

Mythical 441

Chapter 441: No Longer Fearful

"You don't know anything, do you!" Jia Xu suddenly became furious. His once smiling, cautious, and hopeful expression was completely replaced by anger. "I ask you for a way to wealth, and you won't even tell me. You're not even as good as a wandering fortune-telling Daoist!"

Zixu was grabbed by the collar and violently shaken by Jia Xu. He instinctively avoided eye contact, but because of this, he didn't notice the fleeting hint of joy in Jia Xu's eyes.

For someone like Jia Xu, who usually concealed his emotions, to show such joy, it was clear that the information Zixu had inadvertently revealed was of immense importance.

"Do you know or not? Do you know or not!" Jia Xu shook Zixu back and forth as if he were trying to shake him apart.

Jia Xu quickly suppressed his excitement. He had already obtained the most crucial information he wanted. Now, it was just a matter of squeezing out a few more simple details, and he had already decided on his next question.

"Let go of me! Let go!" Zixu, feeling dizzy from the shaking, pleaded.

"Let go? Not a chance! You don't know anything, and I vouched for you to Ziyang. You're making me look bad—I should just kill you!" Jia Xu refused to release Zixu, unleashing his immense mental force to envelop both of them. He was confident that even if Zixu were a so-called "immortal," he could still turn him into a lunatic if it came to a fight, especially at such close range.

"Calm down! Calm down! Calm down!" Enveloped by Jia Xu's overwhelming mental energy, Zixu could no longer maintain his composure. He despised dealing with top-tier strategists. At this distance, if Jia Xu unleashed his full mental force into Zixu's consciousness, it would not only drive him mad but also shatter his personality through the bombardment of Jia Xu's thoughts, memories, and will.

"Calm down? Are you kidding me? Will you tell me or not? If you don't, we'll both perish together! I've mobilized a bunch of people and gotten nothing in return—I can handle that!" Jia Xu roared at Zixu.

At this distance, Zixu dared not make any sudden moves, fearing that if he provoked Jia Xu, they would both go down together. Even a great figure like Nan Hua wouldn't be able to escape from such a close-range confrontation!

"I can't say!" Zixu started to protest, but immediately sensed the surrounding mental energy going berserk.

"I'll tell you!" Zixu, quick to adapt, shouted, then put on a tearful expression and pleaded, "Wenhe, I truly can't say. Let's make a deal. Ask me two simple questions that you can take back as answers, and let me go."

Seeing Jia Xu deep in thought and feeling the mental energy around him calm down, Zixu breathed a long sigh of relief.

Fearing that Jia Xu might continue to press him as before, Zixu added, "But don't do that again. Even if you push me, I can't answer the things I'm not allowed to. If you push me too far, I'll fight back. I might not survive, but I won't die from your first blow. And if I tell you, I'm certain to die! How about that?"

"Fine, you win!" Jia Xu finally relented after some hesitation.

Zixu's strategy of combining soft and hard tactics had clearly hit the mark, but Jia Xu maintained a tough exterior as he said, "But how can I be sure you're not deceiving me? And what if you seek revenge later? I've heard that your kind is quite good at curses."

"I swear that I'll tell you what I know, and I promise not to trouble you in the future. As for curses, you don't need to worry. Kings and ministers blessed by the people are beyond the reach of 'immortals.' The cause and effect are too significant," Zixu said gloomily. "But you only get two chances. If you ask something I can't answer, I won't tell you, and it'll count as one of the two."

"Alright, let's seal it with a vow!" Jia Xu raised his hand.

"Agreed!" Zixu, eager to avoid more trouble from Jia Xu, quickly agreed. With this vow, if Jia Xu broke his word later, Zixu would feel justified in retaliating.

"Tell me all the spiritual talents of my lord Liu Xuande's subordinates, the drawbacks of those talents, how to mitigate those drawbacks, and any abilities similar to spiritual talents," Jia Xu asked after pretending to think for a moment.

Though Jia Xu cleverly bundled four questions into one, Zixu didn't bother to argue. The consequences of this were not severe, and given that Liu Xuande's luck had saved him from a previous calamity, Zixu decided to repay the favor. He proceeded to detail the spiritual talents of Liu Bei's subordinates.

"Now, tell me about the spiritual talents of Xun You or Cheng Yu," Jia Xu continued, unfazed after hearing about Liu Bei's subordinates. He was notably surprised by Zhuge Liang's abilities but maintained a composed expression as he pressed on.

"This..." Zixu hesitated, staring at Jia Xu for a long time before finally gritting his teeth and revealing Cheng Yu's spiritual talent. The consequences of divulging this were less severe than continuing to deal with Jia Xu's relentless questioning, so Zixu chose to speak.

After confirming the details of both individuals' spiritual talents, Jia Xu was thoroughly satisfied. He trusted his judgment and believed Zixu wasn't lying.

"Thank you, Zixu. If you'd been this cooperative earlier, we both would've been better off. Don't you agree?" Jia Xu smiled. "I imagine you're quite tired of me now, so I won't disturb your rest any longer."

Zixu's face twitched slightly, but he resisted the urge to continue talking with Jia Xu. After Jia Xu's shameless behavior earlier, Zixu didn't want to experience that again. He waved dismissively, signaling Jia Xu to leave—he was very much done with this encounter.

Seeing Zixu's irritated expression devoid of the reverence he once held, Jia Xu realized that knowing the true nature of these so-called "immortals" had dispelled much of his previous fear of the unknown. Now, Jia Xu felt no hesitation in mocking them.

With a casual bow, Jia Xu turned and left. Just as Zixu held no respect for him, Jia Xu had little regard for Zixu. He certainly didn't want to lower his intelligence by continuing to engage with this "immortal." Based on his current assessment, Jia Xu concluded that Zixu likely had lost his wits from his so-called cultivation.

Jia Xu's expression remained calm as he analyzed the information he had extracted from Zixu.

Cautiously, Jia Xu reminded himself to remain vigilant. As always, self-preservation was paramount.

Chapter 442: A Misunderstanding

A cold smile appeared on Jia Xu's face. Although Zixu had provided information, Jia Xu, being as cautious as ever, would verify everything.

"Withdraw the troops," Jia Xu called to Wu Anguo with a relaxed expression. He had obtained all the intelligence he needed, and as for Zixu, if he wanted to leave, Jia Xu wouldn't stop him. Jia Xu understood that, barring any unforeseen circumstances, Zixu would eventually return to Liu Bei's side.

"Yes!" Wu Anguo saluted and then, without hesitation, summoned several hundred Tiger Guard soldiers under Xu Chu's command from all directions.

To obtain the information he sought, Jia Xu had not hesitated to mobilize the Tiger Guard without alarming Liu Bei, stationing them here. The timing was also chosen because Jia Xu believed that Liu Bei's tour of the area should be wrapping up.

"Indeed, if it had been confirmed that I was in danger and Jia Wenhe had decided to fight desperately, he would have had no qualms about using his mental energy to shatter my mind, leaving me mentally broken, perhaps even insane, and then Wu Anguo and the others would have rushed in to finish me off," Zixu thought as he watched Wu Anguo and his men leave. He let out a long sigh of relief. The longer one lives, the less one wants to die—especially someone like Zixu, who still had unfulfilled ambitions.

Jia Xu silently pondered the information he had extracted from Zixu. The next step would be to go and offer an explanation to Liu Bei. Although he had only mobilized 500 soldiers, it was still best to provide a proper account.

That night, Xu Chu was sleeping when he heard the sound of footsteps outside. His military instincts immediately alerted him that a group of soldiers was surrounding them. Shocked, he broke into a cold sweat, all his sleepiness evaporating.

Grabbing the large knife at his bedside, Xu Chu felt slightly reassured. He jumped out of bed, flew to the roof, and shouted, "Who dares to cause trouble here? Your grandpa Xu will teach you a lesson today!"

His voice boomed across the area, alerting both the soldiers surrounding him and those guarding Liu Bei, including Liu Ye.

Meanwhile, Hua Xiong, who had just arrived in the area and was about to release his aura, heard Xu Chu's shout and was startled. Knowing Xu Chu well, Hua Xiong understood that if Xu Chu was shouting like this, something serious must have happened. He quickly urged his horse in the direction of the shout, releasing his full aura as he went.

"Zhongkang, it's me!" Wu Anguo's voice rang out. He had already sensed Hua Xiong's presence and, though puzzled, paid it no mind as he walked toward Xu Chu.

"Stop right there, Anguo! What are you doing here with so many soldiers at this hour?" Xu Chu remained vigilant. Although he recognized the Tiger Guard soldiers under his command, his loyalty to Liu Bei made him extra cautious. "And why is Zijian here?"

"How would I know why Zijian is here?" Wu Anguo stopped, looking confused as he addressed Xu Chu, who stood on the rooftop.

"I ordered him to lead the troops here. A few days ago, I commanded Anguo to go to Beihai and bring the Tiger Guard here to ensure the lord's safety," Jia Xu stepped forward and explained.

Jia Xu had already realized his mistake. Although Xu Chu wasn't the sharpest, he was exceptionally loyal. It was clear that Xu Chu was worried that the soldiers led by Wu Anguo might pose a threat to Liu Bei's safety. Even though they were all familiar faces, Xu Chu remained as cautious as a proper bodyguard should be.

"Jia Changshi," Xu Chu nodded slightly. "Please forgive me for not showing proper courtesy. However, Jia Changshi, please order Anguo to retreat 100 steps and explain why Zijian is here."

"Zhongkang, what's going on?" Liu Bei, dressed in a long robe, came out of the back courtyard. He looked up at Xu Chu, who was standing on the rooftop in just his shorts, holding a large knife.

"Reporting to my lord, Jia Changshi and General Wu have brought troops here. I feared for your safety, so I ordered them to retreat 100 steps," Xu Chu said cautiously, still holding his large knife. Even though Jia Xu and Wu Anguo had retreated, he remained vigilant, embodying the perfect protector.

After Xu Chu briefed Liu Bei on the situation, Liu Bei was stunned. Troops arriving in the middle of the night—it was hard not to imagine the worst. "Come down, come down. Wenhe and Anguo wouldn't harm me. Let's go out and ask them."

"Zhongkang, is the lord here?" came the distant shout of Hua Xiong, his voice filled with concern and worry.

"Why is Zijian here too?" Liu Bei's heart skipped a beat. However, trusting his men, Liu Bei opened the courtyard gate. Xu Chu quickly jumped down from the roof to follow him, while Liu Ye, who had just woken up, rushed out, his clothes disheveled.

As soon as Liu Bei stepped outside, Jia Xu quickly approached, pulling Wu Anguo along. "Greetings, my lord."

Before Liu Bei could ask anything, Jia Xu immediately pushed all the blame onto Zixu. After all, if Zixu died, Jia Xu wouldn't care—his usefulness was gone, and he knew too much. So, without hesitation, Jia Xu threw Zixu under the bus.

"So, you're saying that Zixu joined us to protect himself?" Liu Bei sighed. "In that case, bring him along. Once he recovers, we'll discuss it further. Even if he harbored harmful intentions, he hasn't acted on them yet. We shouldn't be too harsh."

"My lord is truly merciful," Jia Xu said with a bow. "However, my lord, now that your identity has been exposed, perhaps it would be best to return to Beihai quickly."

Liu Bei looked around at the townspeople peeking out of their homes and sighed. "Very well, I've learned what I needed to. Let's return to Beihai and focus on developing Qingzhou. As for Zixu, let's not

hold any grudges. Provide him with the same supplies as before. If he wishes to stay, let him stay. If not, he should still receive the treatment he deserves based on the advice he's given us."

Jia Xu lowered his head. He had known Liu Bei wouldn't hold a grudge over something like this. After all, he had only mobilized 500 soldiers, and it was Wu Anguo, not Jia Xu, who had taken the initiative for Liu Bei's safety. Nevertheless, Jia Xu now had a better understanding of Liu Bei's magnanimity.

"Greetings, my lord!" Hua Xiong arrived with his horse, dismounted, and saluted Liu Bei.

"Zijian, why have you come to Qingzhou?" Liu Bei asked, puzzled. "Has something happened in Taishan? Has Lu Fengxian attacked, or has Yuan Benchu launched an offensive?" Liu Bei's voice carried a hint of anxiety. In his mind, something urgent must have happened for Hua Xiong to come all the way here.

Chapter 443: Different Goals

Alright, from Liu Bei's perspective, the only situations that would make Lu Su and Chen Xi so anxious would involve either Lu Bu or Yuan Shao. Lu Bu, despite retreating from Cao Cao due to food shortages, was still a potential threat to Liu Bei. Compared to Yuan Shao, Liu Bei was more wary of Lu Bu. Yuan Shao had land, resources, power, and intelligence, so he wouldn't engage in a direct conflict with Liu Bei at this time. Lu Bu, on the other hand, was like a lone wolf—unpredictable and dangerous, especially when desperate for supplies.

In Liu Bei's view, if a conflict were to erupt in Taishan, it was most likely because Lu Bu, with little to no supplies, decided to make a desperate move. Lu Bu's prowess was undeniable, something Liu Bei knew all too well. Whenever Lu Bu appeared, it often took several top-tier fighters to even contain him, and even then, they couldn't guarantee a victory. If Lu Bu wanted to retreat, his legendary steed, the Red Hare, ensured that no one could catch him.

Moreover, if Lu Bu decided to attack now, he would likely bring the momentum of his recent victory against Cao Cao. To win against him, it would require not only skill but also weakening Lu Bu's morale first. Even against the mighty Western Liang cavalry, it would be difficult to win without having at least twice the number of troops as Lu Bu's Bingzhou cavalry.

"No, no, Taishan is fine. Lu Fengxian didn't attack. Although he did send people to request food, there has been no conflict with us," Hua Xiong quickly explained.

If Lu Bu had come, it wouldn't just be a minor problem. Given his recent victory against Cao Cao, no one on Liu Bei's side would want to face him while his morale was at its peak. Even someone as confident as Guan Yu wouldn't make such a reckless move. At that point, it wouldn't be bravery—it would be suicide. Even if they wanted to defeat Lu Bu, they needed the right circumstances.

If Lu Bu decided to raid and retreat quickly, no one could stop him. Thus, Lu Su's strategy of stalling for time, dragging out negotiations over the food request, was a wise one—waiting for Lu Bu's morale to wane before making any decisive moves.

"Oh, that's good, that's good. My biggest concern was Lu Fengxian launching a direct assault on Taishan. That guy is really hard to deal with," Liu Bei said as he waved to the surrounding villagers and gestured for his advisors and generals to follow him. After taking a few steps, he turned back to Jia Xu and said, "Bring Zixu along."

"Zijian, what exactly brought you here this time?" Liu Bei asked again after leaving the village.

Hua Xiong recounted everything that had happened since Liu Bei's departure. Liu Bei paused for a moment, then smiled and said, "Zichuan handled it well. In such situations, that's exactly what should be done. I left my sword with him precisely for emergencies when I couldn't be reached. Zichuan did what was necessary."

Seeing that Liu Bei only paused briefly without showing any other emotions, Hua Xiong felt relieved. He then explained the issue with Lu Su's letter not reaching Liu Bei, which naturally led to the matter of Fa Zheng leaving his post without permission.

Jia Xu raised an eyebrow and then explained Fa Zheng's policies in Qi State, essentially defending him. After all, the actions taken by Chen Xi, Lu Su, Jia Xu, and Fa Zheng, when viewed individually, might have been dismissed by Liu Bei. But the coincidence of all these events happening at once made it necessary to clarify.

"I see. It's only natural for Xiaozhi to adapt to the local conditions. One shouldn't rigidly adhere to rules. Establishing iron mines in Qi State and forging farming tools—Xiaozhi is indeed remarkable," Liu Bei said to Jia Xu with a smile, showing that he wasn't bothered by Fa Zheng's departure from his post. To Liu Bei, Fa Zheng's actions were part of his duties. The only issue was that unforeseen circumstances had caused him to inspect the local conditions at an inconvenient time.

"My lord is most magnanimous," Liu Ye said, bowing. At this point, Liu Ye was the only one who hadn't made any mistakes, so he stepped forward with his horse.

"Magnanimous? You think I don't know what you're all worried about? Don't worry, it's all been explained. None of these issues amount to dereliction of duty or unauthorized use of military power," Liu Bei said as he glanced back at Jia Xu, addressing the concerns directly. The matters that had transpired simply weren't significant enough to bother him.

"Rest assured, Jia Wenhe's decision to mobilize troops was entirely justified. It was my personal guard, after all, and it was done to protect me. The number of soldiers didn't exceed 500, and the command was issued by Tiger Guard commander Anguo. There was no overstepping of authority," Liu Bei said, turning to Jia Xu. "So, Wenhe, you can relax. I have no intention of dealing with you. You are one of my key advisors, and without you, our mission to restore the Han would be much more difficult."

"As for Zichuan, that's even simpler. I gave him the authority to mobilize troops. He may not have used it often, but that authority has always been there," Liu Bei said casually. He had never stripped Chen Xi of his military power; it was Chen Xi who had chosen to limit himself.

"Fa Xiaozhi acted correctly. As a regional governor, how can one fulfill their duties without understanding the local conditions, resources, and specialties? I transferred him to Beihai, and the first thing he did was to gather this information—exactly what should be done. Xiaozhi has proven that he is more than capable of governing a region. We no longer need to worry about him," Liu Bei remarked with admiration.

"Indeed, Fa Xiaozhi has proven himself capable of governing a region," Liu Ye echoed, also impressed. Not long ago, Fa Zheng had been volatile in Taishan, but now he had matured considerably. Truly, the responsibilities one bears can lead to growth.

Liu Bei looked at the people around him, noting their expressions of admiration, and said, "I, Liu Xuande, trust that you won't betray me. As long as you don't intentionally do anything you shouldn't, I won't hold a grudge over minor missteps. I, Liu Bei, am a man of humble origins, and to restore the Han, I need the strength of each and every one of you. So, if I make a mistake, I welcome you to correct me openly!"

He then took a deep breath and continued, "If any of you make a mistake, I won't hesitate to point it out. I can't pretend to be as inscrutable as other rulers. I am who I am—Liu Xuande—and I don't want to pretend otherwise. You don't need to worry that you'll offend me unknowingly. If I say an issue is resolved, then I won't bring it up again to hold it against you."

"My lord is truly an extraordinary man," Jia Xu said with a slight smile. To him, such frankness wasn't typical of a ruler, but he couldn't deny that it made his ministers feel secure. They could focus on working hard each day without worrying about their future. After Liu Bei's open and honest discussion, Jia Xu felt completely at ease.

"Extraordinary? I just think it's unnecessary to wear a mask. My goal isn't to be an enigmatic emperor. I just want to see this world get better, so I don't need to pretend," Liu Bei said casually.

Chapter 444: Cao Cao's Misfortune

No matter how Liu Bei explained it, those around him remained convinced that he was indeed a broad-minded and exceptional leader, lacking the unpredictable temperament of other rulers. This reassured them that, while they didn't need to constantly analyze Liu Bei's thoughts, at least their safety was guaranteed—they didn't have to worry about holding grudges.

Liu Bei smiled faintly but didn't dwell on the praise from Jia Xu and others. He merely reflected that the little knowledge Chen Xi had shared with him was indeed useful. There was no need to feign inscrutability when a united and strong team around him would naturally increase his power. Why pretend to be enigmatic, only to have misunderstandings grow and escalate to a point where nothing could be resolved without one side being destroyed?

Liu Bei slowly exhaled, admitting to himself that Chen Xi had made a good point.

Jia Xu, observing Liu Bei's actions, silently contemplated. Among those present, Jia Xu was the most affected. As someone prone to paranoia and always concerned about being unjustly removed, Liu Bei's open and honest discussion significantly eased his mind. While it didn't completely eliminate his fears of an untimely death, it allowed Jia Xu to focus less on self-preservation.

In Yanzhou, at Chenliu, Cao Cao's situation had not improved much after Lu Bu's retreat. Although Yuan Shu, preoccupied with his ailing son, had temporarily ceased vying with Cao Cao for control of Nanyang, Cao Cao knew full well that neither Lu Bu nor Yuan Shu would let him off the hook.

Once Lu Bu had sufficient provisions, Chen Gong would undoubtedly advise him to destroy Cao Cao. Given the current circumstances, there was no room for compromise between Chen Gong and Cao Cao—one of them had to fall.

As for Yuan Shu, Cao Cao had long lost faith in Liu Biao. Despite Liu Biao having Huang Hansheng, a renowned general, and Kuai Yue, a capable strategist, his forces failed miserably when attacking the undermanned city of Xiangyang. The result was a significant loss of supplies, which Yuan Shu quickly recouped from Liu Biao.

If Cao Cao had been better informed about Xiangyang's situation, he would have realized that Liu Biao's defeat wasn't unjustified—it was simply a matter of being outmatched. Although Liao Li wasn't particularly skilled in military strategy, his quick thinking allowed him to outmaneuver Kuai Yue completely. After a decisive victory, even commanders like Zhang Xun, Li Feng, and Jiang Qin, who initially didn't respect Liao Li, began to hold him in high regard.

Just as Zhou Yu had predicted, Liao Li's triumph easily earned him the respect of the Xiangyang garrison, while Jiang Qin's martial prowess solidified his reputation. The plan Zhou Yu had devised to gradually control the chessboard of the region was beginning to take shape.

In Chenliu, Fan Qin sat in the government office, observing Cao Cao, who was issuing orders with a heavy heart. He knew that Cao Cao was deeply troubled. The once-promising situation had crumbled due to a single misstep, and if Cao Cao's forces couldn't recover quickly, all that Cao Cao had painstakingly built might collapse, forcing the Cao family to live out their days in obscurity.

After Cao Cao left, Xun Yu took charge of handling state affairs with the remaining advisors. No matter how dire the situation, they couldn't allow internal divisions to tear them apart before the enemy even arrived. While many in the army harbored doubts after Cao Cao's defeat, the core group of advisors remained steadfast in their resolve.

"Xiubo, you seemed quite composed earlier. Do you have any good ideas?" Xun Yu asked as he approached Fan Qin, who appeared to be dozing off.

"Nothing much. I was just daydreaming about when my nephew will be born," Fan Qin replied nonchalantly. As one of Xun Yu's trusted subordinates, Fan Qin's role was more symbolic, and he took full advantage of this, often shirking work when he could. Although others might not appreciate his attitude, no one dared challenge him directly.

Xi Zhicai and Cheng Yu glared at Fan Qin with frustration. Among the high-ranking advisors, they were the most displeased with Fan Qin's behavior, but they couldn't do much since Xun Yu didn't hold it against him.

"Everyone, please sit. I have something important to discuss with you all," Xun Yu said with a sigh, shaking his head at Fan Qin's casual demeanor. He knew all too well that no one could force Fan Qin to change.

As Xi Zhicai, Xun Yu, Cheng Yu, Chen Qun, Sima Lang, and Fan Qin took their seats, they waited in anticipation. It had been a long time since Xun Yu had gathered them all so formally, which suggested that he might have found a solution to their predicament.

"You're all aware of the current situation. While we don't lack capable generals, our forces are severely depleted. If Lu Bu returns, it will be difficult to hold him off, and we can't train new troops quickly enough," Xun Yu began, his tone calm.

Xun Yu felt helpless. Cao Cao's situation was reminiscent of Zhao State after the Battle of Changping—capable generals and advisors were present, but they lacked the necessary troops. The only reason Chenliu had held out was that the enemy had run out of supplies.

However, Cao Cao's situation was slightly better than Zhao State's in that his territories still had people. With a year to train them, they could form a decent army, but time was a luxury they didn't have. Surrounded by enemies eager for his downfall, Cao Cao's previous campaigns had made too many foes.

"While the food situation is dire, it's not entirely hopeless. The Wei family has already purchased grain from Shu and is transporting it via the Yangtze River. As long as we hold onto Wancheng, food won't be an issue," Xun Yu continued, sharing some good news. This news lifted the spirits of Xi Zhicai and the others. As long as there was food, everything else could be managed. The locust plague had devastated Yanzhou's crops, making this news particularly vital.

As Xun Yu spoke, he couldn't help but feel a sense of frustration. The Wei family's willingness to forgive Cao Cao was largely due to Cao Cao's personal visit and the fact that Wei Zi was a fervent supporter of Cao Cao. This had allowed them to move past the previous massacre, albeit begrudgingly.

However, the Wei family had made it clear that if such a senseless slaughter occurred again, they would relocate, regardless of the reasons. It was evident that these great families still cared deeply about their reputation.

Thanks to this reconciliation, the two branches of the Wei family had joined forces to transport grain from their Shu-based stores to Wancheng and then on to Chenliu, alleviating Cao Cao's food crisis.

Chapter 445: Just Stirring Up Trouble

Although the food crisis for Cao's army had been alleviated, there was still no solution to the manpower problem. Xun Yu had initially sent someone to negotiate with Lu Su about redeeming their captured soldiers, but Lu Su flatly refused, saying he'd rather keep them than let Cao Cao have them back. This left Xun Yu with no options, though it did allow him to give a reasonable explanation to the families of the captured soldiers. It wasn't that they didn't want to bring them back—it was simply that Liu Bei didn't give them the opportunity.

"What should we do now, everyone? Speak freely. We're at a critical point," Xun Yu sighed as he spoke.

Xun Yu didn't have much confidence in his own plans, mainly because he didn't have the time to craft a detailed strategy. They were running out of time, and if they couldn't recover faster than Lu Bu, there might soon be no more Cao clan.

No one spoke at first, and Xun Yu scanned the room. Except for Fan Qin, everyone had a furrowed brow. Xun Yu then pointed at Fan Qin, saying, "Xiubo, why don't you start? You seem calm, so you must have a good idea. Let's hear it."

"How about we surrender to Liu Bei? Look at how well he's doing. Our goal is to restore the Han Dynasty, and Liu Bei's goal is the same. We're all like-minded, aren't we? If we join forces, we'll be much stronger, and the path to restoring the Han will be much smoother. What do you think?" Fan Qin glanced around the room, his usual playful demeanor replaced with quick seriousness.

"Xiubo, you're a minister of our lord!" Cheng Yu's eyes flashed coldly as he glared at Fan Qin, looking as though he wanted to tear him apart.

If anyone in the room couldn't reconcile with Liu Bei, it was Cheng Yu. To him, Liu Bei's idealistic vision was impossible to achieve. Even with Chen Xi's wealth and resources, Liu Bei's so-called public spirit

couldn't last forever. Would his ministers and generals, including Liu Bei himself, be willing to watch their families decline into obscurity? Everyone had personal ambitions, and the idea of a unified world was laughable!

"And I'm also a minister of the Han!" Fan Qin shot back with a smile, unfazed by Cheng Yu's anger.

"Liu Xuande has a heart full of ambition. With his strategy of winning people's loyalty, do you think the empire will belong to him or to the Han when it's all said and done?" Xi Zhicai asked calmly, picking up the conversation.

"The emperor's surname is Liu," Fan Qin replied with a nonchalant grin.

Xun Yu frowned and interjected, "Xiubo, stop joking. It's very difficult for us to align with Liu Bei."

Xi Zhicai smiled to himself. He had anticipated that Fan Qin would respond with, "The emperor's surname is Liu," and he knew that this would touch a nerve with Xun Yu's deep-seated loyalty to the current Han emperor. This made any alliance with Liu Bei even more unlikely.

It was curious—unlike other loyalists who were devoted to the Han as a whole, Xun Yu's loyalty was specifically tied to the current emperor. This was why he viewed Liu Bei, a member of the Liu clan, with such suspicion. In Xun Yu's eyes, restoring the Han under a Liu clan member would mean deposing the current emperor, which to him would be a clear act of treason.

Fan Qin paused for a moment, realizing that he had inadvertently struck a nerve. He shrugged and sat down, casting a glance at Xi Zhicai.

"If you don't want to align with Liu Bei, then how about leveraging the private soldiers of the aristocratic families? They might be our best option right now, even if it risks backlash," Chen Qun cautiously suggested. "Of course, this approach would have its own complications."

"Chen Qun's idea isn't bad. Many noble families in our region have two or three thousand private soldiers. If we promise them benefits and enlist their help, we can lead the army ourselves and then..." Fan Qin mimicked a beheading motion. "Afterward, we can eliminate those families and take their wealth, soldiers, and resources for ourselves. It's not a bad plan," he said, clapping his hands in approval.

Xi Zhicai's eyelids twitched. While Fan Qin's suggestion was ruthless, it was a practical solution given their current desperation.

"Xiubo, enough! Did your family send you here to stir up trouble?" Chen Qun snapped, unhappy with how Fan Qin's explanation had excited Xi Zhicai and Cheng Yu, two men who were ruthless enough to carry out such a plan. If they went through with it, Chen Qun's own family would be in serious danger.

"Fine, then what do you suggest? My plan isn't bad," Fan Qin replied indifferently. He knew he was stirring up trouble, but he believed he was doing so within reason, considering the dire situation.

"We could..." Chen Qun started, but then trailed off, realizing that promising benefits to the aristocratic families only to betray them later wasn't a viable option.

Xi Zhicai and Cheng Yu's eager expressions had already revealed their thoughts. Especially Xi Zhicai, whose life was nearing its end—he was more than capable of carrying out such a plan and taking the blame himself, allowing Cao Cao to ascend to power over his dead body.

Xun Yu sighed, "Xiubo, enough already. How's the situation in the west? I need results, not just a report on the process."

Fan Qin's expression twitched. So, Xun Yu had decided to take a gamble after all. Given Cao Cao's current dire state, their chances of success were less than half a percent. This wasn't bravery—it was practically suicide.

"I don't see much hope. If we had won in Xuzhou, I'd fully support a western campaign. But after our defeat in Xuzhou, our strength isn't enough to seize control of Sili Commandery and suppress Dong Zhuo's remnants. In fact, I'm not even sure we can make it past Hulao Pass," Fan Qin replied bluntly. He had no intention of clashing with Xun Yu and laid out the bleak reality—Cao Cao was too weak now.

Xun Yu's original plan had been to replicate the territorial gains of the late Warring States-period Qin dynasty after it had conquered Shu. If not for the defeat at Xuzhou, Xun Yu would have already secured Sili Commandery, locked down Hangu Pass, and started reclaiming fertile land. They would have been in a strong position to sit back and watch the conflicts between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei.

In truth, Xun Yu's decision to exploit Wancheng so ruthlessly had been part of a grand strategy for a rapid rise to power. After all, they would eventually have to abandon Wancheng, so he had intended to extract every last bit of value from it. Even the remains could be left behind to incite further conflict, buying more time for Cao Cao to build up his reserves. But as the saying goes, "Man proposes, but God disposes."

Chapter 446: Xun Yu Takes Action

"The Xiliang cavalry is now split into four factions, controlled by Li Jue, Guo Si, Fan Chou, and Zhang Ji. Li Jue holds the strongest force with around 20,000 true Xiliang cavalry, Guo Si commands 17,000, Fan Chou has about 10,000, and Zhang Ji has over 8,000 riders," Fan Qin explained helplessly. The entire Sili region had essentially become the home base for the Xiliang cavalry, with them scattered everywhere.

The others gasped in shock upon hearing this. The number was simply too overwhelming—how could the Sili region support such a large number of cavalry?

"Originally, each Xiliang cavalry unit had a varying number of Qiang cavalry as their auxiliary forces, but due to food shortages, the number of Qiang cavalry has significantly decreased," Fan Qin added, providing a bit of good news at least—they wouldn't have to deal with an overwhelming number of Qiang cavalry.

"The Xiliang cavalry are fierce, but internal issues due to food shortages have caused significant problems. Their military discipline has greatly deteriorated, and they've turned to plundering—no longer just looting civilians, but even raiding Hu people in Bingzhou and sometimes attacking each other!" Fan Qin continued, delivering another piece of good news. Their chances of success had increased.

"However, despite these issues, the Xiliang cavalry remains a cohesive force, and the remnants of Dong Zhuo's faction still maintain restraint with one another. This means that the timing isn't right. If we enter the Sili region, they may use the opportunity to consolidate their forces," Fan Qin cautioned, bringing the group back to reality. The timing wasn't ripe yet.

"Given the situation, what are our options? Speak your minds," Xun Yu said, signaling for Fan Qin to stop.

“We likely won’t be able to enter the Sili region unless there’s internal conflict. And even if we make it past Hulao Pass, we won’t be able to defeat Dong Zhuo’s remnants. That’s the core issue,” Sima Lang said, having witnessed the strength of the Xiliang cavalry firsthand.

“Even if we breach Hulao Pass, we won’t be able to rout Dong Zhuo’s forces—that’s the fundamental problem,” Chen Qun echoed, rubbing his forehead in frustration.

“Zhicai, Zhongde?” Xun Yu turned to Xi Zhicai and Cheng Yu for their thoughts.

Both Xi Zhicai and Cheng Yu frowned deeply. The crux of the issue was that their side was too weak—so weak that they had no way to counter the enemy.

“Gongda?” Xun Yu asked his nephew, reluctant to resort to his dangerous plan.

“Didn’t the Yang family say they still have some strength left? Similarly, Ma Teng and Han Sui haven’t left the Xiliang region. What if we attempt to swallow them whole? If we move quickly enough, we might succeed,” Xun You replied with a calm expression.

“Hmm, using Fan Chou to destabilize the Xiliang forces? Considering Zhang Ji’s recent return to Hongnong and Zhang Yang’s earlier behavior, Zhang Ji’s days might be numbered. That could be an entry point, but we can’t be certain,” Fan Qin muttered, impressed by Xun You’s quick thinking.

After Xun You spoke, Fan Qin quickly followed his train of thought, considering the high-ranking spies they had in the Sili region. His gaze finally landed on Sima Lang.

Fan Qin thought to himself,

“We need bait. Without it, they won’t make a move,” Xi Zhicai quickly added. “Since they’re loyal to the Han, they should be willing to fight for the empire. They’ll have no choice but to act.”

“That might not work,” Cheng Yu, always one to consider the worst-case scenario, disagreed. But upon seeing Xi Zhicai’s cold smile, Cheng Yu instantly understood what kind of bait Xi Zhicai was referring to—the Emperor himself, Liu Xie. That bait would certainly be effective!

“In that case, we’ll send a letter,” Fan Qin suggested with a smile, understanding Xun Yu’s intentions perfectly. “Since it concerns their own fates, they should make the choice themselves.”

“Agreed,” Xun Yu nodded, signaling his approval.

“I request permission to enter the Guanzhong region and deliver a message to the Emperor,” Sima Lang said, stepping forward. He wasn’t foolish and quickly grasped half of Xun Yu’s plan. Seeing this as a great opportunity, he volunteered. If they succeeded, Cao Cao would rise from the ashes, and Sima Lang would gain great merit. If they failed, well, he could always find another master to serve.

“Since Boda has volunteered, we can hardly refuse. However, let’s carefully consider all the angles before reporting to the lord,” Xun Yu replied with a smile. While he didn’t immediately agree, it was as good as a yes.

Sima Lang was well-suited for the task—his identity, spiritual talents, intelligence, and even Dong Zhuo’s earlier comparison of him to his deceased son—all made him a key player in this plan.

Fan Qin thought as he observed the group,

Although Xun Yu rarely took action, focusing more on managing state affairs, when pushed, he could devise flawless strategies. Every time he acted, his plans were airtight, leaving no room for countermeasures or failure.

It might sound impressive, but in reality, Xun Yu’s strategies often failed to achieve the maximum benefits due to unforeseen circumstances. And if this attempt didn’t yield significant results, Cao Cao might never have another chance to compete for supremacy and restore the Han dynasty.

That’s why Xun Yu was preparing with three layers of backup plans this time, delegating state affairs to Chen Qun and Fan Qin, while focusing on securing the army and key agricultural areas. If this effort failed, Xun Yu couldn’t guarantee a third opportunity.

If they failed to seize the Sili region and secure Yongzhou, if they couldn't restore the fertile lands and rebuild the Zhengguo Canal, Cao Cao's only remaining option would be to retreat into Sichuan—a prospect that made Xun Yu grimace. Even with his vast intelligence, entering Sichuan wouldn't be easy.

Xun Yu thought frantically, nearly at his wit's end.

Chapter 447: Large-Scale Weapons...

Though Xun Yu appeared gentle and approachable on the surface, his pride was deeply ingrained in his bones. This was understandable, given his status in this world.

To put it simply, although Nanyang was known as one of the richest places under the heavens, it couldn't support the massive army that Cao Cao commanded. However, Xun Yu made it work by exhausting all resources, with no regard for the future, essentially draining Nanyang dry. It would take at least a decade for the region to recover. This was the true reason behind Cao Cao's rapid rise to power.

At the time, Xun Yu's approach was the right one. He drained Nanyang to fuel the army, recaptured Yanzhou with military force, and established agricultural colonies. His ultimate goal was never Nanyang itself; it was just a stepping stone to Yōuzhōu.

During this period, the Zhengguo Canal had already been abandoned, along with 40,000 hectares of fertile land. This irrigation project once produced 50 million shi of grain annually, solving Qin's military food supply problems. However, it had been ruined due to ongoing warfare.

Initially, Xun Yu planned to use the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans to build a strong foundation for Cao Cao, but that plan was thwarted by Chen Xi. Frustrated, Xun Yu resolved to use the Xiliang cavalry to forge a new foundation for Cao Cao.

Defeating the Yellow Turbans wouldn't require much strength, just time. Xun Yu wasn't too concerned about that. But taking control of the Sili region was a different story—an extremely difficult task. The situation demanded a strong force, so Xun Yu cunningly manipulated Yuan Shu and recklessly drained Nanyang to quickly raise a formidable infantry force.

Unfortunately, despite his meticulous planning, Xun Yu couldn't have anticipated the catastrophic defeat at Xuzhou. His plans were once again disrupted by Liu Bei. Outraged, Xun Yu decided to take

matters into his own hands this time. This was a situation with no room for retreat; failure was not an option for Cao Cao.

As Xun Yu wrestled with his dilemma, praying to the gods for the first time in his life, Chen Xi had already reached the mouth of the Yangtze River. Meanwhile, Mi Fang and Gan Lan had separated from Gan Ning and were headed toward Yizhou.

“The speed was impressive, but now we’re going against the current. Xingba, can we maintain our pace?” Chen Xi asked as he gazed at the vast expanse of water.

“Hahaha, don’t worry, Strategist! My naval troops will row with all their might. We’ll reach our destination within the planned time. Fortunately, we’re heading to Lùjiāng and Chāo Lake, where the Lu family’s shipyard is located. If it were elsewhere, navigating these large ships might have been difficult,” Gan Ning replied confidently, showing no concern.

“By the way, Xingba, remember to replace the oars with this design,” Chen Xi said, asking Zhuge Liang to bring paper and ink to draw a paddle steamer. Using foot-powered paddles would be faster than rowing with hands.

“It’s best to let the Lu family work on that. The structure seems simple enough, so it shouldn’t be difficult,” Gan Ning said, though he was puzzled by the design, he agreed.

“Yes, I didn’t draw it perfectly, but remember the waterwheels we saw? It’s the same principle. Of course, we’ll need to make adjustments to the design to avoid damage. Hmm... now that I think about it, it might be hard to break. Once the iron beads are well-tempered, they could even serve as bearings!” Chen Xi’s excitement grew as he realized the potential of the ship’s design.

As Chen Xi considered steel balls and their applications, he stumbled upon a vital piece of information that had been overlooked.

Chen Xi’s expression darkened as he asked, “Xingba, how long does it take to fully temper a ship with inner energy?”

Gan Ning's eyelid twitched, "Who tempers a ship? With so many people aboard, it would take at least ten years of constant tempering to succeed. By then, the ship would have sunk!"

"I suspect that the ships we're about to face have been tempered, possibly to perfection. You've heard the reports, right? All of Huang Zu's ships in Jingzhou are over fifteen years old," Chen Xi said, his face twitching.

Gan Ning's headache intensified. Tempered objects were on a completely different level compared to non-tempered ones. In every aspect, they would be superior.

"This is definitely not good news," Gan Ning frowned, then laughed heartily. "But what's there to fear? Sun Bofu's captured ships are just small ones. Fifteen years ago, the Yangtze River didn't have large warships. I've got ways to deal with their small boats!"

Chen Xi glanced at the confident Gan Ning and nodded. At this point, turning back wasn't an option.

"Do we have spike boats, oil, and sawdust ready?" Chen Xi asked cautiously. He didn't want to underestimate Zhou Yu and inadvertently help build his legend.

"The supply ship has everything prepared. Whenever we set sail, I make sure we have double the necessary supplies for the trip and the battle," Gan Ning boasted. With such large ships and ample storage, carrying everything they needed was no problem. He always packed plenty of oil, regardless of the mission.

"Good," Chen Xi nodded, then pulled Zhuge Liang aside to explain the current situation. Zhuge Liang listened in stunned silence, clearly bewildered by the complexity. It was easy to manipulate the young Zhuge Liang, who hadn't yet fully matured.

"I'm leaving this task to you. If we encounter Zhou Yu and the situation is as I described, you must find us a way out. Consider this your vacation assignment," Chen Xi said, patting Zhuge Liang's shoulder.

As he spoke, Chen Xi couldn't help but recall a joke: Sometimes, the problems a university professor can't solve become the students' final projects...

Chapter 448: Battle of Lùjiāng

Chen Xi pondered his strategy while silently unfolding his folding fan, bone by bone. In an era where one could summon wind and rain, catching an opponent off guard was not difficult.

On the other side, the city of Lùjiāng had been under siege for several days. Lù Kàng made it clear he would not surrender. Though his forces lacked great generals, the four members of the Lù family, from old to young, were not to be underestimated. They were fighting on their home turf, and the entire city was united, determined not to surrender. Sun Ce had even threatened to massacre the city if they didn't yield, but Lù Kàng, the old man, stubbornly stood atop the city walls, hurling insults at both Yuan Shu and Sun Ce as traitors.

Enraged, Sun Ce personally led a charge, only to be ambushed by nearly a hundred elite archers under Lù Jun's command, accompanied by ballistae. Sun Ce was met with a hail of arrows and had to retreat. If not for Zhou Yu's foresight in ordering Zhou Tai to stay by Sun Ce's side no matter what, Sun Ce would have been hit by several arrows out of the hundreds aimed at him.

After suffering this setback, Sun Ce refrained from recklessly charging again, though he continued to curse from below the walls. Zhou Tai, unfortunately, had already taken two arrows because of him.

The Lù family, intent on eliminating Sun Ce, showed no regard for the rules of war and poisoned their arrows with a lethal toxin. For ordinary people, a single hit would be fatal. But Zhou Tai, known as the "Immortal Monster," who had already reached the stage of separating internal energy from his body, found the poison merely a minor nuisance. By the next day, he was back to his usual self, bouncing around energetically.

It wasn't that the Lù family underestimated the power of internal energy. It was just that, before this, only Xiang Yu had reached such a stage. The Lù family simply didn't understand what kind of being someone at that level was. Their poison, potent enough to kill someone at the Qi Refining stage, would only cause someone like Sun Ce to feel nauseous, dizzy, and weak for about half a month, even if he ingested the entire dose from a hundred arrows.

When Zhou Tai was first hit, the Lù family cheered. But the next day, seeing him completely unharmed, scaling the city walls to splash water and slay over a dozen of their private soldiers, the Lù family's three generations were left dumbfounded. Even if they didn't fully grasp the power of someone who had separated internal energy, they realized that poison was utterly ineffective against such individuals.

From then on, it was a standard siege. This was the toughest and most frustrating battle Sun Ce had ever fought. In previous battles, either Zhou Yu's clever strategies resolved the conflict, or the opponent would eventually submit to Sun Ce's prowess. But the Lù family, who would rather die than surrender, was something entirely new to him.

"Gongjin, do you have any good ideas? If we keep fighting like this, even if we take Lùjiāng, we'll lose the momentum needed to conquer Jiangdong!" Sun Ce, watching Zhou Tai being forced to retreat under heavy archery fire, turned to Zhou Yu, who had just arrived, in frustration.

"I'm afraid not. Lù Kàng and Lù Jun are both cautious and determined. They are dead set on defending this city. Tricking them into an open battle would be extremely difficult," Zhou Yu replied with a wry smile. This was why he hadn't initially recommended attacking Lùjiāng. Both Lù Kàng and Lù Jun were highly capable, and with the Lù family fighting on home ground, this was bound to be a tough battle. But now that they were committed, there was no choice but to bring it to a swift conclusion.

"What should we do then? Watching our soldiers die each day while the Lù family taunts us from the walls—how can I tolerate this?" Sun Ce, young and hot-headed, had little patience for such prolonged sieges. Since his father's death, his campaigns had been smooth sailing. Being stalled outside Lùjiāng had him fuming.

"Sigh, if that's the case, then we need to take Lùjiāng quickly. But Bofu, don't actually massacre the city. Once that door is opened, we'll be at a disadvantage," Zhou Yu advised. If Sun Ce wanted to win, Zhou Yu would help end things swiftly with the Lù family.

"Massacre the city?" Sun Ce was taken aback. "I was just speaking in anger. I've heard the Lù family only has four people. I'll go kill those four myself—that counts as wiping out the whole family, right? Ugh, they really make me mad. Why won't any of them just die?"

"They'll die soon enough, don't worry," Zhou Yu said, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead.

Zhou Yu's biggest concern was that Sun Ce, frustrated by the prolonged siege, might turn violent and take it out on the civilians. As for wiping out the Lù family, they only had four direct members left. Killing them wasn't a big deal—afterward, they could just install a Lù family branch to replace them. In the end, it would only be four lives lost.

“Good! Gongjin, I’ll leave it to you then.” Sun Ce was delighted to hear this. He had had enough of the Lù family. Clapping Zhou Yu on the shoulder, he said, “You take command. I’m going to join the siege. If I can’t even take down a small place like Lùjiāng, how can I hope to conquer the world?”

Zhou Yu sighed but didn’t try to stop Sun Ce from joining the fight. He had tried to dissuade him many times before, but Sun Ce always insisted on fighting. At least if Zhou Yu was in command, he could ensure Sun Ce’s safety.

Sun Ce readied his spear and moved to the front lines, with Zhou Tai following closely. Han Dang, Huang Gai, and Cheng Pu, worried for Sun Ce’s safety, also moved forward.

“General Han, General Huang, General Cheng, please wait,” Zhou Yu called out to the three veteran generals who had served since the days of Sun Jian.

“Is there something you need, Gongjin?” Cheng Pu, the eldest of the three, stopped and respectfully asked, turning to face Zhou Yu.

Unlike the historical friction between Cheng Pu and Zhou Yu at the time of Chibi, this time, Cheng Pu had fought alongside Sun Ce and Zhou Yu in every battle, from defeating Huang Zu to routing Wang Wei. Having witnessed Zhou Yu’s capabilities firsthand, Cheng Pu had no doubts about the young strategist. He knew very well that, unlike in history, where he had only heard of Zhou Yu’s prowess, here he had seen it in action. As a result, Cheng Pu, loyal to the Sun family, never showed arrogance in front of Zhou Yu.

“It’s like this: we can’t afford to spend too much time on Lùjiāng. Although the city’s defenses are intact, they have too few soldiers, and no reinforcements are coming. I plan to take the city quickly. My brother is already growing impatient,” Zhou Yu said, bowing slightly to the three men as he spoke softly. Although they weren’t in a formal military setting, Zhou Yu still exercised caution.

“The young lord’s temper is a bit fiery, but do you have a strategy, Gongjin?” Cheng Pu, recalling Sun Ce’s temperament and his history of smooth victories, knew the young man must be feeling frustrated. But since Zhou Yu had spoken, it meant that Lùjiāng wouldn’t be a problem for long.

“I wouldn’t call it a strategy. Since they have few soldiers, we should divide our forces into three groups: one to storm the city, one to feign attacks during the day and harass them at night, and the third to rest

and rotate with the other two. This way, we'll ensure our troops are well-rested while wearing down Lùjiāng's defenders. If we keep at it day and night, they'll be exhausted within three days," Zhou Yu explained.

Chapter 449: You Have Zhang Liang's Strategy, I Have Over-the-Wall Ladders

In truth, Zhou Yu disliked using clever schemes because employing them only highlighted his side's weakness. Zhou Yu preferred leading his troops to decisively crush the enemy in straightforward combat. To reach this level, he diligently honed his command abilities. When he had more soldiers and enough provisions, he would overwhelm the enemy head-on.

"This plan is excellent," the three generals, Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, and Han Dang, quickly grasped the benefits of Zhou Yu's strategy. Once the idea was pointed out, everyone could understand it. But before that moment of clarity, the difference between genius and ordinary people could be vast.

"Since that's the case, I'll leave it to you three generals to lead two thousand soldiers each and prepare for rotation. We'll begin tonight," Zhou Yu nodded. "As for Bofu, let him continue leading the assault. I'll keep an eye on him to prevent any rash actions. With Bofu at the front, Lù Kàng won't dare take us lightly."

"Understood!" The three generals saluted Zhou Yu in unison. "We'll go assign the troops and prepare for the rotation."

"If only we had siege crossbows. With these, we could nail bolts into the walls, and hundreds of agile soldiers with internal energy could quickly scale the walls. With archers suppressing the enemy, we would have a good chance of seizing the walls," Zhou Yu sighed. They hadn't brought siege crossbows when they left because Sun Ce had been in such a hurry.

"Gongjin, there's no need for that. We already have a strategy to break this Lùjiāng Commandery," Cheng Pu reassured Zhou Yu. To him, Zhou Yu seemed like a perfectionist. Zhou Yu had it all: good looks, intelligence, talent in both civil and military affairs, and skill in arts and literature. Even his fiancée was extraordinarily beautiful. It felt like Zhou Yu had taken all the good fortune in life.

"Alright then. Let's take Lùjiāng quickly, sweep through Jiangnan, and lay the foundation for our dominance. I've been contemplating how to subdue the Shanyue people. They number over a million and are fiercely courageous. If we fight them, it'll be too troublesome. But if we don't fight, we'll have to

find a way to win them over as allies. I think I might have a solution,” Zhou Yu sighed. He had many things on his mind lately.

“The Shanyue people...” Huang Gai frowned. He had fought those mountain-dwelling tribesmen before, and the thought gave him a headache. Though their military discipline was lacking, they were fearless in battle and made excellent soldiers. The only problem was that they were difficult to educate.

“Yes, the Shanyue people. They seem formidable in battle, and I’ve been thinking about how to win them over. Their current leader is Yan Baihu, but he must be eliminated. However, removing him makes it harder to win them over, so I’m conflicted. Moreover, this Liu Xuande’s power continues to grow. Although he and Yuan Shao will eventually clash, it still feels like a thorn in my side,” Zhou Yu rarely expressed his frustrations, but this was one of those times. With Liu Bei and Yuan Shao’s strength and solid foundations, even a significant defeat wouldn’t crush them.

“Let’s not dwell on that. Have there been any new recruits lately?” Zhou Yu changed the subject to lighten his mood.

“Ziheng has already arrived,” Zhou Yu noted, thinking ahead. “He’ll likely join us soon, which will strengthen our forces. It’s a pity we didn’t bring Lu Su with us. Given his abilities, it’s clear why Liu Bei trusts and values him so much.”

The three generals didn’t say more, but their expressions brightened. If Zhou Yu said Lu Fan would come, they knew it would happen.

Over the next three days, Zhou Yu took advantage of his larger force, staging nighttime harassment raids. He mobilized tens of thousands of auxiliary troops, creating the illusion of a full-scale assault. This forced Lù Kàng, a seventy-year-old man, and Lù Jun, who was in poor health, to stay awake night after night. Whenever they began to doze off, Huang Gai and the others would rally their troops and charge toward the city walls, drums pounding.

Lù Kàng and Lù Jun quickly realized this was a tactic to exhaust them, but they couldn’t afford to let their guard down. On the first night, Huang Gai, following Zhou Yu’s orders, had launched a surprise attack during the chaos. Though they hadn’t taken the city, it served as a wake-up call for Lù Kàng and Lù Jun: any lapse in vigilance would give Sun Ce the opportunity to strike, no matter the hour.

Thus, they had no choice but to remain on high alert, patrolling the city walls throughout the night. After three days of this, the once-determined soldiers defending Lùjiāng Commandery were now thoroughly exhausted, their morale worn down by the relentless pressure.

One morning, Sun Ce, riding at the head of his army, approached the city, stopping just out of arrow range. “Lù Jìníng, come out and speak with me!” Hearing this, Lù Kàng instinctively appeared on the walls, only for Sun Ce to ignore him entirely. “Soldiers on the wall, listen up! Capture him, and I, Sun Bofu, will reward you generously. I’ll even pardon your previous offenses. But if you fail, when the city falls, you’ll all be buried alongside the Lù family!”

This time, the soldiers guarding Lùjiāng couldn’t help but glance back at Lù Kàng. Both their physical and mental fatigue, along with the chest of jewels Sun Ce’s men had dumped on the ground, made some of them waver.

“Trivial treasures? What Sun Ce has, the Lù family can provide in abundance!” Lù Kàng sneered, then glanced at Zhou Tai beside Sun Ce. As expected, Zhou Tai couldn’t meet his gaze, and Lù Kàng breathed a sigh of relief.

Soon after, Lù Kàng ordered his private soldiers to bring out several chests of jewels from the family treasury and scatter them atop the city walls. “Hear me, all of you! Hold out until today’s end, and these riches will be yours. Even if you fall in battle, I, Lù Kàng, pledge on the Lù family’s honor that your share will go to your families. Your children will have the chance to study and advance, and your parents and wives will be cared for!”

At this critical moment, Lù Kàng wasn’t stingy with his wealth. He had long stopped hoarding riches, seeing them only as a means to build connections. Now, with the family’s survival at stake, he didn’t hesitate to scatter gold and jewels. Even Sun Ce, down below, felt a twinge of envy.

“Sun Bofu, let’s see if you can buy off my soldiers. The Lù family once bought off the entire Yangtze region; do you think I’ll let you bribe my men here? Soldiers on the walls, listen well! For every day we hold out, I’ll pay each of you one tael of silver! If the Lù family falls, you can collect ten boats of salt from our stock in Chaohu Lake as collateral!” Lù Kàng shouted, his beard bristling with rage.

Sun Ce nearly drew his bow to shoot Lù Kàng on the spot, throwing caution to the wind. Luckily, Zhou Tai rushed forward and held him back, knowing that killing Lù Kàng in such a manner would ruin Sun Ce’s reputation.

Lù Kàng, perhaps feeling that words weren't enough, ordered his private soldiers to dump several chests of jewels into the moat. The glittering treasures now filled the section of the moat that had been filled in, and Lù Kàng continued to taunt Sun Ce, "Consider this a down payment! Sun Bofu's soldiers, as long as you don't fight too hard, I'll pay each of you a tael of silver every day. I, Lù Kàng, swear it!"

Chapter 450: Returning a Favor

When a few chests of jewels were thrown down, Sun Ce's soldiers began to waver. Sun Ce looked back at his troops and knew what was on their minds. They could easily slack off and not fight with full effort.

Zhou Yu shook his head in exasperation at Sun Ce. Why waste time with words? Just attack. Now, they were stuck between advancing and retreating.

Helpless, Zhou Yu stepped forward. "Lù Kàng, why use the wealth of our army as your guarantee? At this point, you must realize that you can only delay the inevitable. Your family's wealth is already in our grasp. Your so-called reputation and promises are nothing but a joke, merely sending your soldiers to their deaths."

Without waiting for Lù Kàng's response, Zhou Yu turned to his soldiers and shouted, "Listen up! Today, if we take the city, every soldier will receive one guàn in reward, and everyone else will get one diào!" Then, with a deep breath, he bellowed, "Attack!"

The soldiers, hearing Zhou Yu's promise, understood that Zhou Yu wasn't making empty promises. Lù Kàng's promise of daily payments was questionable, while Zhou Yu's rewards were guaranteed. With Han Dang and the others leading the charge, Sun Ce's troops roared and surged forward, giving Lù Kàng no chance to respond.

Retreating to the rear to command, Zhou Yu glanced at the intelligence from Chao Lake and sighed. "I had hoped to fight both Lùjiāng and any reinforcements simultaneously. I didn't expect the first wave of reinforcements to be so formidable."

After putting the report aside, Zhou Yu turned to the messenger, Ling Cao. "Kūntáo, go inform Bofu to come over."

Ling Cao took Zhou Yu's command and went to find Sun Ce. Meanwhile, Zhou Yu looked northeast and sighed again, ordering a messenger to urge Huang Gai and the others to attack quickly.

Following Zhou Yu's orders, Cheng Pu and his comrades didn't focus on just one gate as before. Instead, they launched full-scale assaults on the east, west, and north gates. The exhausted defenders of Lùjiāng were caught off guard, and the city walls began to crumble.

"Demóu, Yìgōng, Gongjin orders us to attack with all our might and take Lùjiāng city as quickly as possible!" Huang Gai, commanding from the northeast, shouted to Cheng Pu and Han Dang after receiving Zhou Yu's orders. The three had been waiting for the right moment to strike.

"Let's charge up now!" Cheng Pu eyed the shaky east gate. "I think it's time. The three of us will lead our personal guards and attack the north gate together. Let's take Lùjiāng city in one go!"

"Agreed!" Han Dang handed his drumsticks to a burly soldier. "Once we charge, you keep beating that drum as loud as you can!"

"Charge!" Huang Gai roared, leading the way with his sword as he rushed towards the city wall. He climbed the ladder, taking three steps at a time, and leaped onto the wall amidst the chaos. Before the defenders could pour boiling oil on him, he swung his sword, cutting down the soldiers around him. Despite the suppression of his internal energy, Huang Gai killed over a dozen men and secured his position.

"A hundred gold to the one who takes Huang Gai's head!" Lù Kàng, seeing Huang Gai, realized the gravity of the situation and shouted from a distance.

"Lù Kàng, prepare to die!" Han Dang followed closely, cutting down an archer about to attack Huang Gai. Cheng Pu also leaped onto the wall, and the three quickly secured a section of the battlements. Their personal guards rushed up the ladders and fought fiercely, clearing the area.

"Counterattack! Shoot them down!" Lù Kàng shouted in panic.

"Take this!" Huang Gai drew his bow and, with a powerful shot, hit Lù Kàng, knocking him to the ground from over a hundred meters away.

"Master, retreat!" The Lù family soldiers, seeing Lù Kàng wounded, knew the situation was dire. A dozen of them blocked the advancing Sun Ce soldiers while others carried Lù Jun and the injured Lù Kàng away.

"Go..." Lù Kàng coughed up blood. Though a loyal servant had blocked part of Huang Gai's arrow, the remaining force had pierced his side. While not fatal, such a wound was dangerous for a seventy-year-old man. Without proper treatment, he wouldn't last long.

"Report! Enemy forces have breached the east and west gates; only the south gate remains unchallenged!" A bloodied retainer shouted.

"Head for the south gate! Zhou Tai has received our family's support for years; he should give us a way out!" Lù Jun, supporting Lù Kàng, ordered.

"Take the south gate and escape to Chao Lake, then head north! Don't go to Jiangdong. The Gu, Zhang, and Zhu families have not sent any aid. If that's the case, let's seek refuge with Liu Xuande!" Lù Kàng, pale but clear-headed, instructed. "Take Sun and Ji, and burn the Lù family estate!"

"Understood!" Lù Jun agreed without hesitation. "What about our shipbuilding knowledge? Even if we reach Chao Lake, we'll have to flee with only our lives!"

"Survive first! Skilled workers can be found again; it's just a matter of experience. As for our family's shipbuilding secrets, I'll teach you everything I know on the way. As long as you remember it, our family can rise again. As for the core craftsmen, dismiss them for now. Once we're safe, we can regroup!" Lù Kàng, coughing, gave his final instructions.

"Understood!" Lù Jun nodded, carrying his father towards the south gate. Lù Xùn and Lù Ji were also taken by the family's guards as they made their escape.

"Boss, are we really going to wipe out the entire Lù family?" A water bandit hesitated and asked.

"Shut up!" Zhou Tai slapped the bandit to the ground. "Get out there and make sure none of our soldiers are looting or committing atrocities. Anyone caught doing so will be executed on the spot!"

After entering through the west gate, Zhou Tai issued the order. His smarter subordinates quickly understood, while the less astute ones were dragged along.

Zhou Tai personally killed a Sun Ce soldier who had tried to assault a Lùjiāng civilian.

"We got out so easily... I didn't expect Zhou Yu not to set an ambush at the south gate!" Lù Jun remarked in surprise.

"Maybe there was an ambush, but someone diverted it!" Lù Xùn, at just eleven years old, was more perceptive.

"Zhou Yòupíng must have done it. Let's not make it difficult for him. We need to leave quickly. Once we reach the Yangtze, even if Sun Ce blocks the waterways, no one can stop us from escaping." Lù Jun, enlightened by his son, sighed, cleaned up his appearance, and rode south.

"Report! General, the Lù family estate is on fire, and General Zhou is executing our soldiers who attacked the city!" A messenger hurried to inform Huang Gai and the others.

"What?!" Huang Gai was stunned. "Yòupíng dares to act like this? Take me there at once!"