

Mythical 45

Chapter 45: Sun Jian, Oh Sun Jian

Liu Bei remained silent, while Guan Yu and Zhang Fei said nothing either. When they first heard about the Imperial Seal, they immediately came to inform Liu Bei, hoping he could secure it. But now, Chen Xi claimed the Seal was just bait. If not for the series of strategies that had already earned their respect, Guan and Zhang might have slapped him by now.

Liu Bei took a deep breath, his eyes slightly red, and said to Chen Xi, "I placed too much importance on the Seal. As you said, it's just a symbol. Li Ru is truly terrifying!"

Liu Bei felt a pang in his heart, realizing the fearsome cunning of Li Ru. Even after being warned that the Seal was bait, he still wanted to seize it. How much more for others who believed Sun Jian had accidentally found and inadvertently revealed it?

"Let's go and take a look. Remember, Lord Xuande, not to touch it regardless of what happens. Sun Jian will deny it to the end even if it costs him his face." Chen Xi sighed, noting how Li Ru's ploy was nearly impossible for the coalition lords to resist. Pursuing Dong Zhuo was out of the question; avoiding an all-out brawl would be a blessing.

"Very well!" Liu Bei said solemnly. "Zichuan, please remind me about such matters in the future. Li Ru indeed has far-reaching plans. As you said, this battle is likely just a strategic retreat. Returning to Western Qin, he intends to stir up the whole realm."

Chen Xi didn't continue to harp on the Seal. Since Liu Bei pledged not to touch it, there was no need to remind him further. If he couldn't control such a basic desire, he wouldn't be Liu Xuande.

"Strategic retreat is not quite accurate," Chen Xi shook his head. "If Dong Zhuo were still as he was, this would be just bait, and the retreat would be to watch from the sidelines. But things are different now. Dong Zhuo is finished. These schemes are still in play, but without a central figure. Without his ambition, Dong Zhuo won't last long."

"Oh, that's good," Liu Bei said, though his face showed a touch of joy. He opened his mouth as if to say something but remained silent, his thoughts reflected in a sigh. After all, Li Ru was still a traitor.

As usual, Liu Bei brought Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Chen Xi into the main tent. But unlike the usual cordial atmosphere, the tent was filled with oppressive tension. Seeing Liu Bei enter, only Kong Rong, Tao Qian, and Cao Cao acknowledged him with a nod. The rest were full of wariness.

“Lord Yuan, since we have taken Luoyang and Dong Zhuo has fled, our strategic goal is achieved. I will soon return to Taishan to assume my duties. As for other matters, I hope everyone will show some restraint and not let the Xiliang warriors mock us.” Liu Bei, sensing the tense atmosphere, hinted at his intentions, hoping to calm the situation.

The lords understood Liu Bei’s words to mean he was withdrawing from the alliance, thus no longer a threat in the struggle for the Seal. This realization made them more welcoming towards him.

[Sigh, I can only help you all this far. It seems someone understands the implications, as Zichuan said about Ju Gong being wise. Indeed, he already sensed the meaning, though his changing expressions are hard to read.] Liu Bei thought with interest. He didn’t want to spell things out explicitly as it wouldn’t change the inevitable struggle and might drag him in further.

Despite the others’ attempts to draw him in, Liu Bei just smiled without committing to anything. Like Kong Rong, he was now a witness. If someone obtained the Seal in the presence of a Han descendant and a sage’s descendant, it would carry significant implications.

After a long wait, Sun Jian finally appeared with Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, and Han Dang, looking pale and exhausted.

“Cough, cough, cough, my apologies, Alliance Leader. My old ailment has flared up, and I can no longer lead effectively. I regret not being able to fulfill your expectations.” Sun Jian said, coughing and looking genuinely ill. “In this state, I plan to leave Luoyang today and return to Jiangdong to avoid dying in a foreign land.”

Sun Jian’s words evoked sympathy. A once-robust hero now seemed feeble and just wished to die at home, a stark contrast from his former vigor.

Without the Seal issue, Yuan Shao would have let him go without question, maybe even with a grand farewell. But with the Seal involved, even Sun Jian’s death wouldn’t stop them from finding it.

Yuan Shao, sitting at the head, sneered. [Look at how sensible Liu Bei is. And you dare to play tricks with me? Courting death!]

Yuan Shao looked at Sun Jian and said coldly, "Sun Wentai, pretending to be ill is a lie. You've found the Seal, haven't you?"

Sun Jian was shocked. How did Yuan Shao know? He had kept it well-hidden. Trying to feign ignorance, he said, "I don't understand what you mean, Alliance Leader. When did I find the Seal?"

Yuan Shao sneered, "Ask those around you. Who here doesn't know?"

Sun Jian was stunned. He had thought the matter well concealed, having ceased his search after finding the Seal and preparing to return to Jiangdong. He hadn't noticed the rumors in the camp.

Seeing the looks from others, Sun Jian realized the Seal's discovery was exposed.

"What do you have to say now, Sun Wentai?" Yuan Shao demanded harshly. "Hand over the Seal. It's not something you should possess!"

Sun Jian stiffened, saying, "I don't have the Seal. What should I hand over?"

Yuan Shao was furious. Sun Jian's stubbornness was maddening. "Hmph, let me show you someone!" Yuan Shao clapped his hands, and a soldier entered the tent. "He saw you retrieve the Seal with his own eyes!"

Sun Jian was enraged. The man was his former guard, now siding with Yuan Shao. Drawing his sword, he moved to kill the traitor.

"You dare kill a soldier? You must be hiding something! Yan Liang, Wen Chou, seize him!" Yuan Shao shouted.

Yan Liang and Wen Chou appeared at Yuan Shao's sides, swords drawn. Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, and Han Dang stood ready to defend Sun Jian. The atmosphere grew tense, on the brink of violence.

The lords intervened to defuse the situation. Sun Jian, with one hand raised, swore, "If I stole the Seal, may I die by a thousand arrows." With that, he left swiftly, taking his troops and leaving before anyone could react.