had encountered someone so stubborn.

"General Guan ordered you to go to Yizhou, but I have some business that could use your help. We're headed to Lujiang, and there's a chance we might have to fight. I'd like you to lend a hand," Chen Xi said, patting Gan Ning on the shoulder to signal him to step aside. He figured Guan Hai had already recognized them.

"Can't you handle it?" Guan Hai asked, clearly surprised.

"We can. It's just that the scale of the battle is uncertain. It's a precaution," Chen Xi calmly explained. "Of course, if you don't want to, we can still follow General Guan's orders and take you to Yizhou."

"Can you guarantee my identity won't be exposed?" Guan Hai asked.

"We can guarantee it. As long as you don't reveal your own name, no one in Lujiang will know who you are. If necessary, you can even use an alias," Chen Xi said, raising an eyebrow. Guan Hai's question implied he was willing, as long as his identity remained hidden due to Guan Yu's instructions.

"Alright, it's settled then. But unless it's absolutely necessary, I won't get involved," Guan Hai agreed, then gestured for Chen Xi and Gan Ning to leave.

As Chen Xi and Gan Ning made their way through the ship's corridors, Gan Ning began grumbling, "What bad luck! Such a strong and fierce man, yet he hesitates and makes excuses. It's disappointing. I thought he'd be full of loyalty and righteousness, but now that we've met, he's pushing back on everything. What a letdown—he even hesitates when asked to fight."

"His situation is complicated; he has to be careful. Besides, this doesn't conflict with his sense of honor. Given his actions in Qingzhou, he's certainly proven his loyalty. Don't be too hard on him. He's just being cautious," Chen Xi said with a smile, trying to comfort Gan Ning. He knew Gan Ning wouldn't hold a grudge over this, but it was better to smooth things over so they could work together without any issues.

"Fine, whatever. I'll let it go," Gan Ning waved it off. "Let's go. If he's agreed, then he'll keep an eye on things when the time comes. People like him value honor."

In the days that followed, when Gan Ning wasn't overseeing the daily training, he spent his time fishing with Mi Fang and the others. In the end, Zhuge Liang confirmed one thing: using a large hook with a rope to fish in this area was far more effective than using a rod and line with bait.

Although Zhuge Liang was frustrated that his fishing rod caught nothing and switching to a large hook nearly got him dragged into the sea, he ended up having a great time. Of course, after nearly becoming fish food himself, he enjoyed eating fish that evening even more—it seemed all his frustrations had been taken out on the fish.

While Chen Xi and Zhuge Liang were dining on fish at sea, Hua Xiong had already galloped into Beihai territory. There's no denying that even a mediocre horse in this era could cover ground quickly. If he had Red Hare, he would probably be close to Qi by now. This was the advantage of a good horse. However, traveling with a group would have slowed them down significantly.

"Where's the lord?" Hua Xiong's luck seemed to hold as he encountered Fa Zheng, who was out inspecting the area with his father. Hua Xiong reined in his horse, stopping right next to Fa Zheng. The cloud of dust that followed engulfed Fa Zheng, who had been about to greet him with a smile, leaving him covered in dirt.

"Ugh, ugh, ugh!" Fa Zheng spat out the dust, his face darkening. "General Hua..."

Hua Xiong felt a bit embarrassed, seeing Fa Zheng's expression and hearing his tone, realizing that Fa Zheng was a bit annoyed. But it had truly been an accident.

"Father, take it easy. This is General Hua Xiong, a loyal subordinate of Lord Xuande," Fa Zheng quickly moved to help his father out of the carriage, choosing to let go of his earlier grievance. He introduced Hua Xiong, "This is my father."

"Greetings, sir," Hua Xiong dismounted and respectfully saluted Fa Yan, grateful that Fa Zheng's father appeared much older than him.

"No need for that, General. My son can be a bit reckless; please don't hold it against him," Fa Yan said, noticing Fa Zheng's irritated expression. He patted his son on the shoulder, signaling him to make amends with Hua Xiong.

"Sir, you're too kind. We all know how straightforward Xiaozhi is—he wears his heart on his sleeve. It's nothing," Hua Xiong replied, bowing to Fa Yan.

"Well, I'm an old man now, and seeing my son achieve so much already makes me very proud. Xiaozhi, it's time for you to return to Beihai and take up your duties. I've seen enough of your abilities," Fa Yan said affectionately, looking at his son with pride. He was already very pleased with Fa Zheng's success and didn't want him to neglect his responsibilities any longer, even if it was under the guise of "inspecting the people's conditions."

Fa Zheng forced a smile, "Father, I really am inspecting the people's conditions. I brought you along to enjoy some fresh air, but rest assured, Beihai is in no immediate danger."

Standing off to the side, Hua Xiong could barely contain his irritation. He tapped Fa Zheng on the shoulder, and when Fa Zheng gave him a puzzled look, Hua Xiong pulled him aside and explained everything that had happened recently. Fa Zheng's face turned pale.

"You're not joking?" Fa Zheng asked, his voice trembling.

"Do you think I rode hundreds of miles to make a joke? Don't you know I've been busy training troops in Taishan?" Hua Xiong retorted, annoyed. "Let's head back to Beihai. I still need to report to Lord Xuande. Most of the letters from Lu Zijing never made it through—you really messed up this time!"

Fa Zheng grimaced, then forced a smile as he turned to his father. "Father, you were right—Beihai does need someone in charge. Something's already happened as soon as I left!"

Chapter 439: The Revelation

When Fa Zheng and Hua Xiong rushed back, the messenger who had been waiting for them nearly broke down in tears. The letter from Lu Su was marked as extremely urgent, yet it had been delayed to the point where it was now slower than an ordinary message.

"Alright, you don't have to worry about this anymore. I'm here now," Hua Xiong said, recognizing the beleaguered soldier as one of his own. He waved the soldier off, telling him to rest and return to Taishan by the end of the month.

"Yes, sir!" The messenger was overjoyed. His greatest fear had been that something would go terribly wrong because his message didn't arrive in time, leading to his execution. Many messengers had met such fates...

"Where is Lord Xuande likely to be?" Hua Xiong asked as soon as Fa Zheng had settled his father and returned to the office. He wanted to address the matter as quickly as possible.

"Most likely in this area," Fa Zheng replied, pointing to a spot on the map.

Hua Xiong glanced at it and nearly spat out blood. He had passed by that very location earlier.

Suppressing his frustration, Hua Xiong said, "Xiaozhi, you stay here and oversee Beihai. I'll go and report this matter to Lord Xuande. But remember, don't leave your post so recklessly again. Even if Beihai seems quiet, you can't abandon your duties. And if you must leave, ensure you appoint someone to take your place."

"Fine, fine. Just go already. Don't worry, developing Beihai is easy. Trust me, we've done this countless times before," Fa Zheng replied, clearly annoyed. "You just focus on your own tasks. You don't need to worry about Beihai. I was there when we developed Taishan!"

With that, Fa Zheng practically shoved Hua Xiong out the door. For him, developing Beihai really wasn't a challenge. He had seen firsthand how Chen Xi and Lu Su had developed Taishan, and after being appointed as Xiang of Qi, he had already implemented similar agricultural, commercial, and mining developments there. When Liu Bei later assigned him to Beihai, Lu Su had even provided him with a detailed plan for handling large-scale Yellow Turban refugees, originally drafted by Chen Xi for Taishan.

This was why Fa Zheng was so confident. The plan, supplemented by Lu Su, was already incredibly thorough. Beihai's situation was almost identical to Taishan's when Chen Xi first arrived, except now they had ample resources. By following the steps, Fa Zheng could easily implement the work-for-relief programs.

This also explained why Fa Zheng had been wandering around inspecting the local conditions. He wasn't trying to outshine Chen Xi or Lu Su; he just didn't like copying others. He wanted to introduce something unique, like when he had mobilized the people of Qi to build an iron mine and manufacture agricultural tools rather than weapons. He hadn't even reported this achievement to Liu Bei yet, planning to surprise him with the ready-made farm tools, which were still in short supply.

Hua Xiong left the office, watching as Fa Zheng ordered the gates to be closed. He mounted his horse with a look of disdain and rode off into the night, heading toward the location Fa Zheng had indicated. Once he reached the area, he planned to release his aura, hoping that Xu Chu would sense it and lead him to Liu Bei.

That night, just as Zixu was about to meditate and heal his injuries, he heard faint footsteps outside his door. Sighing, he put on his shoes and opened the door just as the person outside was about to knock.

"Click!" Jia Xu was just about to knock when Zixu appeared in front of him with a calm expression. Jia Xu's raised hand paused mid-air, his expression momentarily stunned. But he quickly composed himself, showing no sign of emotion.

"What a coincidence, Zixu," Jia Xu said, lowering his arm and ignoring the awkwardness.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Jia Changshi?" Zixu asked, his face expressionless.

"Aren't you going to invite me in? We're around the same age; just call me Wenhe," Jia Xu replied calmly, seemingly indifferent to Zixu's demeanor.

"Of course, Brother Wenhe, please come in," Zixu said with a forced smile, though internally he felt a sense of dread. Despite his confidence that he hadn't revealed any flaws in front of Jia Xu, he couldn't help but feel uneasy around him. Jia Xu was like a shadowy blade, deadly and unseen.

Jia Xu entered without hesitation, taking the main seat and tapping his tea cup. Zixu could only smile bitterly as he served Jia Xu tea, suppressing any displeasure. Even if he wanted to confront Jia Xu, it would have to wait until after they parted ways.

"Zixu, have a seat. No need to stand there awkwardly," Jia Xu said, seemingly only noticing that Zixu hadn't sat down after taking a sip of tea.

Once Zixu had found a seat, he asked, "Brother Wenhe, what brings you here? I'm a bit concerned."

"It's nothing major. I just wanted to continue the conversation from the other day. Ziyang asked a question that piqued my interest, and now I'd like to know the answer," Jia Xu said with a sly smile, his eyes gleaming as he looked at Zixu. "Specifically, I'm interested in the spiritual abilities of the Cao and Yuan families."

Zixu was taken aback. He hadn't expected Jia Xu to come asking about this. It seemed easy enough to deflect. "Why would Brother Wenhe be so interested in such a thing?"

"Zixu, let's not beat around the bush. If you're joining us, you need to show your true capabilities. Half-truths won't do either of us any good," Jia Xu said calmly, but the depth of his gaze sent a chill down Zixu's spine.

"I don't know," Zixu hesitated before finally speaking. At this moment, he couldn't perform any divination. With Jia Xu present, any prediction he made wouldn't necessarily come true—the implications were too complex.

"Are you sure about that?" Jia Xu raised an eyebrow. "If you have any difficulties, just say so. These individuals are important to us. Since you're residing here, we need to understand your intentions. Alternatively, you could share the information we seek. It would benefit everyone."

"Aren't you afraid I'll attack you?" Zixu asked, his identity exposed. After an initial moment of shock, he felt less intimidated by Jia Xu.

"I'm not afraid. You won't dare, and even if you did, it wouldn't work," Jia Xu replied calmly. "I have my own means of protection, and besides, aren't you still injured? Forcing yourself to act would likely do you more harm than good."

Chapter 440: Hidden Agendas

Zixu watched Jia Xu with a wary expression. From the first moment he had encountered Jia Xu, he had felt an intense sense of danger.

"It's not that I don't know, but rather that I don't dare to speak," Zixu sighed, sitting down with a look of helplessness. "As you said, I am indeed a Daoist and do know some things. Though I'm not sure where I exposed myself, your confident demeanor suggests that you've already figured everything out."

"Not daring to speak?" Jia Xu glanced at Zixu. "Between two evils, one should choose the lesser. Which side do you think is the lesser evil?"

"Must I answer?" Zixu asked with a dark expression.

"Indeed!" Jia Xu stared at Zixu, ready in case Zixu attempted to act violently.

"Compared to the plotting of the Cao family and the Yuan family... Sigh, can't I just avoid answering?" Zixu responded with a bitter smile. Even though the Yuan family's cause and effect were minor, it was still not something he could bear. If he spoke, the resulting entanglements could potentially lead to his complete annihilation.

"And what about the plotting of the Liu family?" Jia Xu's eyes gleamed with interest. He had expected to get no clear answers but had asked nonetheless.

"This one is also difficult," Zixu replied, visibly wavering. After calculating internally, he realized that the consequences of revealing this were bearable. Yet, he didn't agree immediately, aware that Jia Xu was merely testing the waters. Now that he understood, Zixu felt less inclined to resist.

A faint smile appeared on Jia Xu's face. He enjoyed situations like these.

Jia Xu quietly pieced together the information Zixu had inadvertently revealed. While Zixu might not have realized it, every word was valuable intelligence to Jia Xu.

Zixu remained solemn, but since noticing that Jia Xu wasn't pressuring him, he felt more at ease. Little did he know, Jia Xu had never intended to force anything out of him. His goal had been to confirm a few things, and now that he had, Jia Xu was satisfied.

"This is difficult too... Fine, something simpler then," Jia Xu said, frowning. "Tell me, who will take control of the southeast?"

"No! Absolutely not! I cannot reveal the identity of the one who takes control!" Zixu exclaimed. Though revealing this information wouldn't directly harm him, he wanted to use this moment to weaken Jia Xu's leverage over him.

Jia Xu glanced pityingly out the window. This "immortal" really wasn't very clever.

"If that's not an option, how about telling me how Cao Cao plans to advance westward? That should be easier, right?" Jia Xu asked after staring at Zixu for a long time, finally switching to another question.

"Well... Can you ask something else? I can't reveal this either," Zixu responded with a feigned expression of difficulty. The implications of this question were even greater than the last one. Although Zixu was confident that he would be fine if he answered, he had no intention of inviting trouble. Having already declined the previous question, he saw no reason not to do the same here.

The look of pity in Jia Xu's eyes deepened.

Jia Xu frowned slightly, realizing he had underestimated Cao Cao. The man's potential was not to be taken lightly.

After hearing Zixu's response, a cold gleam flashed in Jia Xu's eyes as he glanced at Zixu. "Zixu, if none of these are possible, then what is?"

Zixu thought for a moment, realizing he might have gone too far. Jia Xu had asked multiple questions, and he had rejected every single one. With a bitter smile, Zixu finally said, "Jia Changshi, it's not that I don't want to answer. It's that I don't dare. If I were to speak, misfortune could soon follow, leading to my demise. Please ask something within my capabilities. Although these questions seem within reach, I truly cannot answer them."

Jia Xu stared at Zixu for a long time. When Zixu started feeling uncomfortable under his gaze, Jia Xu finally said, "I'll believe you this time, but don't let me find out you've deceived me. If I ever confirm that you have, I'll make sure you pay dearly."

"I wouldn't dare," Zixu replied, tugging at his robes. Internally, he thought, I must be more cautious around this man.

"Let me think... You haven't been able to answer any of my questions. I need to come up with a simpler one," Jia Xu said, tilting his head as he pondered.

Given his current grasp of the situation and his understanding of Zixu's character over the past few days, Jia Xu suspected that Zixu would eventually give him an answer, as long as the question wasn't too difficult.

Jia Xu frowned slightly.

"Come on, Wenhe, all this thinking is making me nervous. Whether I answer now or later, it's all the same. Just ask your question quickly," Zixu said, feigning a troubled expression and cautiously probing Jia Xu.

Though he was laughing inwardly, Zixu outwardly maintained a pitiful demeanor.

"Hold on a moment!" Jia Xu shot Zixu a dissatisfied look.

"Got it!" Jia Xu suddenly smiled and turned to Zixu, grinning as he grabbed Zixu's arm. "Zixu, you just reminded me of something I've been curious about."

"Go ahead. If I know the answer and can share it, I will," Zixu said, letting out a long breath as if relieved.

"When my lord bestows titles upon his ministers, where will I rank?" Jia Xu asked, posing an odd question.

Zixu stared at Jia Xu for a long time, but Jia Xu remained unperturbed. Eventually, Zixu sighed and replied, "That... I really can't tell you."