

Mythical 451

Chapter 451: Gan Ning in Battle Mode

When Huang Gai and the other two generals arrived, they saw Zhou Tai decapitate a Sun family soldier. They were shocked and quickly held their weapons against Zhou Tai, who appeared ready to execute another soldier.

"General Zhou, what do you think you're doing?" Huang Gai shouted, barely containing his anger.

Zhou Tai, though visibly frustrated, restrained himself. "Generals, do you know what these men did? We're here to reclaim these lands, not destroy them. Our lord made it clear: no harm to the people, only the execution of the Lu family. How can we allow such scoundrels in our ranks and still expect the people to submit to us?"

His words were logical and justified, making Huang Gai and the others ease up. They realized that Zhou Tai was only enforcing military discipline. "Listen up! Anyone caught looting or harming the people of Lujiang will be executed!" Huang Gai commanded.

Zhou Tai sighed in relief but felt embarrassed. "I can't believe I forgot such a simple method in the heat of the moment."

Han Dang clapped Zhou Tai on the shoulder. "It's okay, Zhou Tai. You were just looking out for the army's discipline. We are a righteous army, after all. We'll make sure to compensate the affected citizens."

"Exactly," Cheng Pu agreed.

A messenger then rushed in to report to Sun Ce, "General, Lujiang City has been taken!"

"Good!" Sun Ce cheered, slapping the table. "What about the four members of the Lu family?"

"General Huang shot Lu Kang with an arrow. Lu Kang and Lu Jun escaped the city, but when we reached the Lu residence, it was on fire. The flames have been extinguished, but all the records and books have turned to ash," the messenger reported.

"And the four members of the Lu family?" Sun Ce pressed.

"They... perished in the fire, along with several loyal guards and servants who defended them to the end," the messenger replied.

"They're dead?" Sun Ce asked, raising his voice before waving dismissively. "Forget it. Just bury them somewhere and have General Cheng reorganize the troops and reward the soldiers."

After the messenger left, Sun Ce turned to Zhou Yu with a grin. "Gongjin, you're amazing. I knew you had a way."

"They're probably all still alive," a voice suddenly interjected. Pang Tong poked his head into the tent.

"What did you say?" Sun Ce asked, turning around. "Weren't you supposed to be escorting supplies? How did you get back so quickly?"

"I came back to deliver news and overheard your conversation," Pang Tong said with a mischievous grin. "But yes, the Lu family is probably still alive."

"Shiyuan is right, Bofu," Zhou Yu agreed. "The deaths were likely staged. There must be a secret passage leading out of the city."

When Sun Ce arrived at the partially burned Lu residence, Zhou Tai used his extraordinary hearing, a trait unique to those with his level of internal energy mastery, to find a secret tunnel in the middle hall that led westward out of the city. While everyone believed that the Lu family had escaped through this passage, only Zhou Tai knew that they had actually used the south gate.

Zhou Tai, a man of both loyalty and righteousness, made this choice in silence.

Meanwhile, Chen Xi and his group had just arrived at Chao Lake, where the Lu family's docks appeared unusually quiet.

"Where is everyone?" Gan Ning jumped onto the dock and shouted. An old man dressed as a steward soon appeared and, upon seeing Gan Ning, beamed with joy. "Master Gan, you've finally arrived! Our Lu family has been under siege by Sun Ce for days. All the stewards have gone to seek help. Please, Master Gan, rescue our lord quickly!"

"I'm here to save them. Look, I've brought my brothers. Don't worry. Sun Ce is no match for us. How is Jùn lately?" Gan Ning asked, not in a hurry, instead inquiring about Lu Jun's condition.

"The master has been well, though his old ailments have returned. With Sun Ce's fierce attack, I fear for him and the elder master," the steward said, quickly steering the conversation back to the urgent need for help.

"Gan Ning, ask about the current situation. We need to know what's going on if we're going to rescue them," Chen Xi said, seeing that time was of the essence.

The steward quickly relayed what he knew, including the state of the Lu family's finances, trying to reassure Gan Ning.

"Don't worry, I'm not interested in your family's wealth. We're here to escort the Lu family to safety. Lord Xuande doesn't need your riches," Chen Xi said with a smile.

"Gan Ning, you're in charge. We're likely going to clash with Zhou Yu and Sun Ce," Chen Xi said, stepping off the boat and patting Gan Ning on the shoulder.

"Understood!" Gan Ning nodded and roared orders to his men, "Listen up! Taishi Ci will guard Chao Lake and the ships. Each ship's captain, leave behind enough men to handle the basics. The rest of you, grab your weapons and form two teams. Gànlùò will lead the second team; I'll lead the first."

The soldiers quickly responded, unloading land warfare equipment from the supply ships and preparing for battle.

"Ziyi, we're counting on you for the return trip. Deploy small boats to patrol the area and make sure we don't get ambushed. If you encounter any trouble, alert the general onboard. Chao Lake is vast; don't let them surround us," Gan Ning warned Taishi Ci before leaving.

"Don't worry. I'll guard the ships well and won't let anyone catch us off guard. I've learned a lot from you, and my men are all skilled sailors. No one will get the better of us!" Taishi Ci assured him.

"Chen Xi, you go with Gànlùò. I'll scout ahead to assess the situation in Lujiang. I'm concerned that the steward's information may be outdated. More importantly, I might need to fight Sun Ce and his men. This is Chao Lake, and while it's clear they know it belongs to the Lu family, they haven't stationed any troops here. They're probably planning to ambush us," Gan Ning explained. Once in battle mode, Gan Ning's sharp intelligence kicked in.

Chapter 452: Crippling One First

"I'll stick with you. Even if they're trying to trap us, they won't be able to defeat us easily. Let's assess the situation in Lujiang first," Chen Xi shook his head, refusing Gan Ning's suggestion. There wasn't much danger in staying with Gan Ning, and it was clear that Gan Luo had been sent ahead in case Lujiang fell, and the Lu family couldn't make contact.

Gan Ning thought about it and decided not to say more. He immediately activated his internal energy and led his troops, with Chen Xi in tow, towards Lujiang.

Meanwhile, Pang Tong, who had just extinguished the flames at the Lu residence and was preparing the rear camp to enter Lujiang City, suddenly raised his head. "This is bad!"

"Indeed, it's troublesome. Two opponents have arrived. Quickly, notify Bofu and the others. I'll have our men dismantle the rear camp and form a defensive formation right here. Internal energy really is a hassle. Normally, my spiritual talent should cover several miles, but I didn't sense them until they were this close," Zhou Yu said, frowning as he instructed a messenger. "Shiyuan, did you sense them too?"

"Do you have a wide-area spiritual talent as well?" Pang Tong asked with a frown. He had always thought he was unique since his spiritual talent allowed him to detect any other spiritual talents or special abilities nearby. This was especially useful for identifying top talents.

"Yes, didn't I mention it before? Aside from you, I've always detected others with spiritual talents. You're the only one I didn't sense initially," Zhou Yu replied calmly as he took down his sword hanging in the tent and strapped it to his waist. "I wonder how Kun Tao's task is progressing. It seems inevitable that we'll clash with Liu Bei's forces."

"When did you mention this?" Pang Tong muttered as he hurriedly followed Zhou Yu outside. "My spiritual talent can be perfectly concealed, making it undetectable, but only when I'm calm. Once I get worked up, like during our debates, I can't hide it anymore."

"I wonder who can keep their composure in the middle of a war," Zhou Yu scoffed as he stepped out of the tent. Moments ago, it had been a bright sunny day, but now the sky was filled with dark clouds, and the wind howled.

"Calling the wind and rain... I haven't done this in a while," Chen Xi chuckled. "It feels much easier and more controllable now. Though it's a shame I don't have Zijing's icy touch. If I did, I could turn this summer rain into snow, wounding the enemy before the battle even begins."

"Gongjin, you focus on forming the battle array and directing the flow of internal energy. I'll handle this weather manipulation—mere wind and rain won't stop me," Pang Tong said as he stepped forward, squinting against the wind and sand.

"Leave it to you then. The weather was sunny to begin with, so it'll be easier for you to clear the skies than for the enemy to change them," Zhou Yu nodded before rushing to the rear camp to raise their defensive formation, preventing Liu Bei's forces from exploiting any gaps.

Pang Tong immediately got to work, swiftly dispersing the clouds overhead, allowing sunlight to pierce through the gaps. Meanwhile, Zhou Yu began using his spiritual power to assist the disorganized Sun Ce troops in forming their battle array and raising their internal energy.

"They tore through it, huh? Let's see how they handle this!" Chen Xi laughed as he continued drawing in rain clouds from other areas. He realized he was facing a formidable opponent, likely Zhou Yu, given the swift and skillful maneuvers.

Pang Tong's already unattractive face twisted even further as he realized someone was reversing the weather pattern he had set in motion, suppressing his efforts. "I'll sap your intelligence first!" he snarled.

A wave of spiritual energy washed over Chen Xi, but it had no effect. However, Chen Xi could clearly tell that this was some kind of negative spiritual talent.

"Only one debuff landed!" Pang Tong's face contorted with frustration. Instead of weakening Chen Xi's mind, all he felt was a slight physical boost. "How could he resist my spiritual talent? This is impossible!"

Whether possible or not, Chen Xi took advantage of the time Pang Tong spent struggling to gather a massive storm cloud overhead. He was confident that this downpour would flood Lujiang City, turning it into a swamp.

"Turn into a flood!" Chen Xi laughed, clapping his hands. With a rumble of thunder, the dark clouds merged into an ominous black mass. Before Pang Tong or Zhou Yu could react, it was as if the heavens had opened, and a torrential downpour poured down.

Gan Ning's eyes widened in disbelief as he witnessed the scene. With his sharp vision, he could clearly see that the rain had nearly formed a solid sheet. At this rate, the flood would be catastrophic within minutes.

"Damn it!" Pang Tong ignored the downpour, pushing his spiritual power to its limits to tear a massive hole in the storm clouds.

But Chen Xi quickly countered, using what felt like immense force to gradually close the gap. As the hole sealed shut, another thunderclap shook the sky.

Pang Tong knew things were going south as soon as the clouds closed. He tried to retreat, but he was too late. The thunderclap reverberated through his head, making him dizzy and causing blood to rise in his throat. He collapsed into the mud.

"Shiyuan!" Sun Ce arrived just in time to catch Pang Tong, shielding them both from the rain with his internal energy. "Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

"I'm fine. Tell Gongjin that the enemy's spiritual power is terrifying. They're a pair—one scholar, one warrior. As unbelievable as it sounds, the scholar is likely Chen Zichuan!" Pang Tong forced a bitter smile. "If I had known his spiritual power was this overwhelming, I never would have tried to compete with him. He might even be capable of casting pure spiritual spells. Bofu, you'd better stay away from him."

"Good to know you're okay. Now watch me avenge you!" Sun Ce dried Pang Tong's clothes with a wave of his hand before lifting him and sprinting towards Zhou Yu's formation, where the internal energy was rising.

"I've already crippled Zhou Yu. Let's see how he deals with this. Even if he dodged quickly, that blast should leave him reeling for a while," Chen Xi laughed. "Looks like Lujiang has fallen, and we're late to the party. But from the looks of it, Sun Ce's forces only just took the city. Let's speed up and catch them off guard!"

"Yes!" Gan Ning roared, filled with confidence. "Since Lujiang has fallen, there's nothing left to say. We'll take revenge for the Lu family."

Gan Ning took a deep breath, channeling his internal energy. With his sharp vision, he could see that the area ahead had turned into a swamp. Fighting in such conditions would be a nightmare, so the best strategy was to concentrate his forces' internal energy around him, replacing brute force with precision.

"I'll join in too!" Seeing the flow of energy centered on Gan Ning, Chen Xi knew what was happening and quickly linked his spiritual power with the internal energy, making the flow faster and smoother.

Chapter 453: Defeating Zhou Yu Again

"Can you make the unleashed cloud energy even more violent?" Gan Ning asked, quickly manipulating the cloud energy while glancing to the side.

"As long as you can control it!" Chen Xi replied with a smile. He then split his spiritual power in half, then into four parts, and then even more, intertwining the cloud energy with each thread of his spiritual power as they moved together.

"It's done!" Gan Ning shouted in surprise. He hadn't expected Chen Xi to achieve this level of control in an instant—this wasn't humanly possible.

"I'm stabilizing the structure of the cloud energy. It seems I've developed a new formation—a highly advanced variation of the Xuanyang Formation!" Chen Xi laughed aloud.

Chen Xi hadn't anticipated such a shocking effect when he fully expanded his spiritual power. What was once a complex operation of cloud energy had become even more intricate in his hands, and he fed this refined complexity into Gan Ning's control, leaving only the most violent aspects.

"Forget the military formation—I'm at my limit!" Gan Ning's eyes flashed with madness as he struggled to maintain control. Chen Xi's speed far exceeded his expectations.

"I'll stabilize it for you!" At this point, Chen Xi also sensed the danger from the whale-like cloud structure above Gan Ning's head. Realizing the vastness of his spiritual power, Chen Xi poured in a large amount of it to help Gan Ning stabilize his technique.

"There's no time!" Sun Ce, who had just arrived through the rain, could already see the figure of the man charging ahead of him. He also noticed the massive cloud structure above Gan Ning's head. Seeing Zhou Yu struggling to control the cloud energy, Sun Ce knew that if they were hit by this attack head-on, his forces would surely collapse!

"Gongjin, channel all the cloud energy now!" Sun Ce, decisive as ever, shouted to Zhou Yu.

"Understood!" Zhou Yu also knew the situation was critical. The timing of Liu Bei's forces was perfect—right when they were breaking camp. If they had arrived a bit earlier or later, they wouldn't have been caught in such a vulnerable position.

Zhou Yu channeled all of the available cloud energy into Sun Ce's body. Originally clad in golden armor, Sun Ce absorbed the cloud energy, and amidst the torrential rain, a brilliant golden sun rose.

"There's no way I'll let you succeed!" Gan Ning roared as he unleashed the massive blue cloud whale. The torrential rain was instantly blown away by the fierce energy, and the ground outside the city of Lujiang was left pockmarked with craters.

"Break!" Sun Ce thrust his spear, his essence and spirit merging with all the accumulated cloud energy of his army, transforming into a colossal golden spear that struck the cloud whale.

A deafening boom echoed across the battlefield. Sun Ce's side was then hit by chaotic spiritual waves and a violent level-12 storm.

If it had been only the storm, their remaining cloud energy shield would have protected Sun Ce's forces from too much damage. At most, the dispersed troops would have been blown away.

Unfortunately, the chaotic spiritual waves struck first, destroying most of the cloud energy shield. Many of the front-line soldiers collapsed without resistance, and if Zhou Yu hadn't intercepted the majority of the spiritual shock, they would have been incapacitated, if not killed.

As the mud and debris finally stopped falling, torrential rain continued to pour over the area hundreds of steps in front of Gan Ning, where hardly any enemies were left standing.

"Phew!" Gan Ning exhaled deeply, pulling on the reins as he surveyed the massive crater over a hundred meters wide. "Although we didn't hit them directly enough to completely destroy them, they won't be regrouping after this. Time to charge in and finish them off! Surrounding and attacking without properly blocking reinforcements—what were they thinking?"

Zhou Yu couldn't hear Gan Ning's words right now, but if he could, he would have been furious. Gan Ning's timing was just too perfect. If he had arrived earlier, Zhou Yu's rear guard would have been caught outside the camp. If he had arrived later, Zhou Yu would have already been stationed inside Lujiang City. In either case, they wouldn't have been this vulnerable.

"Bofu, let Youping hold off Gan Ning! Neither side has cloud energy left now. Although we've suffered heavy losses, they won't be able to suppress experts at the Internal Qi Manifestation level anymore," Zhou Yu said, pressing his temples in pain. Even though he had blocked most of the spiritual shock, the sudden attack had left him dizzy.

Upon hearing this, Sun Ce and Zhou Tai rushed toward Gan Ning. Their horses had perished in the initial spiritual shockwave, and both had suffered significant mental impacts due to being on the front lines.

Sun Ce, in particular, was weary after his hasty clash with Gan Ning's charged attack and the subsequent spiritual shock.

Zhou Tai charged toward Gan Ning with a grim expression, while Sun Ce, understanding that this was no time to maintain decorum, forced himself to gather his internal energy and also charged at Gan Ning.

"Spread out and focus on killing the enemy soldiers first!" Gan Ning commanded his troops. He knew the opponents charging at him were all experts, and without cloud energy to protect his soldiers, even heavily injured foes could slaughter them like cutting down grass.

"So, it's really you, Gan Xingba!" Zhou Tai roared as he swung his broadsword at Gan Ning.

"Zhou Youping! Get out of my way!" Gan Ning shouted back, grabbing his Hengjiang Iron Chain with his left hand and swinging it toward Zhou Tai's head, while his right hand wielded a massive cleaver against Sun Ce.

The clash of weapons echoed as Zhou Tai deflected Gan Ning's chain with his broadsword, then countered with a dark blade of energy. However, Gan Ning had anticipated this, pulling back his chain to block Zhou Tai's strike while the deflected chain, seemingly with a mind of its own, shot toward Sun Ce's head from behind.

Sun Ce nimbly dodged, slipping through the blue-green blade energy and the chain whip. Gripping his spear with both hands, he lunged at Gan Ning, delivering five consecutive strikes, each faster than the last, piercing through the air toward Gan Ning.

"Get away!" Gan Ning roared, his body suddenly enveloped in a shimmering blue aura. The spear tips that Sun Ce thrust at him veered off course, while the massive energy wave Zhou Tai unleashed was also diverted, carving a deep trench into the ground several hundred meters away.

"Is this all you've got, Zhou Tai?" Gan Ning laughed loudly. When he had first arrived at the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, he had clashed with Zhou Tai and harbored a grudge ever since. Back then, he had barely managed to hold his own, but now he realized that even if Zhou Tai were at his peak, they would be evenly matched!

Zhou Tai pushed his internal energy to its limits, but each time he attacked, the blue aura around Gan Ning diverted his strikes. Even when Zhou Tai managed to break through the aura, it was difficult to land a direct hit on Gan Ning.

Chapter 454: The Undying Zhou Tai

Chen Xi frowned as he observed Sun Ce's forces gradually organizing a counterattack, along with the reinforcements pouring out of Lujiang City.

"Xingba, finish off those two quickly!" Chen Xi ordered, while simultaneously gathering his own troops and shouting toward Gan Ning.

"Got it!" Gan Ning responded without turning his head. Although both Zhou Tai and Sun Ce were injured, Gan Ning knew that defeating them wouldn't be as easy as just saying it, but he enjoyed challenging the limits.

"Die!" Gan Ning retracted all the internal energy swirling around him. While the protective layer of energy made it difficult for ordinary attacks to penetrate and harm him, it also hindered his maximum offensive output.

In the next moment, a layer of blue-green internal energy burst onto Gan Ning's broadsword and his Hengjiang Iron Chain, flashing with an intense sharpness.

Sun Ce silently gathered his remaining internal energy, forming a golden armor around his body. His spear was also enveloped in a layer of golden flames, while Zhou Tai looked like a fierce deity, dark energy radiating from him as black flames ignited on his broadsword.

"It seems you two aren't compatible!" Gan Ning laughed loudly, disregarding everything else as he launched himself at Sun Ce. In this critical moment, Gan Ning believed that his short-term explosive speed far surpassed that of a horse, and the only way to kill his opponents was to be faster than them.

"Kill!" Zhou Tai growled lowly, slashing his broadsword toward Gan Ning's path. The blade split into three, sealing off Gan Ning's escape routes from all directions. At the same time, Sun Ce thrust his spear

with overwhelming force, lacking Zhao Yun's delicate spearwork but brimming with boundless dominance.

Gan Ning sliced through Sun Ce's energy with his broadsword while his left hand manipulated the Hengjiang Iron Chain like a serpent, slipping through the gaps between Zhou Tai's three blade paths and stabbing toward Zhou Tai's head. Gan Ning himself followed the chain's trajectory, shooting forward like lightning.

As Zhou Tai deflected the chain, Gan Ning had already evaded the three blade strikes. The chain's tip, predictably deflected back toward Gan Ning, coiled around his body in an instant.

With the Hengjiang Iron Chain wrapped around him, Gan Ning's left hand finally freed itself. In the next moment, he gripped his broadsword with both hands and unleashed his most powerful strike, a blue-green blade of energy combined with his rapid descent, slashing directly at Zhou Tai.

Zhou Tai realized the danger as soon as Gan Ning wrapped the chain around himself. In that split second, Zhou Tai understood that evading the attack was impossible. A desperate counterattack was his only hope, so he poured all his energy into a powerful slash aimed at Gan Ning.

"Boom!" A series of explosions echoed as if a meteor had crashed into the ground, sending up a mushroom cloud. Before the dust could settle, Sun Ce rushed toward Zhou Tai.

The sound of air splitting accompanied the scene as Gan Ning emerged from the dust cloud, his face slightly pale and his broadsword missing. A gust of wind followed in his wake.

"Zhou Youping, I underestimated you," Gan Ning remarked in shock as he looked at Zhou Tai, who was still standing in the massive crater.

When Chen Xi looked over, he saw Gan Ning's broadsword embedded deeply in Zhou Tai's shoulder. Zhou Tai's broadsword had been shattered into two pieces, with the hilt in his right hand and the blade tip in his left. Zhou Tai himself was buried waist-deep in the ground.

"You okay, Youping?" Sun Ce asked as he noticed Zhou Tai standing next to him, seemingly taller and bulkier.

"I'm fine. It's just a minor injury," Zhou Tai replied, casually tossing aside the broken pieces of his broadsword. He then helped Sun Ce out of the crater, completely unfazed by the massive broadsword still lodged in his shoulder.

"A minor injury..." Sun Ce muttered, his eye twitching. Even for someone at the Internal Qi Manifestation level, this kind of injury would take at least a month to heal. However, the fact that Zhou Tai was still alive was a huge relief—Sun Ce had never lost a comrade in battle.

At this point, Sun Ce finally confirmed that Zhou Tai had indeed grown taller—by about three feet—and his body had become even more muscular.

"The 'Undying Monster'?" Chen Xi murmured as he looked at Zhou Tai. This man was indeed the most resilient creature of this era, surviving countless wounds and still able to fight.

With a loud crack, Zhou Tai yanked the broadsword out of his shoulder. Blood gushed from the massive wound, but it was soon suppressed as black internal energy spewed from the wound. Zhou Tai, as if unaffected, casually swung the broadsword a few times.

Gan Ning gripped his Hengjiang Iron Chain tightly, ready to resume the fight with Zhou Tai. But before they could clash again, Sun Ce's reinforcements, led by Cheng Pu and Ling Cao, had already charged out of Lujiang City.

"Xingba, it seems our luck isn't on our side today. Let's go," Chen Xi said as he turned his horse and gestured for Gan Ning to follow.

"Zhou Youping, I'll leave my broadsword with you for now. Next time, I'll definitely take it back," Gan Ning taunted Zhou Tai with a cold smile, not waiting for a response before vanishing with a few quick steps to join Chen Xi.

"Let's focus on rescuing our wounded soldiers. I've already sent someone to prepare along the Yangtze River," Zhou Yu said as he saw Ling Cao and the others preparing to pursue the retreating enemies.

"You okay, Youping?" Sun Ce asked, patting Zhou Tai on the back.

"I'm fine for now, but it won't last. This technique allows me to surpass my peak strength even while heavily injured, but my body... the cost is..." Zhou Tai's words trailed off as he collapsed to the ground. His previously bear-like figure shrank significantly, and blood began to pour from his wounds once more.

"Get help, now!" Sun Ce shouted, realizing that things weren't as simple as they seemed. As expected, such powerful techniques always came with a price—the stronger the effect, the more dangerous it was!

Gan Ning spat out a mouthful of blood and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "That Zhou Youping... his brute strength is terrifying!"

"You didn't see how much bigger he got—his height increased by thirty percent, and his body expanded as well. It's no wonder his strength increased. I figured you were knocked away by him, and it seems I was right. Make sure to take some medicine later so you don't suffer any lasting effects," Chen Xi sighed. He had already guessed that something wasn't right when Gan Ning had been thrown out of the smoke earlier.

"I originally planned to cut him in half, but I miscalculated. His broadsword absorbed most of the force, along with his internal energy, so I could only wound him that much. Then he hit me square in the chest and sent me flying. That technique is no joke. By the way, you called him the 'Undying Monster'—what's that about?" Gan Ning asked with a wry smile, holding onto his reins. Zhou Tai's ability to withstand his most powerful strike had truly surprised him.

Chapter 455: Zhou Yu

"The term 'Undying Monster' refers to Zhou Youping's incredibly tenacious vitality. He's nearly impossible to kill," Chen Xi explained with a shrug. "Unless you cut off his head on the spot, even if you leave him barely alive, the next time you see him, he'll be as lively as ever."

"You must be joking!" Gan Ning said incredulously, all the while using his internal energy to treat his injuries. "I've never heard of such a person."

"But it's true—Zhou Tai is one of those rare cases," Chen Xi responded with a helpless shrug. He realized that the unique traits of these historical figures hadn't changed; in fact, due to the world's increased

strength, their characteristics had only intensified. Zhou Tai, the 'Undying Monster,' had become even more resilient.

"...", Gan Ning fell silent, but he made sure to remember Chen Xi's words. If Zhou Tai really possessed such a trait, killing him would be extremely difficult. Killing an Internal Qi Manifestation-level fighter who could only be killed by decapitation seemed like a feat only Lu Bu could accomplish.

"It seems Sun Bofu hasn't pursued us," Chen Xi remarked, pulling on the reins to slow down and glancing back. "Today's events were strange. A person like Zhou Yu didn't respond in time, and even more puzzling is that they didn't have a rear guard or pursue us. Something feels off."

"If we consider Sun Ce's force as a whole, their strongest component isn't their underdeveloped land army but rather the navy they captured in Jiangxia and retrained. They likely don't want to risk everything in a confrontation. It seems we'll have to put in some effort to retreat," Gan Ning quickly analyzed, arriving at the simplest and most realistic conclusion.

"Perhaps our timing was just too precise. As for the naval battle on the Yangtze, I never intended to avoid it. I need to see how we measure up against the strongest navy in the land," Chen Xi mused after a moment's thought.

"The strongest navy, huh? Haha! Even I, Gan Xingba, don't claim to have the strongest navy. Who's so arrogant?" Gan Ning raised an eyebrow. Although he knew who Chen Xi was referring to, he refused to acknowledge such a self-deprecating statement.

"Well, you might just win," Chen Xi said, rubbing his chin.

"Heh, I knew it. If I, Gan Xingba, didn't say it, who are they to claim it?" Gan Ning grinned, but then his expression darkened as he remembered the situation with the Lu family. He sighed and said, "Looks like we failed this mission. The Lu family is gone. If only we had been faster... Given the situation earlier, Lujiang City fell in just about an hour."

"It's not that simple. Although Lujiang City fell, the Lu family may not have perished. While some clans have indeed been wiped out in wars, most of them make preparations beforehand, leaving behind opportunities and bloodlines to rise again," Chen Xi shook his head. "Let's search for the Lu family while Sun Bofu is occupied. We might still find something."

"I hope so," Gan Ning sighed. "I wonder if Gan Luo has found anything."

Meanwhile, Sun Ce carried Zhou Tai back to Lujiang City. After some treatment, it was hard to say whether it was due to the doctor's skill or Zhou Tai's resilience, but Zhou Tai's life-threatening injuries stabilized quickly. Within an hour, Zhou Tai had regained consciousness.

"Ugh, it hurts..." Zhou Tai hadn't even cried out in pain yet when Pang Tong, who had just woken up, started screaming in agony. He had been the unluckiest of them all—first struck hard by Chen Xi, leaving him dazed, and then brought to the front lines by Sun Ce. When Chen Xi unleashed his spiritual shockwave, Pang Tong instinctively bore the brunt of it and collapsed again.

"Shiyuan, are you okay?" Sun Ce asked nervously, seeing Pang Tong clutching his head in pain.

"I swear, Chen Zichuan, I'll make you suffer the same! Ah, it hurts, it hurts..." Pang Tong began cursing, only to be interrupted by another wave of pain.

"Alright, stop shouting," Zhou Yu, sitting nearby, said to Pang Tong.

"My head feels like it's about to explode. How are you fine?" Pang Tong asked, trying to maintain composure in front of Zhou Yu. He didn't want to embarrass himself any further.

"I was just caught off guard. Let me play a tune for you; it'll help you recover faster." With that, Zhou Yu placed his green qin on his lap and began to play. A calming wave of energy flowed from the strings, and Pang Tong immediately felt a soothing coolness in his mind.

As the music ended, Pang Tong subconsciously stretched his body, noticing that his headache had significantly lessened and his spiritual energy had even started to recover.

Pang Tong stared at Zhou Yu with a complicated expression. For the first time, he felt a sense of envy. It seemed as though Zhou Yu had everything—spiritual talent, special abilities, military prowess, intelligence, good looks, and even the unmatched beauty of Xiao Qiao as his fiancée. Was Zhou Yu the favored child of the heavens, blessed with every good fortune?

"Shiyuan, feeling better?" Zhou Yu's gentle voice pulled Pang Tong out of his thoughts as the last notes of the melody lingered in the air.

"Thank you, Gongjin." Zhou Tai, wrapped in bandages, sat up and flexed his arms, performing some chest exercises. Although still somewhat stiff, he felt as if he had rested for several days.

"Mind your own business!" Pang Tong snapped irritably. As much as Zhou Yu annoyed him, Pang Tong couldn't deny that Zhou Yu was the most reliable figure under Sun Ce's command.

Zhou Tai was about to speak, but Sun Ce held him back. Matters of strategy and planning were best left to Zhou Yu, while Sun Ce and Zhou Tai excelled in leading troops and fighting on the front lines.

"Is the Yangtze River really an impenetrable barrier? We need to see how sharp our navy truly is," Zhou Yu said with a smile. "Our greatest strength lies in our navy, just as the northern forces rely on their cavalry. For us in the south, everything hinges on our naval prowess. We need to see if the Yangtze is truly a natural barrier."

"Hmph, you're thinking the same as I am, but I'm not just here to test our navy. I want to defeat them on the Yangtze and settle the score!" Pang Tong said with a proud expression.

Zhou Yu glanced at Pang Tong and silently turned away.

Chapter 456: Bofu, Your Opportunity Has Arrived

Zhou Yu watched as Pang Tong eagerly prepared for action. He didn't say anything to dissuade him, thinking that maintaining such enthusiasm was beneficial. After all, Zhou Yu needed someone with both drive and intelligence, like Pang Tong.

"Gongjin, I will join you when the time comes," Sun Ce said, placing his hand on Zhou Yu's shoulder, a fierce gleam in his eyes. "I will make Gan Xingba pay for Youping's injuries."

"Master, please allow me to accompany you into battle. This time, I will not let my guard down. Gan Xingba isn't worthy of making you take action. Please allow me to fight in your stead," Zhou Tai said, kneeling on one knee before Sun Ce.

"Master, please allow me to join you in battle as well," Ling Cao appeared in front of Sun Ce, solemnly declaring, "I was born in Jiangnan, and river warfare is my specialty. The old saying goes, 'When the lord is worried, the minister is humiliated.' Please give me a chance to wash away this shame."

"Youping, Kuntao, rise," Sun Ce said as he reached out to pull them up, but neither of them moved, remaining like statues.

"Bofu, bring Youping, Kuntao, and also Generals Cheng, Huang, and Han. Take all of our elite infantry. We will face the enemy on the Yangtze River," Zhou Yu stood and addressed Sun Ce. "It's time to end our Jiangdong campaign early."

"The two of us will surely redeem ourselves!" Ling Cao gripped Zhou Tai's arm and respectfully saluted Zhou Yu and Sun Ce.

"Is it necessary to take everyone?" Sun Ce asked, somewhat dissatisfied. "If they hadn't caught us at the perfect moment today, we wouldn't have been in such a difficult position. By the way, Gongjin, what do you mean by saying the Jiangdong campaign must end?"

"Chen Zichuan, as Liu Xuande's most trusted minister, would never act recklessly. He must have prepared thoroughly. We should also assess their strength and Liu Xuande's overall power. Consider it a gift for Lord Yuan," Pang Tong, despite being furious with Chen Xi for nearly killing him, cooled down enough to understand the current situation.

Zhou Yu silently raised his gaze, feeling a hint of surprise at Pang Tong's brilliance. Even in anger, Pang Tong could calm himself and think critically, a quality that made him an excellent strategist. Zhou Yu gently patted Pang Tong's shoulder, then exchanged a look with Sun Ce. Sun Ce, though reluctant, didn't press the matter further.

"What is it?" Pang Tong asked, puzzled by Zhou Yu's smile.

"You might surpass me someday," Zhou Yu replied with a smile. "I can see that potential in you."

"Of course, I'll be better than you. I've been learning how to command armies recently. Just wait and see—I'll definitely surpass you," Pang Tong grumbled, envious of Zhou Yu's nearly perfect demeanor.

"Keep at it. I need to brief Bofu on what you told me. This situation with Lord Yuan could go either way, and I'm not sure if it's a blessing or a curse," Zhou Yu said with a smile. "Rest for now. I've figured out how to counter Chen Zichuan's spiritual attacks. His methods are too chaotic."

Pang Tong's eye twitched. The most infuriating thing about Zhou Yu was his constant calm. It was as if nothing could faze him, no matter how dire the situation. Zhou Yu was always confident that his intellect could resolve any problem, and to Pang Tong's chagrin, nothing had ever proven him wrong.

"Come on, Bofu, let's take a walk. I need to explain some things to you. There have been some changes, and the battle at Lujiang has revealed a lot," Zhou Yu said, tidying his clothes as he prepared to leave. He gestured for Sun Ce to follow, muttering to himself as he walked.

Pang Tong, now lying on his bed, couldn't help but ponder Zhou Yu's words, unaware of the smile that briefly crossed Zhou Yu's face.

"Gongjin, what do you need to tell me?" Sun Ce asked as he followed Zhou Yu out of the hall.

"We need to return to Shouchun. Lord Yuan's son, Yao, is gravely ill," Zhou Yu quietly informed him.

"What? How is that possible? I transferred all of my inner qi, resembling Lu Bu's, into Yao. He almost reached the level of Refining Qi into Steel. Even if he's not invulnerable to all diseases, he shouldn't be critically ill," Sun Ce said in disbelief.

Zhou Yu explained everything in detail, and Sun Ce, enraged, slammed his palm onto a stone platform, shattering it into pieces. "Cao Ren, Du Xi, if anything happens to Yao, I will not forgive you!"

After a long pause, Sun Ce sighed as he looked toward the south. "Forget it. Jiangdong can wait, but I cannot ignore Yao. We will return, no matter what."

Zhou Yu smiled faintly. He knew Sun Ce would make this choice, driven by a sense of brotherly duty.

"Let's settle things with Chen Zichuan on the Yangtze, then return to Shouchun. I believe Yao, being blessed by the heavens, will be fine," Zhou Yu said with a smile. "But Bofu, don't do anything reckless. In times like this, it's better to be cautious than to take unnecessary risks."

Sun Ce looked puzzled, but Zhou Yu did not offer his usual explanations. He simply gazed at Sun Ce until he was dumbstruck, then sighed deeply.

Looking up at the azure sky, Zhou Yu silently reflected that for him, Huang Zhong, Kuai Yue, Kuai Liang, and Cai Mao were merely obstacles to be swept aside.

Zhou Yu shifted his gaze back to Sun Ce. He had never told Sun Ce that Jing Province was ripe for the taking. He had always clouded the current situation. Liu Biao had grown too weak, losing the rich lands of northern Jing and suffering continuous defeats. Liu Biao was no longer the formidable lord who once dominated Jing Province.

Chapter 457: The Wisdom of Lu Kang

"This situation feels odd. It seems like Sun Ce's army isn't concerned with our movements," Gan Ning remarked after several distant encounters with Sun Ce's forces.

"I don't know either. Who knows what Zhou Gongjin is thinking? If he's not targeting us, that's better for us. Or perhaps he simply doesn't want to engage in battle right now," Chen Xi speculated, considering Gan Ning's thoughts.

In truth, Chen Xi suspected that Zhou Yu was avoiding land battles, knowing that they were at a disadvantage and not wanting to waste troops in a fruitless struggle. However, the more Zhou Yu held back, the more concerned Chen Xi became about how much naval power Zhou Yu might muster on the Yangtze River. The Wu Kingdom's greatest strength had always been in water battles, and ever since Zhou Yu's victory over Huang Zu of Jiangxia, their title as the strongest navy in the world had remained unchallenged, even through the fall of their kingdom.

"Let's search for a few more days. If we don't find anything, we'll have to leave," Chen Xi sighed. If Zhou Yu managed to gather his naval forces in full strength on the Yangtze River, retreating would become significantly more difficult. After all, Jiangxia wasn't far from Lujiang.

"We're just going to let them do as they please?" Sun Ce grumbled from the city walls.

"We're searching for the Lu family too. Consider this a brief respite. Besides, Youping's injuries haven't fully healed, and our naval forces haven't yet arrived in full," Zhou Yu responded with a smile. He wasn't overly concerned about finding the Lu family; this was merely a way to bide time until their naval forces were ready.

"Hmph, I'll tolerate them for now," Sun Ce said, glaring at Chen Xi, who was setting up another camp outside Lujiang. It was already the fifth or sixth camp he had established in the area.

"By the way, Bofu, make sure to dismantle those camps periodically. Don't let them fully surround us with their encampments. That could become troublesome," Zhou Yu advised.

With little else to do, Sun Ce eagerly took on the task of tearing down the camps, not giving it much thought.

"Zhou Gongjin, do you have to be so cautious? I haven't even done anything yet, and you're already dismantling my abandoned camps. So boring," Chen Xi sighed. He hadn't placed much hope on those camps, but it was still frustrating to see them torn down.

For the past few days, Pang Tong had been mulling over Zhou Yu's vague and cryptic words. As he observed more closely, he began to see a pattern, but it didn't sit right with him.

"Hey, Gongjin, are you sure you're being reasonable?" Pang Tong asked cautiously as he approached Zhou Yu, his expression filled with doubt. If what he suspected was true, Zhou Yu's actions were far from trustworthy.

"Very reasonable," Zhou Yu replied, not even bothering to turn his head. In Zhou Yu's memory, Pang Tong had a tendency to become erratic every now and then, entering phases where he would say bizarre and contradictory things.

"I think your approach is unreliable. Look at Bofu—he's so loyal. What if you push him down the wrong path?" Pang Tong frowned, questioning Zhou Yu's methods. "The path you're choosing may not be the right one for Bofu."

"No, it's definitely the right path because in the end, the choice will be his own," Zhou Yu turned to Pang Tong and said. "You know I never force Bofu to do anything."

"But by cutting off all other options, you're leaving only one path for him. Once you start persuading him, he'll have no choice but to follow you, even if he doesn't want to," Pang Tong objected, dissatisfied with the idea that Zhou Yu might lead Sun Ce away from his loyal nature.

"Hm?" Zhou Yu looked at Pang Tong in confusion before breaking into a knowing smile. "Shi Yuan, is that really how you see me?"

"You weren't like this before, but you are now," Pang Tong replied nonchalantly.

"You're letting your imagination run wild. Go back and rethink things. Don't let baseless thoughts cloud your judgment," Zhou Yu said, giving Pang Tong's shoulder a light pat. "Remember, I won't harm Bofu, and I won't make him do anything he's uncomfortable with. Bofu will bear his own responsibilities and choose his own path. I'm simply helping him go further than anyone else."

In a village west of the city, Lu Kang and his family were calmly sharing a meal with the villagers, discussing recent harvests. They appeared to be just another family that had lived there for years. Even the villagers hadn't noticed that the Liu family had been replaced by the Lu family.

"Father, I think we should stay a while longer before heading north. Sun Bofu has issued numerous proclamations reassuring the populace, and the villagers here can all vouch that we are the Liu family. They won't find us," Lu Jun said as he casually picked up a piece of fish with his chopsticks.

"Let's wait two more days before heading north. We've received no word from Jiangdong, and honestly, the Zhang, Gu, and Zhu families have been disappointing," Lu Kang replied, shaking his head with a carefree expression.

Several patrols had passed through Liu Family Village, but most only conducted brief searches inside the houses. The Liu family's open and welcoming demeanor had never raised suspicion. After all, the Liu family had lived here for decades, and the entire village could attest to their identity as good, quiet folk.

In reality, this was all part of Lu Kang's carefully laid trap. The Liu Family Village had been established by the Lu family over fifty years ago, with the Liu family as a front. Each member of the Lu family had a double, some even resembling them closely. These doubles lived as fake fathers and sons, or grandparents and grandchildren, across various locations in Lujiang.

There were eight such villages, and the Lu family could seamlessly replace the original inhabitants, continuing their roles without anyone noticing. The deep-rooted identities of the Liu family members as reclusive, kind-hearted landlords allowed them to blend in perfectly, with no one suspecting that the timid old farmer was actually Lu Kang, the resolute former governor of Lujiang.

The reason they stayed in the western part of the city was simple: it was the last place anyone would look. Zhou Yu had indeed ordered several thorough searches but eventually concluded that the Lu family wasn't there. Although the area was still occasionally patrolled, none of the soldiers ever suspected that the humble old landlord offering them food was actually the man they were hunting.

"Lately, it seems that others besides Zhou Yu's forces have been searching for us. Should we try to make contact?" Lu Jun asked his father.

"Send a death warrior to make contact, but don't reveal our current situation. Let's find out who's looking for us. I'm concerned that it might be one of Zhou Yu's tricks. However, if it's the Jiangdong families, then there may still be hope for cooperation in the future. If it's someone under Liu Xuande, it would show that he's sincere," Lu Kang replied after some thought. He still held onto a sliver of hope for the Jiangdong families, given their long history of mutual support.

Chapter 458: The Lu Family's Choice

"Sun, take your uncle to play. I need to discuss some matters with your father," Lu Kang gestured to eleven-year-old Lu Xun. The more mature Lu Xun nodded and led Lu Ji away.

"Jun'er, my injuries have stabilized. As you mentioned, we need to find a new path. If the three major families of Jiangdong don't come for us, we might as well abandon Jiangdong entirely. We can let go of those assets; if we lose them, so be it," Lu Kang said as he watched Lu Xun leave. Compared to his less capable son, he had higher hopes for his grandson.

"We should go to Liu Xuande. I've visited him several times, and I believe Liu Xuande has the capacity to accept all people. He won't hold a grudge for our previous refusals, and Chen Zichuan has already extended an offer. More importantly, though Xingba is somewhat eccentric, we've become close friends. These are all advantages for us," Lu Jun said with a smile, noting that Gan Ning now commanded an army.

"I did misjudge him back then," Lu Kang sighed when Gan Ning's name came up.

Lu Kang initially disliked Gan Ning due to his unruly behavior. As a noble-born who disregarded his status to become a pirate on the Yangtze, and even taking pride in it, Gan Ning's actions deeply offended Lu Kang's traditional values as a staunch, rule-abiding noble.

It wasn't until Gan Ning made a name for himself with a series of major accomplishments in the north that Lu Kang stopped subtly advising Lu Jun to distance himself from Gan Ning. Regardless of his strange personality, Gan Ning's abilities were undeniable. In the world of the nobility, talent grants the privilege of eccentricity, and Gan Ning's talents were impressive enough to allow him considerable leeway with any open-minded lord.

"Xingba may be reckless, but his straightforwardness is reassuring. When he's displeased, it's obvious. Everything is written on his face, with no hidden agendas. Although his bluntness can be awkward at times, his honesty puts me at ease," Lu Jun chuckled. Despite Gan Ning's quirks, dealing with someone so forthright had its advantages—so long as you could handle his occasional eccentricities, it was quite agreeable.

"Let's pledge allegiance to Liu Bei. Our family can't afford to split into branches; with so few descendants, that would be foolish. You, unfilial son, should marry a few more concubines so I won't be so dissatisfied!" Lu Kang mused, reflecting on the dwindling numbers of their family. With only four direct descendants left, and the collateral lines distant and scattered, the responsibility to continue the family line would fall on his second son and grandson. His eldest son was no longer reliable.

Lu Jun looked up at the sky, exasperated. It wasn't as though his father had taken multiple wives either. The Lu family's dwindling numbers were the result of their ancestors' choices generations ago—few wives, and even fewer concubines, with low fertility rates. It was no wonder the family wasn't flourishing.

"Sun is getting older too. It's time to find him a suitable wife," Lu Jun deflected, bringing up his son to divert his father's attention. Whether or not it was appropriate, he could follow the current trend in the Han dynasty, where child marriages were becoming popular. Although this didn't align with the aristocratic custom of marrying at eighteen, they could at least arrange the engagement first, leaving the rest for later.

"Forget about the Zhang, Gu, and Zhu families. If we're abandoning Jiangdong, there's no need for any lingering ties. I'll write a letter to cancel the previous arrangement with the Zhang family," Lu Kang sighed. "We'll find another suitable match."

"If we're aligning with Lord Xuande, then we should seek out a suitable match from among his top ministers," Lu Jun followed the typical aristocratic logic. Throughout history, marriage alliances had always been both the most reliable and the least reliable way to strengthen ties.

"Liu Xuande's top ministers?" Lu Kang nodded. "Indeed, that's a good idea. However, among Liu Xuande's senior ministers, only a few have daughters, and of them, only Jia Wenhe has an unmarried daughter. The others—Guan Yunchang has a son, Chen Zichuan just got married, Liu Ziyang has a son, Mi Zizhong has a son and a daughter, but his daughter is not yet three years old. Lu Zijing and the others are still unmarried themselves..."

In short, it seemed that among Liu Bei's top ministers, only Jia Xu had a daughter of suitable age. But Jia Xu, known for his cautious nature, was unlikely to marry her off.

"Father, we shouldn't limit ourselves to daughters. Many of Lord Xuande's ministers are under thirty, so their sisters might be more age-appropriate for Sun," Lu Jun smiled.

"Yes, yes, you're right." Lu Kang slapped his forehead. "I must be getting old and forgetful. It seems you've already made your choice."

"I recall that one of Liu Xuande's ministers has a sister who is both of suitable age and beauty, perfect for our Sun," Lu Jun said with a smile.

"And who might that be?" Lu Kang asked.

"Mi Zizhong's sister, Mi Zhen, is a true beauty—graceful, courteous, and poised," Lu Jun reminisced about his visit to the Mi family in Mount Tai, where he had met Mi Zhen. Her charm had left a strong impression on him.

That day, Mi Zhen had been in a good mood, and since Lu Jun was her brother's friend, she had treated him exceptionally well. However, had it been someone like Chen Xi, a more familiar face, she might have shown her mischievous side. As the cherished daughter of the Mi family, Mi Zhen had gone from being a wealthy heiress to an elite lady of both commerce and politics. In short, even if Lu Xun married her, he might not be able to afford the upkeep. Lu Jun's suggestion was far from ideal.

"There's actually another possibility, but she might be out of our reach—Cai Bojie's daughter, Cai Yan!" Lu Jun recalled a brief glimpse of Cai Yan. Her melancholy beauty had left him stunned, despite his devotion to his wife. And while Cai Yan wasn't young, she wasn't that old either.

"You dare mention her! Unfilial son!" Lu Kang grabbed his cane, ready to strike his son. It was one thing to suggest the Mi family, but daring to even think about someone like Cai Yan was too much.

"I said she might be out of our reach," Lu Jun chuckled bitterly. Still, Cai Yan's talent and elegance had left an impression. A mother like her would ensure excellent descendants for the Lu family.

"The Cai family has only Cai Yan left, and her engagement to the Wei family is over. Whether she remarries or stays single, it's not something we can influence. The rumors of her bringing misfortune to her husbands are one thing, but if she does remarry, it would be more practical for her to bring in a husband for the Cai family," Lu Kang shook his head.

Lu Jun simply hadn't experienced enough. Cai Yan, despite her past misfortunes, was still a noblewoman. Having suffered once and with her father gone, she had little reason to settle for a lesser match. Bringing in a husband to continue the Cai family line would be a far easier choice.

Chapter 459: News of the Lu Family

Although Lu Jun didn't fully understand what his father was thinking, from his father's expression, he knew that any thoughts of pursuing Cai Yan had been completely dismissed. It seemed that his son, Lu Xun, would not have the fortune to marry such a beauty.

"The Mi family then. When the time comes, you can discuss it with Mi Zizhong," Lu Kang sighed. In his view, the Mi family was the most suitable in all aspects. It wouldn't be seen as social climbing, nor would it diminish their status. More importantly, Mi Zhu was one of Liu Xuande's most low-key ministers.

"That's fine," Lu Jun nodded. "Mi Zizhong is indeed a gentleman."

With that, the father and son said no more about the matter. They sent a trusted servant to gather intelligence, while they themselves settled into the role of a wealthy landowner. Lu Kang lounged lazily on a large stone outside, wearing a straw hat to shield his face from the sun. From time to time, passing villagers would tiptoe quietly by, never suspecting that the dozing old man was actually Lu Kang.

"The time is almost up. If we don't get any news today, we'll have to retreat. Jiangxia County is too close to Lujiang, and with the river current flowing downstream, staying here any longer could force us into a direct confrontation with Sun Bofu's Jiangxia navy," Chen Xi sighed as he spoke to Gan Ning.

"It can't be helped. When I find Lu Jicai, I'm going to give him a good beating. I've been searching so hard, and he still hasn't shown himself," Gan Ning replied with frustration. He wasn't foolish—he knew that the longer they stayed in Lujiang, the greater the risk of ambush, and the more dangerous their situation would become.

Just as Chen Xi and Gan Ning were debating whether to withdraw in stages or make a clean break under the cover of night, Gan Luo appeared outside the tent.

"Yo, Gan Luo, don't tell me you've found them. Your timing is impeccable," Gan Ning immediately asked. Lately, he had scolded Gan Luo so often that the man had been avoiding him. If he dared to show up now, it had to be with good news.

"We've found the Lu family. Wenxiang, bring in the man you captured," Gan Luo said with a smile, not directly answering Gan Ning's question. He then called out to the guards outside.

Soon, a burly man entered the tent, escorting someone who looked like a simple farmer. "Xu Wenxiang greets General Gan and Strategist Chen," the man said.

“General Gan, I’m one of the lord’s personal guards. We’ve met before,” the farmer-looking man said happily when he saw Gan Ning.

Gan Ning raised an eyebrow, thinking for a moment. “Lu Liang? That seems like the right name. How is Lu Jun and the old master? Take me to them. Damn it, I’ve been searching for ages, and now that we’re about to leave, you finally show up.”

The guard felt a bit embarrassed. His name wasn’t Lu Liang, but this wasn’t the time to correct Gan Ning. As long as Gan Ning recognized him, that was what mattered. He hadn’t expected to be discovered, let alone captured by Xu Sheng and brought here. At first, he thought he had fallen into Sun Ce’s hands, but to his surprise, it was Gan Ning’s men who had caught him.

“Release him,” Gan Ning instructed Xu Sheng. “Your name is Xu Wenxiang, right? You captured Zhao Yan last time and helped us take Pengcheng. I didn’t give you much of a reward back then. Now that you’ve found the Lu family, when we return to Mount Tai, you’ll be in charge of a new warship. You’ll be the captain of that ship.”

Gan Ning felt a bit guilty. Every ship in the navy already had a captain, and none of them were underperforming. In his opinion, they were all doing a good job. Since he didn’t have any existing positions to promote Xu Sheng into, the best reward he could offer was command of a new ship, allowing Xu Sheng to lead his men as part of a small fleet. Anything else would be insufficient recognition.

Xu Sheng’s face lit up with joy. Even if it was a small warship, outfitted with a few smaller boats, leading his five hundred men aboard such a vessel would be a mighty sight.

“General Gan, my master is unharmed, aside from the old lord suffering a minor injury from Huang Gai’s intimidation. The rest of us have no injuries and have been hiding in a small village west of Lujiang City these past few days,” the guard, whose real name was Lu Ming, reported.

“Oh, that’s great news! Let’s go pick up the Lu family,” Gan Ning laughed heartily.

“Xingba, start packing up the camp. We’re preparing to retreat. Have Wenxiang and Gan Luo escort the Lu family. We’ll break camp entirely. If we all go, it could cause trouble for the villagers,” Chen Xi said as

he waved his hand, now understanding why they hadn't found the Lu family during their earlier searches in the western villages.

"Oh, Gan Luo, go with Wenxiang and bring the Lu family. Just don't disturb the villagers," Gan Ning ordered, quickly grasping Chen Xi's point. While Sun Ce and Zhou Yu might not care about the villagers, lower-level officials could very well take out their frustrations on them.

From the city walls, Sun Ce and Zhou Yu watched as Liu Bei's army dismantled their camp in the distance. Sun Ce frowned. "Gongjin, why are they moving camp again? They won't fight us head-on, and breaking camp is getting tiresome."

"They're not just moving camp; they're retreating. Chen Zichuan has timed this perfectly. If they delayed any longer, our Jiangxia navy would be in place. As it stands, only the vanguard of our forces has arrived, and Chen Zichuan doesn't want to risk a confrontation," Zhou Yu replied, shaking his head.

Zhou Yu's thinking was logical under normal circumstances, but it didn't apply to Chen Xi. Knowing his intelligence couldn't match these top strategists, Chen Xi preferred to act cautiously, relying on experience or even brute force rather than clever schemes to overcome his opponents.

For a strategist, the most frustrating scenario is when you have the advantage in every aspect—when every plan is flawless, yet you still can't decisively defeat your opponent. Even if you win, it's only a small victory, while the larger strategic picture remains unchanged.

So far, Zhou Yu hadn't experienced this frustration. The most brilliant minds of Jiangdong and Jingxiang, like Pang Tong, had surprised him but never truly pressured him. No strategist had yet made Zhou Yu feel that overwhelming weight.

The proud heart beneath Zhou Yu's refined exterior craved a challenge, a real test. The conflicts in Jiangdong, Jingxiang, and with Yuan Shu had been too easy. Even battles that had seemed stunning to others hadn't stirred his pride.

Chapter 460: A Token of Gratitude

Chen Xi's appearance piqued Zhou Yu's interest. The reason was simple: Chen Xi's abilities had already been proven to many. By now, he no longer needed to demonstrate his competence through achievements or governance. The prosperity of Mount Tai and Liu Bei's repeated victories spoke for themselves.

What intrigued Zhou Yu the most was that Chen Xi was only one year older than him. Zhou Yu was nineteen this year, and Chen Xi was twenty. Both were in their prime, and it was precisely this that made Zhou Yu eager to compete with Chen Xi. In the world today, only by defeating such a renowned strategist could Zhou Yu feel the thrill of victory.

After Chen Xi and Gan Ning led their troops to retreat, it wasn't long before Gan Luo and Xu Sheng brought the four core members of the Lu family, along with Lu Jun's wife, to meet them.

"Old man Lu Kang greets the Marquis of Yingshang," Lu Kang said as soon as he saw Chen Xi and Gan Ning, immediately guessing Chen Xi's identity.

"There's no need for that, Old Master Lu," Chen Xi replied calmly. His current status dictated that he couldn't be as casual as before. "And this young man must be Lu Xun, the third generation of the Lu family?"

"Lu Xun of the Lu family greets the Marquis of Yingshang and Uncle Gan," Lu Xun said respectfully, bowing deeply to Chen Xi and Gan Ning. His solemn and courteous demeanor reminded Chen Xi of Zhuge Liang.

"You're very promising. Once the carriages arrive, we can head out. When we reach Chaohu, I'll introduce you to someone. He's one year older than you, and you two can become friends," Chen Xi said with a smile. Introducing Lu Xun to Zhuge Liang seemed like a great idea—two equally talented individuals could inspire and challenge each other.

"Jicai, you really aren't reliable. I've hurried all this way, and if you had held out for just one more hour, we could have surrounded and defeated Sun Ce. How could you not manage to hold on for just a bit longer? It's such a waste," Gan Ning said as he turned to see Lu Jun, his tone filled with dissatisfaction. "And when the city fell, you should have left a message for me. I've been searching for you for so long. If you hadn't come out today, I would have left."

"My father was injured in the battle for Lujiang City. How could we move hastily in such a condition?" Lu Jun shook his head. "But being able to meet you just as you were about to leave shows that we were meant to cross paths. We're planning to go to Mount Tai. Won't you give us a ride?" Lu Jun, having spent much time with Gan Ning, was no longer as rigid as before.

"I told you long ago to come with me to Mount Tai. No one dares to trouble you there. Now, forget it. It's too late for regrets. As long as everyone is safe, money can always be earned again," Gan Ning said bluntly, causing Lu Jun to roll his eyes in exasperation. He knew Gan Ning's personality well enough to understand that he meant no harm with his straightforward words.

"Enough, let's discuss this later. Help your father and sister-in-law onto the carriage. We'll talk more once we reach my territory," Gan Ning said, glancing at the carriages that Xu Sheng had brought over. Then, remembering the promise he made to Xu Sheng earlier, he shamelessly turned to Lu Jun and said, "This General Xu was the one who captured Lu Liang. Without him, I wouldn't have found you. You should remember to thank him."

Gan Ning then patted Lu Jun on the shoulder with a serious expression. Lu Jun immediately understood the unspoken request. This look, this tone—it was just like the time Gan Ning had come to borrow a ship without enough money, leaving Lu Jun no choice but to extend credit.

"Hahaha, don't worry, Xingba," Lu Jun laughed as he helped his father, brother, and wife onto the carriage. Then, he turned to Xu Sheng and said, "Thank you, General Xu. My family is not in the best situation right now, but once we reach Mount Tai, the Lu family will present you with a grand gift."

"There's no need for that," Xu Sheng quickly replied, waving his hands. Although he didn't know what this grand gift might be, he had no intention of accepting it, especially in front of Chen Xi and Gan Ning. "This was my duty, and besides, General Gan has already promoted me."

To be fair, a Tuen Commander typically led more men than a Ship Captain. However, in the navy, three Tuen Commanders without ships had less power than a single Ship Captain with a vessel. And with Gan Ning promising to give him a ship, complete with smaller boats, Xu Sheng would effectively command a small fleet—much more exciting than being a Tuen Commander.

"Just accept it," Chen Xi and Gan Ning said simultaneously, each placing a hand on Xu Sheng's shoulders. With Lu Kang no longer present, Chen Xi no longer needed to maintain the refined, gentlemanly facade.

"Then, congratulations on your promotion, General Xu. Xingba's promotion is his gift to you, and the Lu family's gift is our way of showing gratitude," Lu Jun said with a smile, deciding it was worth investing in Xu Sheng. It was clear that this young man had caught the attention of both Gan Ning and Chen Xi.

After that, Lu Jun climbed into the carriage, leaving Xu Sheng standing there with a sense of disbelief. The other soldiers looked on with slight envy. Over time, they had come to recognize Xu Sheng's abilities, and while his rapid rise surprised them, none showed any resentment.

"Let's go, Wenxiang. You probably don't know what kind of gift the Lu family is offering, do you?" Chen Xi asked with a smile as the army started to move again. He rode up beside Xu Sheng, who was originally destined to become a famous general for Wu.

"I really have no idea," the young man admitted, somewhat embarrassed. "To be honest, I don't mind receiving gifts, but I don't feel right accepting something that doesn't seem quite proper."

"Oh, so that's how you see it," Chen Xi chuckled, his opinion of Xu Sheng improving slightly. "Actually, the gift that Lu Jicai mentioned is the warship you've always wanted. Xingba may have promised you one, but he can't deliver on that. However, he knows Lu Jicai well and is confident that the Lu family will fulfill the promise. After all, the ships we've been using were built by the Lu family."

"Really?" Xu Sheng asked, somewhat incredulous. "So, does that mean our forces don't have any reserve ships?"

"Do you really think someone like Xingba would keep a reserve ship hidden away? Our current warships were all newly built by the Lu family. Just wait. Once the Lu family rebuilds their shipyard in Donglai, the first ship they produce will be yours. We've gone through all this trouble because of the Lu family's shipbuilding expertise," Chen Xi explained with a sigh. He then extended his hand. "Work hard, and you'll become an outstanding naval commander. I believe in you."

"Thank you for your encouragement, Strategist. I will do my best to become an excellent naval commander," Xu Sheng replied earnestly.