

Mythical 461

Chapter 461: Li You's Strategy for Xuzhou

Chen Xi didn't say much more. The Lu family's gift was essentially designing a warship for Xu Sheng. Of course, if Xu Sheng hadn't been there, the first warship would have naturally gone to Gan Ning. After all, once the shipyard in Donglai was established, Liu Bei's policies would favor such projects.

The first ship was intended as a trial, with Liu Bei's side providing the materials. It served not only as practice for the Lu family but also as a gesture of goodwill. After all, in this era, the core technology of shipbuilding was monopolized by only a few families, and the key craftsmen were also under their control. The Lu family was indispensable, and the first ship would be a statement to other lords: don't mess with the Lu family.

"Xingba, pick up the pace and head towards Chaohu. We've achieved our goal. Let's return to the Yangtze River, sail downstream, and head back to Mount Tai. We have no reason to continue fighting," Chen Xi instructed Gan Ning.

At the same time, Jiang Qin was leading over five thousand Jiangxia naval troops down the Yangtze River, preparing to meet up with Zhou Yu near Jiujiang and intercept Chen Xi and his group.

"Is that so?" Li You in Xiapi looked at the group of timid family heads standing in the government office and waved them off, indicating that they could leave. The arrogance that the Xuzhou aristocratic families once displayed had completely vanished. Even Chen Deng felt a bit intimidated in front of Li You. His methods were ruthless—so ruthless that no one dared to defy him.

"Yuanlong, is there anything else you need to report?" Li You asked calmly as he placed the military orders from Zhao Yun and Chen Dao on the desk.

Not long ago, Liu Bei's dispatch had reached Xuzhou, ordering Zhao Yun and Chen Dao to head to the border between Xiapi and Jiujiang to gather intelligence on Chen Xi. If the situation turned unfavorable, Zhao Yun was authorized to lead troops into Jiujiang for rescue.

"Reports from Yuzhou indicate that Sun Bofu is bringing the Jiangxia navy into the Yangtze River, heading downstream. By now, they should be nearing the waters of Lujiang," Chen Deng replied, keeping his head down, unable to meet Li You's gaze. The brilliance of Li You's manipulations left Chen Deng both shocked and fearful.

"Oh, is that so? Has there been any new information from Zichuan? Do we need to provide assistance or anything else?" Li You asked calmly. He knew he had been a bit too harsh earlier. The aristocratic families of Xuzhou had nearly been wiped out, and worse, they gained nothing from it, only deepening their mutual grudges.

"Chen Hou's orders are for us to patrol the Xiapi and Jiujiang areas. If anyone dares to invade, we are to capture them immediately," Chen Deng replied, still not daring to look up.

"Yuanlong, do you think I've been too harsh in my actions? That ruthless methods may suppress them but won't win their genuine loyalty?" Li You asked with a smile.

In truth, the strategy that Jushou and Xun You had sent was a trap—a plan that would leave Xuzhou rife with hidden dangers. But after careful consideration, Li You extended their strategy further, making it even harsher.

After all, when Jushou and Xun You saw the results, they would likely attribute it to Li You's eagerness to prove himself, which might raise suspicions from Jia Xu and Guo Jia. However, this would also align with his role as an incompetent ally.

In short, what Li You had done was detrimental to Liu Bei. At least for now, 95% of the Xuzhou aristocratic families harbored resentment towards Liu Bei. With the recent orders, their hatred had reached its peak. Unfortunately, given Liu Bei's overwhelming strength, none of them were willing to be the first to rebel—though they might do so if an opportunity arose in the future.

However, there was a benefit to being ruthless. At least now, no one dared oppose Li You. His reign of bloodshed, harsher than even Tao Qian's final days, left the families powerless. They could only endure in silence.

"Yes!" Chen Deng hesitated for a moment before responding with a heavy heart.

"I've given them chances. How about this? I'll give them one more chance. I'll allow local officials to stay in Xuzhou instead of sending them to Qingzhou, but they must stop meddling in the military," Li You said dismissively.

Chen Deng was baffled. After everything that had happened, why was Li You suddenly showing mercy? Either crush them completely or don't start at all. After all that had been done, did Li You really think a small favor could undo the damage?

Chen Deng couldn't make sense of Li You's actions. Earlier, Li You's ruthless precision had earned Chen Deng's respect. But now, this sudden compassion and self-righteousness made Chen Deng question whether the previous plans had really come from this same man.

"Looks like you don't understand either. Well, go inform all the families. Tell them to behave. I don't want any more grudges. It's better for everyone if we get along," Li You said with a forced smile.

Before Chen Deng could respond, Li You waved him off and retreated into the inner hall, leaving Chen Deng standing in the middle of the room, utterly perplexed.

Li You thought with a smile.

As Li You quietly planned out the current situation, he realized that he too could play the game of "killing with a borrowed knife."

Feeling reassured after surveying the nearby conditions, Li You was confident that once this was done, all internal dissent would be silenced. No one would undermine their efforts again, and the blame wouldn't fall on him.

Without even realizing it, Li You had once again veered towards exploiting the aristocratic families.

Li You picked up a pen and paper, his face filled with scorn, as he quickly scribbled down the current situation to Jushou. Keeping them jumping into traps was the best strategy—after all, unexpected events were constantly unfolding!

Chapter 462: The Way of Kings

Jia Xu, Guo Jia, Liu Ye, Li You, and others were all originally experts in the art of deceit, or what is called the strategic path of trickery. Essentially, this strategy involves using war to sustain war, relying on plunder, abandoning internal development, and directly annexing surrounding areas. The key is to defeat external forces before internal troubles erupt, and then settle down to recuperate.

This path is not unfeasible. For example, the historical Cao Cao, and the Cao Cao of this era, fundamentally followed this strategy. It's not that this path is bad, but it requires extreme speed, and both strategy and tactics must be flawless. The trickery path is fast but lacks a solid foundation. In other words, it's like defying fate—if you're fast enough, nothing will be a problem.

Now, however, Jia Xu, Guo Jia, and the others have been pulled back by Chen Xi to follow the path of kingship, also known as the "high walls, abundant grain, step by step" approach. In this method, one or two defeats won't affect the overall situation. Even a major setback won't lead to total collapse.

The advantage of kingship lies in a solid foundation. The advantage of trickery lies in quick success. But when following the kingship path, one can always use trickery when necessary. However, if one follows the path of trickery, there's no way to transition to kingship unless all threats are subdued.

The further one walks down the path of kingship, the broader it becomes. This is why Li You and the others have focused on maintaining internal unity and rarely provoked external conflicts. Chen Xi has paved the way for kingship; they only need to maintain the situation, and the gap between the other lords and Liu Bei will only widen. In the end, a single general leading troops will be enough to make all adversaries surrender without a fight.

When the gap reaches such a point, strategy and schemes will no longer be necessary. This is the highest realm of a strategist: no matter how much the enemy struggles, one blow will finish them off.

This is why Li You, after careful consideration, still decided to eliminate the unruly families in Xuzhou. He needed to stabilize the situation.

As for how terrified the remaining families might be, Li You didn't care. Although Li You didn't know about Stockholm Syndrome, back when he was in Luoyang cultivating loyal ministers for Dong Zhuo, he had learned a valuable lesson—when the enemy is so strong that they can only bow down, even the smallest favor will make them eternally grateful.

Of course, Li You knew that what he gained wasn't true loyalty, but a mix of fear and respect. However, as long as you remain overwhelmingly strong, you can consider their loyalty to be at its peak.

As for the impression this might leave on the aristocratic families, Li You's actions, taken as a whole, represented Chen Xi's attitude toward the aristocrats: "Don't cause trouble, and you won't get hurt. On my turf, I'm in charge. If you behave, you'll be rewarded; if not, you'll be punished. We won't deliberately target you, but if you step out of line, we won't hesitate to strike back."

Due to the different styles of each local governor, some families have been beaten, some have lost their heads. Justice is subject to human interpretation. The same actions may lead to different outcomes depending on the person in charge, and the tragedy is that sometimes, it's just bad luck.

By now, most major families have understood Chen Xi's overall attitude towards them. The policy is reasonable—just follow the law. As for what happens if they don't, the consequences range from losing everything to just a slap on the wrist, depending on the local governor's judgment.

By the time this ordeal is over, as long as half of the families remain, no one will be able to criticize Li You. Military power in these chaotic times isn't something to be trifled with. Even small families in Xuzhou that dare to challenge Liu Bei's authority will not be tolerated by anyone in Li You's position.

Returning home, Chen Deng greeted his father, Chen Gui, with a bow. "Father."

"Sit, it's just us. No need for formalities," said Chen Gui, who had aged significantly over the past few months. Once robust, he now leaned on a cane. "Are you troubled by Li Wenru's methods, fearing that his blade may turn towards us?"

"The rabbit dies, the fox grieves," Chen Deng replied curtly.

"Sigh, Yuanlong, you still have much to learn. I've been reflecting on things these past few days, and I believe Li Wenru won't stay in Xuzhou for long. Sooner or later, the position of Xuzhou's governor will be yours," Chen Gui said with a sigh, slightly disappointed in his sharp-witted son.

"Li Wenru is too ruthless. After he's done, how many of the Xuzhou families will be left? Aside from those who genuinely keep to themselves and don't seek power, how many will survive this purge? I can't believe the families don't harbor resentment towards him. At first, I thought he had grown soft, but now I realize he's just baiting them," Chen Deng said with fear, realizing this was a plan to annihilate the aristocracy in Xuzhou. Liu Bei placing someone like him here meant there was no intention of accommodating the aristocrats.

"My son, you're unsettled," Chen Gui remarked. "Yuanlong, continue to follow Li Wenru. Just carry out his orders. Sooner or later, the Chen family of Xuzhou will fall to you. My health no longer allows me to lead the family."

"Father, don't say such discouraging things!" Chen Deng exclaimed, surprised by his father's words.

"It's the natural order of things for families to pass leadership to the next generation. I'm fortunate that you can succeed me as head of the family," Chen Gui said with a sigh. Reflecting on his past struggles to become the family head, he realized it had been far more challenging than what Chen Deng was currently facing.

"The Chen family and Liu Bei's Xuzhou will eventually be yours to manage. Don't harbor any ill intentions. Chen Zichuan, Jia Wenhe, and the others are all exceptional talents, while Guan Yunchang, Zhang Yide, and their peers are unmatched warriors. Liu Bei himself is known for his magnanimity. No matter what, the Chen family of Xuzhou must stand behind Liu Bei," Chen Gui advised, considering passing the mantle of leadership to Chen Deng sooner rather than later.

"I've always admired Mi Zizhong. Back then, the Mi family wasn't as prosperous as our Chen family, but now Mi Zizhong's name resonates across the land. His vision was indeed sharp. Yuanlong, you should interact with him more in the future. After all, he's also from Xuzhou, and we have old ties," Chen Gui added, feeling that vision and wisdom were just as crucial as intelligence.

Chen Deng silently listened to his father's advice, unaware that Chen Gui's casual words had given him insight into Li You's strategy. Indeed, Chen Deng was a keen individual.

Chen Deng thought bitterly, realizing that Li You's actions were all part of a plan—the Xuzhou aristocrats were merely his playthings.

Chapter 463: When Young Lu Xun Encounters the Enhanced Version of Zhuge Liang...

Regarding Li You, Chen Deng had nothing more to say. If things were truly as he suspected, then Li You's intelligence and ability were undoubtedly at the pinnacle of the era. Although his methods were ruthless, his capability couldn't be denied. If future developments aligned with Chen Deng's assumptions, then all he could do was look up to Li You with admiration.

Chen Deng couldn't help but ponder Li You's background, much like how others initially questioned Chen Xi's origins when he first displayed his extraordinary talents. After all, no genius simply appears out of nowhere; even late bloomers leave traces in their past. Yet, Li You seemed to have emerged from thin air.

Sighing, Chen Deng reflected that great Confucian scholars of this era often had hidden depths, and those who were recognized as friends by such scholars must possess outstanding virtue and ability. In his view, Li You was precisely such a person.

As he mulled this over, Chen Deng decided to wait a couple of days before acting.

Meanwhile, Gan Ning and his group had already departed from Lake Chao. During the time when Gan Ning and Chen Xi were encircling Lujiang, Taishi Ci, apart from eliminating the already scarce lake pirates, had little else to do. Zhuge Liang, on the other hand, secluded himself in deep thought, analyzing the current situation. With Chen Xi's reminder, Zhuge Liang quickly realized from the map that they would inevitably encounter trouble—Lujiang and Jiangxia were practically next door!

Sun Ce's strongest force was, of course, the Jiangxia navy. And with Jiangxia so close to Lujiang, it would be easy for Sun Ce to summon reinforcements. Traveling downstream ensured both speed and fighting strength.

This realization led Zhuge Liang to conclude that if they weren't fast enough, they would likely face the full force of the Jiangxia navy. Even if they were swift, a battle with the vanguard of the Jiangxia navy on the Yangtze River was inevitable. In short, once they left Lake Chao, a clash on the Yangtze was unavoidable.

However, Zhuge Liang hadn't considered the true scale of the Jiangxia navy. In his view, even if Sun Ce's forces were stronger than Gan Ning's navy, the difference couldn't be too significant. After all, Liu Bei had granted Gan Ning considerable autonomy over the navy, something Yuan Shu would never do for Sun Ce. That was the crucial difference.

Unfortunately, Zhuge Liang hadn't anticipated that Zhou Yu would be so audacious—simultaneously suppressing river pirates on the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze and reporting to his superiors that due to Huang Zu's death, many of Jingzhou's naval forces had turned to piracy, necessitating increased defenses to counter these bandits. Given the vastness of the Yangtze, figures like Li Feng were inclined to believe Zhou Yu's claims, allowing him to legitimize his actions on both sides of the law.

Over time, Zhou Yu not only suppressed these pirates but also strengthened his control over the local navy, vigorously managing Jiangxia County and the Yangtze River routes. If needed, he even resorted to river piracy himself. This precarious balance allowed him to barely sustain the entire navy. In other words, Sun Ce's hidden strength far exceeded what Zhuge Liang had realized.

As for Chen Xi, his tendency to analyze history and current events together led him to suspect that Sun Ce's forces might not be weak. However, he never imagined that Zhou Yu could amass such a formidable force. The ability to make something out of nothing to this extent was truly impressive!

Although Chen Xi recognized that Sun Ce had amassed considerable strength, he wasn't worried that Zhou Yu would deploy more than 8,000 troops. The reason was simple: Yuan Shu was still alive, and Sun Ce remained under his command. Zhou Yu, no matter how powerful, couldn't openly flaunt his strength until Sun Ce had officially broken away from Yuan Shu.

Noticing that Zhuge Liang was still deep in thought, Chen Xi asked, "What's on your mind? Feeling the pressure from Lu Boyan? Take some time to talk with him; you two will be spending a lot of time together in the future."

Every time Chen Xi thought about Zhuge Liang and Lu Xun possibly serving in the same court, he couldn't help but smile. After all, in the previous life, Lu Xun had shattered Zhuge Liang's lifelong ambitions. If it hadn't been for the Battle of Yiling, which decimated the second-generation elites of Shu and most of its veterans, Zhuge Liang's Northern Expeditions wouldn't have been so difficult.

"Nothing much. He's decent, but barring any surprises, he won't surpass me," Zhuge Liang replied with a raised eyebrow. He was deeply aware of Lu Xun's talents, recognizing that they were quite similar in many respects. However, as Zhuge Liang pointed out, unless something unexpected happened, Lu Xun wouldn't be able to catch up.

"Hey, this guy is supposed to be your companion. Take good care of him. He's quite proud, so don't hesitate to knock him down a peg," Chen Xi teased, not at all shy about stirring the pot between the two. He wasn't above encouraging a little rivalry between two prodigies; it made for an entertaining spectacle.

"Boring," Zhuge Liang responded calmly. His mindset was exceptionally mature. He wasn't like Fa Zheng, who, after being repeatedly outmaneuvered by Guo Jia, needed to find validation by targeting other geniuses. It's worth noting that Zhuge Liang himself had suffered a few underhanded tricks from Fa Zheng when he first arrived, though he quickly retaliated.

At first, Zhuge Liang found Fa Zheng's antics annoying. But after learning the truth, his gaze towards Fa Zheng softened with a hint of pity, which only agitated Fa Zheng further. Eventually, Fa Zheng relocated to Qi, using his achievements there to prove himself. By the time Fa Zheng returned after the New Year, he would probably be too busy to bother with Zhuge Liang anymore.

"Show some enthusiasm! Don't be so mature. Look at Lu Boyan; despite the upheavals in his life, he hasn't grown as distant as you. Come on, give us a smile," Chen Xi quipped with a playful grin, looking even less mature than Zhuge Liang.

"He's only faced turmoil; I lost my way after reading your books, and then I lost my family too," Zhuge Liang calmly replied, nearly choking Chen Xi with his words.

"Boyan, I've got a military strategy book for you!" Chen Xi, recovering from his shock, leaned back against the boat's railing and shouted towards the cabin.

"No need, the one I'm reading is enough," Lu Xun, crouched at the cabin door, replied without looking up.

It wasn't that Lu Xun didn't want more strategy books from Chen Xi, but after witnessing Zhuge Liang's prowess, he had no desire to provoke him further. It was already overwhelming enough to see someone his own age excelling in astronomy, geography, military tactics, and strategy. Zhuge Liang even recounted a story that concluded with five seemingly contradictory yet equally valid lessons.

Was this meant to make his brain explode? Zhuge Liang was only a year older than him! Lu Xun was beginning to question whether he was truly a genius. Zhuge Liang's distant gaze, exuding a melancholy aura of a lonely master, weighed heavily on Lu Xun.

Chapter 464: Becoming Your Disciple

"Hey, why do I get the feeling that Boyan seems like he's been thoroughly crushed by you?" Chen Xi turned his head and asked Zhuge Liang, who had a calm expression, sensing that Zhuge Liang's demeanor seemed similar to when he pretended to be indifferent to avoid being noticed while daydreaming.

"I was outside the cabin reading 'Strategies of the Universe,' and he came over to take a look. I've gone through this book dozens of times, and I've pretty much grasped its essence. I was just flipping through it when he told me I didn't understand it. So, we talked for a while, and now he's like this." Zhuge Liang replied nonchalantly. He had already given the book to Lu Xun; after all, he knew exactly who had compiled this work, which, despite its lengthy digressions, contained significant insights.

"Oh, let me think about what I wrote in that book," Chen Xi mused, looking up as he tried to recall the content of the book he had authored under the title *Strategies of the Universe*. "That book suits you, but it might not be right for him."

Zhuce Liang frowned slightly. The idea that the author himself couldn't remember what he had written was enough to make him want to punch the person responsible if the book hadn't been genuinely insightful.

"It suits him as well," Zhuge Liang remarked, glancing at Chen Xi. "When we talked, it was clear he had his own ideas about military strategy, even though they were immature and underdeveloped. But still, they were his own insights, which is quite promising!"

Meanwhile, though Lu Xun was intently reading the pirated version of *Strategies of the Universe* that he had managed to obtain from Zhuge Liang, he couldn't help but eavesdrop on Chen Xi and Zhuge Liang's conversation. The more he heard, the more uncomfortable he felt. Of course, he still held a deep respect for Chen Xi, who had written such an impressive book.

"He's suited to learning tactics, while you're suited to mastering strategy. You should learn how to grasp the great trends of the world, how to understand the ebb and flow of victory and defeat, how to contend for power, and how to turn the tides of fate," Chen Xi said, frowning as he continued,

wondering if he might have guided Zhuge Liang onto the wrong path. "That's what the book should have covered, right?"

"Do you not even know what you wrote?" Zhuge Liang asked, exasperated. "How could you dare publish it?"

"I've written so many things—who remembers them all? I just found a suitable title and slapped it on." Chen Xi replied nonchalantly.

Zhuce Liang chuckled and nodded, dropping the formal tone. "Your book does indeed discuss how to grasp the grand trends of the world, how to understand victory and defeat, and how to contend for power and turn the tides of fate. But your habit of digressing means the latter part veers off into discussions on civil governance. Overall, though, it's an excellent book."

"Oh, well then, it's fine. I remember that I didn't let you read anything inappropriate." Chen Xi nodded in satisfaction, confirming that his guidance for Zhuge Liang had been correct.

"Grasping the world's trends, contending for power, and turning the tides of fate—these should be your forte, right?" Zhuge Liang mused. "But you seem to shy away from handling details, or perhaps it's more accurate to say you're too lazy to deal with the minutiae. You often leave things somewhat vague."

"Hahaha," Chen Xi laughed awkwardly. Indeed, he wasn't particularly adept at handling fine details. As for grasping the world's trends, that did seem to be his strong suit. After all, he had been able to catch hold of the overarching trends from the beginning, and now he was barely able to keep the situation moving in the direction he had planned.

"That's why I want to learn from what you're best at," Zhuge Liang said with a smile. "I really like that book, and I believe that what you're best at is what I need to master the most and am most interested in."

As he spoke, Zhuge Liang fixed his gaze on Chen Xi, his eyes filled with anticipation. Zhuge Liang admired Chen Xi's mastery of grand strategy but was dissatisfied with his laid-back attitude. In Zhuge Liang's view, Chen Xi possessed countless tools at his disposal but often refrained from using them simply because it seemed too bothersome.

"I want to learn too!" Lu Xun suddenly jumped in.

"I don't even know how to teach this," Chen Xi said, yawning. This time he wasn't just making excuses—he genuinely had no idea how to teach such things.

"I'll follow you and learn on my own. If there's something I don't understand, I'll ask you. Over time, I'll figure it out," Zhuge Liang replied calmly.

"Boyan, you might not be suited for this. Kongming's mind is meticulous, so strategy suits him better. For you, learning tactics or methods might be more appropriate. You each have your own strengths, and Kongming excels in meticulous thinking," Chen Xi said, turning to Lu Xun. He noticed that despite everything, Lu Kang had still bestowed upon Lu Xun the courtesy name "Boyan." It seemed rather mystical, though Lu Xun's coming-of-age ceremony would have to wait until they reached Taishan.

"I want to learn," Lu Xun insisted, his eyes filled with determination as he looked at Chen Xi.

"You're naturally inclined towards something different," Chen Xi said, frowning. He knew these people's potential paths and didn't want them to end up working twice as hard for half the results.

"I want to learn," Lu Xun repeated after glancing at Zhuge Liang, who remained composed.

"Let him learn," Zhuge Liang interjected calmly.

"He's different from you," Chen Xi replied, irritated. How could these kids be so stubborn? And Zhuge Liang was only making things worse by egging Lu Xun on. Seeing the hopeful look in Lu Xun's eyes, Chen Xi felt a headache coming on. If he outright refused, it might sour their relationship in the future. Stubborn kids were always particularly troublesome.

"Diligence can make up for lack of talent, but not everyone can see the same thing from the same perspective. A fool sees a crane, a wise man sees snow, and a Zen master sees white," Zhuge Liang said meaningfully, casting a glance at Chen Xi.

Although Lu Xun didn't fully grasp Zhuge Liang's words, he glared at him for a moment before fixing his gaze on Chen Xi.

"Alright, you can join too," Chen Xi sighed.

He understood Zhuge Liang's point. The same lesson could yield different outcomes depending on the individual, and Zhuge Liang was suggesting that since Chen Xi had the luxury of time, there was no reason not to teach both of them. After all, if a single story could be interpreted in multiple ways, it would be easy to separate their lessons, ensuring each learned what suited them best.

"Thank you, teacher!" Lu Xun immediately knelt and bowed to Chen Xi three times, making Chen Xi feel awkward as he hurriedly helped him up.

Zhuce Liang glanced at Lu Xun with a sidelong look, then turned his head, hesitated, and finally sighed. "I suddenly realize how much I've gained from you. Maybe I should formally become your disciple too."

"No, no," Chen Xi quickly stopped Zhuge Liang. "Don't mess around. I've already got enough on my plate. I wasn't prepared when Boyan caught me off guard, but if you stir things up too, I'll really be in trouble. Sigh, Boyan, why did you insist on becoming my disciple?"

Chapter 465: Too Many Unbelievable Things

"Because, Master, you're stronger than him," Lu Xun said, pointing at Zhuge Liang.

"..." Chen Xi looked up at the sky speechlessly. That reason was certainly pragmatic, but it did fit Lu Xun's character—he was indeed a realist.

Zhuge Liang also sighed. This kid... Zhuge Liang suddenly felt a bit childish himself.

"That's a good reason," Chen Xi said, patting Lu Xun's shoulder. "Let me first tell you what I know. Astronomy, geography, the art of war, formations, yin-yang, military strategies, rewards and punishments, signals, and encampment..."

Chen Xi listed a whole bunch of things, and Lu Xun's eyes grew brighter with each word. Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang turned his head to look at the sky, already anticipating what Chen Xi would say next. He had experienced this before—Chen Xi would get him all excited, only to deliver a punchline that nearly made Zhuge Liang choke.

"...But I'm not actually good at any of those," Chen Xi finished with a dry laugh.

"..." Lu Xun froze in place, his facial muscles twitching.

"Sigh~" Zhuge Liang sighed from the side. "Those are just trivial matters. It's not that Zichuan doesn't know them; he's just too lazy to teach them. Think about how many military achievements and governance records he has. That's all the proof you need." Zhuge Liang reassured him.

"So, what should I learn from you?" Lu Xun tried to stay calm. He had been shocked by Chen Xi's lack of reliability. In this era, respecting one's teacher was of utmost importance, and teachers needed to maintain their dignity. Clearly, what Chen Xi had just done didn't fit the role of a teacher.

"You should first go ask your father and grandfather if they allow you to take me as your teacher," Chen Xi said, patting Lu Xun on the shoulder. In this era, becoming someone's disciple wasn't something done lightly. The approval of one's elders was required.

"I already agree," Lu Jun said with a smile. "As for the formal disciple ceremony, we won't skip that either once our family is settled."

"In that case, Lu Xun, do you wish to become my disciple?" Chen Xi's usual carefree expression turned serious. After all, in this era, one had to conform to the expectations of the times.

"Disciple Lu Xun greets Master," Lu Xun said as he knelt on the deck and solemnly bowed three times to Chen Xi.

"I'll think about what to teach you later. A lot of what I know is just surface-level, so you'll need to figure things out on your own." Chen Xi muttered to himself, while Zhuge Liang nodded along. Many of the things Chen Xi had were frameworks that required filling in.

"I'll make sure to teach you well. Kongming, help take care of him too," Chen Xi said with a yawn. "Didn't you borrow a lot of books from Cai Zhaoji? You can pass those on to Boyan; they're quite valuable."

The more Chen Xi learned about Cai Zhaoji's father, the more he marveled at Cai Yong's abilities. How he managed to amass so many books still puzzled Chen Xi, but he was certain that with such a collection, producing renowned ministers, generals, or even emperors wouldn't be difficult, as long as they were properly taught...

"Yes, Cai Dajia has been transcribing the books she's read. I've always found it strange—how do you and Cai Dajia know so much? One of you theoretically shouldn't know so much, and the other theoretically shouldn't be able to remember so much," Zhuge Liang said, adding something that had puzzled him for a while.

"That's probably just a matter of talent," Chen Xi replied after thinking for a while. After all, his vast knowledge came from the accumulation of two thousand years, with experience outweighing wisdom. As for Cai Zhaoji, it was indeed inexplicable—she was only nineteen, yet she claimed to have read and memorized all the books in the Eastern Pavilion, making her a walking library.

Zhuge Liang pouted but said nothing. Given Cai Wenji's scholarly prowess, had she been born male, she might have become a great Confucian scholar.

"Boyan, follow Kongming for now. He carries a lot of books with him. Read those first, and if you don't understand something, ask him. He'll explain it to you," Chen Xi said, turning to Lu Xun. He still wasn't used to this new role, but he knew he had to ensure this promising student didn't grow up the wrong way.

"Okay~" Lu Xun looked back and forth between Chen Xi and Zhuge Liang, dragging out the word reluctantly. He was clearly dissatisfied with Chen Xi's arrangement but obediently complied due to his teacher's authority.

"But what if I ask him something he doesn't know?" Lu Xun asked with a cute expression, pretending to be innocent. Having been discouraged by Zhuge Liang earlier, his childlike nature made him reluctant to interact with him.

"As long as your questions aren't too ridiculous, he should be able to answer them. Even if he can't, he'll come up with a solution. Other than experience, Kongming isn't intimidated by anyone now," Chen Xi thought for a moment. As long as Lu Xun didn't ask something absurd like how many stars were in the sky, Zhuge Liang would either answer or provide his own insights.

"Really?" Lu Xun asked with a look of disbelief, glancing skeptically at the calm and collected Zhuge Liang, starting to believe him a little.

"Yes. Follow him for now. If you don't understand something, ask him. He'll guide you without bias and won't just give you the answers. He'll provide hints to help you figure out the solutions yourself," Chen Xi said, turning to Zhuge Liang. His words made Zhuge Liang frown slightly, as this approach was far more challenging than simply giving answers, but he didn't object.

"..." The more Lu Xun listened, the worse he felt. Was the gap between them really that wide? Zhuge Liang wasn't much older than him, yet he was so far ahead. This was beyond belief—it didn't seem scientifically possible.

"No problem," Zhuge Liang said after some thought. To him, this was just another test from Chen Xi.

"Then it's settled. See what he likes," Chen Xi said, giving a few more instructions. He then began to ponder what he could teach Lu Xun. After all, Lu Xun was destined to be famous, and as his teacher, Chen Xi didn't want to embarrass himself. Raising a prodigy meant providing proper nourishment, and there was no way Lu Xun, whom he mentored, could turn out worse than his wild counterparts. After all, the environment in which Lu Xun originally grew up was far from ideal.

"Understood." Zhuge Liang's expression remained unchanged, still exuding that calmness tinged with loneliness, as if teaching Lu Xun was no challenge at all.

Chen Xi had tasked Zhuge Liang with teaching Lu Xun what he was best at and most passionate about, and Zhuge Liang had accepted it without batting an eye. This only made Lu Xun feel even worse—Zhuge Liang had taken on the task with such indifference.

With his head down, Lu Xun silently vowed to test Zhuge Liang in every possible way to see how they measured up.

Chapter 466: The Changing Weather

Chen Xi might overlook Lu Xun's thoughts, but Zhuge Liang, known for his meticulous thinking, certainly wouldn't. Even if Zhuge Liang guessed Lu Xun's intentions, he showed no signs of rejection. To Zhuge Liang, Lu Xun was still too inexperienced. Even in Lu Xun's best area, military strategy, he was no match for Zhuge Liang.

"Boyan, bring The Grand Strategy and follow me. Let's do a test so I can gauge your current level," Zhuge Liang said calmly, walking past Lu Xun with an indifferent tone, leaving him with a solitary figure.

Lu Xun glared at Zhuge Liang's back. That cold, almost aloof demeanor, as if nothing could catch his attention, ignited a fierce determination in Lu Xun's heart. For the first time in his life, Lu Xun encountered someone so utterly infuriating—someone who hadn't done anything wrong, hadn't shown the slightest disrespect, yet still made Lu Xun deeply dislike him.

【Hmph, once I've learned everything from you, I'll give you the same cold shoulder!】 Lu Xun thought angrily as he grabbed the book and followed Zhuge Liang.

"Xingba, Jicai," Chen Xi called out to Gan Ning and Lu Jun curiously.

"I'll leave Xun'er in your capable hands, Chen Hou," Lu Jun said with a smile. "I remember you once wrote in a letter that he's not inferior to Fa Xiaozhi."

Lu Jun wasn't very old, and with his good relationship with Gan Ning, he had become familiar with Chen Xi, so he didn't stand on ceremony.

"Rest assured, Jicai. Since I've said he's not inferior to Fa Xiaozhi, I'll teach him as such," Chen Xi replied with a smile.

"This Zhuge Kongming is no ordinary person," Lu Jun remarked, thinking of the calm and composed Zhuge Liang.

"There is only one Zhuge Liang in this world," Gan Ning said with a grin. "At first, it may not seem like much, but the more time you spend with him, the more you realize that you can't treat him like an ordinary youth. He's incredible, just as Zichuan said—what he lacks is experience, not ability."

"Indeed, the longer you stay with him, the more you realize he's no ordinary youth. If there's anyone in the world who can make no mistakes, he's the first choice," Chen Xi agreed, nodding at Gan Ning's assessment, though he didn't notice the knowing look in Gan Ning's eyes.

Lu Jun was taken aback. He had merely admired Zhuge Liang's composure, but he hadn't expected such high praise from Chen Xi.

"Xingba, any news from the scouts you sent out?" Chen Xi asked, not avoiding the topic in front of Lu Jun.

"We have support from Xuzhou, but it's only for defense. The Jingxiang navy hasn't arrived yet. If we move quickly, we shouldn't encounter them. However, I suggest we engage them in battle. If they haven't caught up by now, escaping won't be necessary anymore," Gan Ning relayed the latest intelligence.

"Did Ziyi go in person?" Chen Xi asked, frowning.

"Yes, he's already connected with Zilong and Shuzi. Zilong wanted to come over, but Ziyi persuaded him to stay," Gan Ning replied with a nod.

"Then let's increase our speed. Head for the Yangtze as fast as possible, then sail downstream. I don't know how Zhou Yu did it, but he's probably already ahead of us, waiting to intercept," Chen Xi sighed. The Yangtze's biggest challenge was its complexity. Although Chen Xi didn't understand how Zhou Yu managed it, he was certain Zhou Yu was already in the Jiujiang waters, lying in wait. The idea that the Jiangxia navy was too far away to catch up was believable, but saying they hadn't appeared at all was impossible.

Gan Ning wasn't a fool. He just hadn't thought it through initially. Once Chen Xi pointed it out, he instantly understood. "So he's trying to be sneaky, huh? I, Gan Xingba, fear no one in naval battles. If it's a fight he wants, it's a fight he'll get!"

"I'll summon some wind to speed up the ships. If their speed is too fast, they must be underprepared. Let's hurry and crush them!" Chen Xi said after some thought, then began manipulating the weather. "By the way, send someone to scout the lower Jiujiang waters to see if a fleet is gathering."

"Got it. I'll send someone right away," Gan Ning said, understanding the urgency. Without further delay, he gave a respectful nod to Lu Jun and then walked to the other side of the ship.

"Wenxiang, lead a team of fifty disguised as boatmen and scout the lower Jiujiang waters. If a fleet is gathering, send someone back while you go to the mouth of the Yangtze and wait for Ganlan's arrival. This battle won't be easy," Gan Ning instructed.

"Understood!" Xu Sheng, though puzzled as to how Ganlan could return so quickly, didn't question it. He simply nodded and acknowledged the order.

Seeing all this, Lu Jun was initially stunned, but as the ship continued to sail swiftly with the wind, he gradually realized the extent of Chen Xi's power. For the first time, he understood how terrifying Chen Xi truly was. This sheer amount of mental strength didn't seem human, and to Chen Xi, it was as effortless as breathing.

In fact, Chen Xi found it quite strange himself. It seemed that any spell purely based on mental energy was trivial to him. Even such an unnatural display was done with ease. What was even stranger was that when Chen Xi carefully assessed his mental strength, it wasn't as vast as he had imagined. It was only about 20% more than Zhuge Liang's...

While having 20% more mental strength than Zhuge Liang was certainly impressive, it didn't match up to the scale of the mental techniques Chen Xi was employing. At best, it should have been a small fraction of what was required!

Fortunately, Chen Xi wasn't the type to overthink things. If he couldn't figure it out, he'd leave it be. After all, it was a good thing—at least for him.

【Forget it. I'll test my limits and see how much mental energy I really have.】 Chen Xi decided, making another move. Slowly, he began to influence the weather—not changing it directly, but gradually affecting it. 【At this rate, by the time we reach Jiujiang, there will be a natural fog. I refuse to believe they can see through that!】

"What's wrong, Gongjin?" Sun Ce asked, puzzled, as he noticed Zhou Yu suddenly looking up at the sky.

"The weather has changed, but something feels off," Pang Tong interjected. "Originally, the day after tomorrow was supposed to be clear, but now it looks like fog is setting in, and it's going to cover a vast area. As they say, 'the weather is unpredictable.'"

"This isn't just unpredictable weather; it's man-made," Zhou Yu said, frowning. "It seems Chen Zichuan has figured out our plan. Did we miss something? That shouldn't be possible. I didn't leave any gaps."

"Who knows? Even if the weather change is Chen Zichuan's doing, it might just be a test," Pang Tong said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Never mind. Let's not dwell on it. Head for Jiujiang quickly," Zhou Yu said, shaking his head, not wanting to argue with Pang Tong over this matter.

Chapter 467: Unconscious Overpowering and Crushing

Lu Xun looked bitterly at Zhuge Liang. The young man before him, only a couple of years older, seemed to have an overwhelming intellectual advantage. Lu Xun had asked every question he could think of, and Zhuge Liang had answered them all. What frustrated Lu Xun even more was that Zhuge Liang's expression remained unchanged, a detached indifference, regardless of what Lu Xun asked.

"Any more questions?" Zhuge Liang calmly set aside the book that Cai Yan had transcribed and looked at Lu Xun, who had been staring at him. It wasn't that Zhuge Liang was multitasking; his thoughts simply weren't on the book. In fact, Lu Xun's questions had also given Zhuge Liang some insights, and he had read the book several times before.

"How do you know everything?" Lu Xun asked through gritted teeth.

"No, quite the opposite. There's much I don't know," Zhuge Liang replied, his gaze deep and calm as he looked at Lu Xun.

"But you can answer everything I ask!" Lu Xun said, exasperated, his childlike frustration overwhelming the maturity he usually maintained.

"That's because your questions are too simple," Zhuge Liang replied bluntly, delivering a crushing blow to Lu Xun. "In mathematics and the study of objects, you seem to have talent, but while I'm not particularly skilled in these areas, you're still far from the mark."

As Zhuge Liang said this, his gaze became distant. The things Chen Xi had taught him—called "Natural Philosophy" or "Physics" and sometimes referred to as "high-level mathematics"—felt like heavenly texts to him. He didn't understand them at all, and he had come to realize that he might not have any talent in this field.

Lu Xun clutched his chest. The mathematics and natural studies his grandfather Lu Kang had taught him had taken him a great deal of effort to surpass both his grandfather and his hired teachers. Yet here he was, crushed by Zhuge Liang.

"In terms of managing accounts, you also show some talent," Zhuge Liang continued his evaluation, following Chen Xi's method of thoroughly assessing newcomers before educating them.

As he thought about accounting, Zhuge Liang couldn't help but recall Liu Ye and Chen Xi, those two prodigies who were true masters of bookkeeping. Liu Ye sometimes even dabbled in falsifying accounts. What was more, when Chen Xi spotted the discrepancies immediately, he'd pass them to Zhuge Liang, making him point out where the errors were. At first, Zhuge Liang couldn't find any issues even after a whole day of studying the books.

But after Chen Xi's persistent corrections, Zhuge Liang eventually managed to identify the problems at a glance. Of course, Zhuge Liang also knew that if Liu Ye were serious about forging accounts, he wouldn't be able to detect it so easily. Fortunately, Chen Xi's end-of-year audits would catch those errors.

"However, you're only decent at it. Your forgery skills are subpar," Zhuge Liang dealt another blow before Lu Xun could recover some confidence. "At the very least, you should make it hard for me to spot. I gave you an account book and asked you to falsify it, but you made it so obvious."

Zhuce Liang's tone was tinged with resignation. When he thought of the people he had encountered—from Lu Su to Fa Zheng—although they didn't often handle accounts, it was difficult for Zhuge Liang to detect any issues when they did. At least, none were as blatantly obvious as Lu Xun's.

Lu Xun's head drooped even lower. Zhuge Liang had immediately spotted the problems and pointed out all the falsifications, leaving Lu Xun stunned. In defiance, Lu Xun had written another account book and asked Zhuge Liang to falsify it, but to this day, Lu Xun still couldn't figure out where the discrepancies were.

"Next is governance. Your military governance is passable, but your civil governance is mediocre. Fa Xiaozhi at least knows how to adapt policies to local conditions, yet you don't even grasp that concept," Zhuge Liang said, looking at Lu Xun with exasperation.

To be honest, Zhuge Liang now felt that Chen Xi had made a big deal out of nothing. Fa Zheng, who often slacked off, wouldn't get up until late in the morning and didn't spend much time on government affairs. Even after being sent to Qi, Fa Zheng knew to first assess the region's specialties, geography, and whether infrastructure like roads or canals needed improvement. Yet Lu Xun stuck rigidly to what he knew.

"Fa Xiaozhi is the Chancellor of Qi and a renowned genius throughout the land..." Lu Xun muttered softly. Despite feeling frustrated by the comparison, he was also pleased. Although he had lost, losing to someone as uniquely talented as Fa Zheng was no disgrace; it was an honor to be compared to him.

"When we reach Taishan, I'll make sure to relay that to Fa Xiaozhi. I'm sure he'll be delighted. Now, let's talk about military governance. Compared to your rigid civil governance, at least your military governance shows some adaptability. I just can't figure out why you can be flexible with military governance but not with civil governance. Aren't these skills supposed to be interconnected?" Zhuge Liang sighed, feeling somewhat exasperated by Lu Xun's rigid thinking.

Lu Xun lowered his head even further. Zhuge Liang's words filled him with a sense of shame.

"As for your military governance, I'll give you a barely passing grade, considering your young age. Although your attempts at flexibility were more like paths to failure, at least you tried. There's room for improvement," Zhuge Liang said with a sigh.

Kneeling before Zhuge Liang, Lu Xun was on the verge of tears. His most skilled area, military strategy, had only earned him a barely passing grade. Although Zhuge Liang had bested him with a single strategy, it was still too disheartening.

"Now, regarding enriching the people—well, I didn't give you a zero because I'm considering your youth and inexperience. When we get back, I'll find a book on enriching the nation for you to study," Zhuge Liang said with a sigh. "Understanding economics is crucial. If you can't learn anything else, at least grasp macroeconomic policies. Otherwise, you'll end up collapsing your entire jurisdiction."

Lu Xun kept his head down, feeling utterly defeated. He didn't even know what to say about this topic since he had no experience with it. The high-level concepts Zhuge Liang mentioned were entirely foreign to him, making him realize how much he still had to learn.

"Next is training soldiers. Alright, you can pass on that since you haven't had any experience. Camp setup? No experience. Marching formations? No experience..." With each topic Zhuge Liang mentioned, Lu Xun's face grew redder with shame as he realized how much he had yet to encounter.

"Codes and intelligence? Maybe you've dabbled in this, but it's too simplistic. Anything that can be cracked at a glance is really not worth discussing," Zhuge Liang said indifferently, causing Lu Xun to feel even more inadequate.

In his frustration, Lu Xun had written a secret code message that read, "Zhuge Liang is an idiot," thinking Zhuge Liang wouldn't understand it. But to Lu Xun's dismay, Zhuge Liang deciphered it at a glance and read it aloud without even changing his expression...

"In summary, you have a lot to learn. Let's start with the basics," Zhuge Liang said, shaking his head at Lu Xun, whose head was now nearly touching the floor. "By the way, if you don't grasp things quickly, I'll request Chen Xi to assign someone else to teach you. So, you'd better work hard and show me why Chen Xi holds you in such high regard."

Chapter 468: Zhou Gongjin, You Are Ruthless!

Zhuce Liang didn't concern himself with what kind of shadow he might be leaving on Lu Xun. After all, he had gone through similar ability tests himself. But compared to this relatively simple test he was conducting for Lu Xun, his own experience had been much more intense—administered by none other than Chen Xi, with Lu Su, Liu Ye, Jia Xu, Li You, Man Chong, and Mi Zhu all involved.

Of course, Guo Jia wasn't present at that time, so Fa Zheng took his place. Every time Zhuge Liang thought back to that test, he felt that after surviving that ordeal, no test could ever intimidate him again. Imagine being tested by such top-tier individuals in the areas where they excel—it's the kind of experience that leaves a lasting impression.

After that test, Zhuge Liang gained a thorough understanding of his strengths and weaknesses, and he also came to know those who tested him better. Because of that, he actually felt quite satisfied with the experience, except for the deep embarrassment he felt over his inability to answer certain questions at the time.

"At least you passed one aspect," Zhuge Liang said calmly. "We won't test the classics and literature; you probably won't have any issues there. Can you manage to remember everything you read?"

"Just barely..." Lu Xun replied softly, feeling his face flush with embarrassment at Zhuge Liang's comment about passing just one aspect. Today, he had been thoroughly humbled.

"Good," Zhuge Liang nodded. "Start by reading. For the things you don't like studying, just make sure you have a general impression of them. Later, I'll help you build a solid foundation. You understand your current situation, right?"

"Yes," Lu Xun replied, dejectedly lowering his head.

"Since you understand, start learning. You'll pick up the necessary skills soon enough," Zhuge Liang said, trying to offer some encouragement as he noticed Lu Xun's low spirits. However, Lu Xun hardly reacted.

Zhuce Liang glanced at Lu Xun but said nothing more. Is he really this affected? When I was tested by that group, I didn't let it get to me like this. Is his mental toughness really so lacking? he thought.

Meanwhile, Chen Xi was unaware that Lu Xun was currently suffering from an intense psychological blow, courtesy of Zhuge Liang. Lu Xun's young heart was being pummeled, and it was likely he wouldn't be eager to challenge Zhuge Liang again anytime soon.

After initiating the weather change, Chen Xi finally felt a slight pause in his vast mental reserves. Although his abilities continued to function afterward, the brief pause allowed him to gauge his total mental capacity. It was no longer a matter of merely being "large"—it was immense.

"Xingba, if we encounter Sun Ce's ships in the Yangtze River, don't hold back. Use whatever strength you have and, most importantly, keep moving. I'm worried that the enemy may try to encircle us," Chen Xi said with a furrowed brow.

Chen Xi's greatest concern now was that Zhou Yu was also timing things perfectly. If they entered the Yangtze and confronted Sun Ce's forces, who had somehow reached the lower river, while Jiangxia's navy attacked from behind, they would be trapped. Even though Chen Xi had great faith in Gan Ning's abilities, he couldn't envision them escaping unscathed from such a situation.

"The Jiangxia navy..." Gan Ning muttered, frowning. "That could indeed be a problem. But their overall strength won't change—they only have so many soldiers. If they spread themselves too thin, we might find an opportunity to annihilate one or two of their forces."

"Hopefully," Chen Xi nodded, feeling that he might be overthinking things. After all, Zhou Yu's forces were limited, and he couldn't afford to act recklessly. "Since we have some time, I'm going to relax. Get me a fishing rod—I'll catch some fish and unwind."

Holding the fishing rod, Chen Xi's thoughts wandered. Ever since he noticed that Zhou Yu's navy wasn't where they should be, he felt that something was off. But even now, he couldn't pinpoint the exact problem.

As he watched the ferrymen's boats near the reeds along the riverbank, Chen Xi felt as though he had overlooked something. His grip on the fishing rod tightened, and his brow furrowed.

"Zichuan, what are you thinking about?" Lu Jun asked as he noticed Chen Xi's deep contemplation during another of his outings.

"..." Chen Xi had been on the verge of grasping a critical realization, but Lu Jun's question scattered his thoughts. Sighing, Chen Xi replied, "How are you holding up, Jicai?"

"With an army protecting us, what could be wrong? In the past, my family's trade routes were always stop-and-go, constantly requiring bribes or negotiations. But now, with the army escorting us, even the most notorious river pirates avoid us. It's truly effective," Lu Jun said with a smug expression. Although the Lu family hadn't encountered any accidents on the river, the constant stops due to safety concerns

had been frustrating. If it weren't for the need to protect their family members, they would have preferred to move swiftly.

"Oh..." Chen Xi nodded, his thoughts racing. Lu Jun's comment had clarified everything for him. He now understood why the Jiangxia navy hadn't appeared upstream and how Zhou Yu had managed it. The Jiangxia navy, apart from its regular forces, likely included conscripted river pirates. Unlike Gan Ning, who incorporated them into his navy, Zhou Yu had allowed these pirates to remain in their own domains, continuing their illicit activities.

If that's the case, the river pirates in the middle and lower Yangtze must have gathered by now. On one hand, Zhou Yu aims to use these pirates to block us, and on the other, he might be trying to eliminate some of the more disobedient pirate leaders by using us. Chen Xi's expression darkened as he realized the implications. Zhou Yu's tactics were bordering on shameless.

Zhou Yu has probably even prepared an official excuse for mobilizing the Jiangxia navy—something like 'the river pirates have gathered in Jiujiang, posing a threat to Shouchun.' If I remember correctly, the Jiangxia navy's primary mission under Yuan Shu was to suppress river pirates. This gives them a legitimate reason to deploy. Zhou Gongjin, you are truly ruthless—raising bandits to serve your own interests! Chen Xi wasn't slow to catch on. Once the pieces fell into place, everything became clear.

In fact, Chen Xi had hesitated to think this way because he wasn't sure about Zhou Yu's character. But now, with a clearer picture, he realized that the forces gathering near Jiujiang and Shouchun could number around 30,000. While he had initially suspected there might be bandits among them, Chen Xi was now certain that these were the secret forces Zhou Yu had prepared for Sun Ce. Even if Sun Ce wasn't fully aware, Zhou Yu certainly knew.

Having 30,000 troops stationed near Shouchun was a significant concern. Even if Chen Xi hadn't fully grasped Zhou Yu's intentions, he couldn't help but suspect what Zhou Yu was plotting. Yuan Shu's only son, Yuan Yao, was reportedly close to death. For a warlord, having an heir was crucial. If Yuan Yao fell and Yuan Shu followed, then those 30,000 troops on the Yangtze would be enough to suppress everyone and secure Sun Ce's rise to power.

Chapter 469: They Have Arrived...

The mere thought of such a scenario sent chills down Chen Xi's spine. If Yu Province were in Yuan Shu's hands, it would be as easy to manipulate as a chess piece, with countless traps laid. If Chen Xi weren't concerned about being attacked by multiple enemies, he would have taken Yu Province for himself long ago—after all, it's a place abundant in both population and grain!

But if that place were to fall into Sun Ce's hands, do you know what kind of situation that would be? At the very least, Chen Xi definitely did not want to face that outcome. Xu Province bordered Yuan Shu's territory, and as long as Chen Deng was there, Chen Xi had little to worry about. However, if Sun Ce took over, Chen Xi estimated he would have to shift one-third of his forces there just to stabilize the situation in Xu Province.

Chen Xi was already starting to feel frantic. Thinking about the chess pieces Zhou Yu had likely planted in Xiangyang and Jiangxia made Chen Xi feel a deep unease. This was madness—Zhou Yu had been planning this all along!

After calming down, Chen Xi finally felt reassured. It seemed that even if Sun Ce did rise to power, he would be unable to break free from his constraints in the short term.

But just as Chen Xi started to feel relieved, Zhuge Liang emerged with a map, revealing calculations that made Chen Xi fully realize the depth of Zhou Yu's schemes. Zhou Yu, are you sure you won't get yourself into trouble by doing this?

Chen Xi could no longer find the right expression to describe his thoughts.

After mentally running through this series of plans, Chen Xi couldn't help but feel immense wariness toward Zhou Yu. This kind of long-term planning combined with such strong execution capabilities had far exceeded Chen Xi's expectations. If he didn't remain vigilant, the success of Zhou Yu's plans was a very real possibility. The only question was who would grow greedy enough to attempt to seize Yuan Shu's position under Zhou Yu's calculated tolerance—the mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind...

"Kongming, when will you finally reach adulthood? Right now, you're still a bit too weak," Chen Xi sighed as he looked at Zhuge Liang beside him. Judging by the current situation, Zhou Yu was already operating at a peak level.

Zhuce Liang looked at Chen Xi, puzzled. Chen Xi then explained the entire situation to him, leaving Zhuge Liang momentarily stunned. Whether it was Chen Xi, who pieced together the entire scenario from mere scraps of evidence, or Zhou Yu, who was carefully planning behind the scenes, both left Zhuge Liang deeply impressed.

“What do you think the chances are that Zhou Yu is actually doing this?” Chen Xi asked with a bitter smile.

“You should be thinking about what you would do if you were in Zhou Yu's position,” Zhuge Liang replied, though he was already certain that Zhou Yu's actions were highly plausible. Moreover, Zhou Yu was likely just letting others plot against Yuan Shu, while Sun Ce would later have the chance to avenge Yuan Shu...

Chen Xi didn't respond immediately. He simply furrowed his brow, remaining silent. Zhuge Liang, seeing Chen Xi tightly gripping his intricate folding fan, spoke up, “Zichuan, do you still remember the grandeur with which you once guided the world? Where is your confidence now? Shouldn't you be facing your enemies with a gaze that looks down on the world?”

“I'm confident that I won't lose to anyone. I just find it all a bit strange. Given Zhou Gongjin's temperament, it's very likely that he would do this, but he has always accommodated Sun Bofu. Even when Sun Bofu makes a mistake, Zhou Gongjin finds a way to turn that mistake into a path to success. He shouldn't be acting like this,” Chen Xi said, furrowing his brow.

Chen Xi couldn't deny that if this plan succeeded, Sun Ce would need only a year to consolidate his forces, merge Jingzhou, and capture Yangzhou. He would be able to redirect his conflicts with the aristocrats of Yu Province and Yangzhou to the noble families of Jingzhou, and by then, Sun Ce's power would be sufficient to execute the strategy of dividing the world in two that Zhou Yu had proposed in history.

If, during the later period of the Han Dynasty, Sun Quan's era couldn't resist and eventually subdue the aristocratic family of Shi Xie in Jiaozhou, then Sun Ce, after taking control of Jingxiang and Yangzhou, would undoubtedly be able to crush Shi Xie's powerful foundation.

Chen Xi couldn't help but think that by inadvertently glimpsing just a fraction of the bigger picture, his focus had now become laser-sharp.

Chen Xi rubbed his temples and slowly opened a few ribs of his wooden fan. His solemn expression caused Zhuge Liang to contemplate the root of the problem as well. As Chen Xi had said, if Zhou Yu had any flaw, it was that he placed Sun Ce too high on a pedestal.

Chen Xi ran his fingers over the fan's ribs, wrapping its tassel around his pinky finger as he carefully reconsidered his thoughts.

"Kongming, let's leave it at that. When the time comes, just reveal everything and force Zhou Yu into action," Chen Xi muttered as he gazed at the river. The mist was already beginning to rise in the sky.

"Are you certain that Zhou Gongjin's value outweighs that of an entire province?" Zhuge Liang asked calmly, observing the red cord wrapped around Chen Xi's pinky finger as he sought clarification. He understood Chen Xi's intention now.

"I don't know, but we're too occupied to deal with it right now. At most, we can seize the three counties we've already prepared in Yu Province when it falls apart. But rather than doing that, we might as well try a different approach," Chen Xi said evenly. "As long as a rift appears between Sun Bofu and Zhou Gongjin, then Zhou Gongjin will never surpass his own limits, and Sun Bofu will find it difficult to make further progress."

"Together, they are a match made in heaven—only when they are united can they be called the Little Conqueror and the Beautiful Zhou Yu. If separated, they are just Sun Bofu and Zhou Gongjin. Though they would still be exceptional, they would no longer command the awe of the world," Chen Xi sighed. "The most important thing is that Lu, Pei, Chen, and Liang counties are always within our reach. We don't need to expose our hand right now."

"A match made in heaven, you say?" Zhuge Liang muttered to himself.

"Yes, only when Zhou Gongjin stands by Sun Bofu's side can he be called a man of celestial bearing. Only when Sun Bofu stands before Zhou Gongjin can he be deemed invincible," Chen Xi mused as he watched the mist rise. "Enough talk. They're probably already waiting for us up ahead."

Chapter 470: Schemes

Zhuce Liang briefly activated his spiritual abilities and then turned to Chen Xi. "There are three Inner Qi practitioners and two top strategists waiting for us dozens of miles ahead." After saying this, Zhuge Liang felt a slight headache. "One of them is a familiar face, though I can't fathom why he is here."

"You have familiar faces? Is it your brother?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow. He had sensed something off with the dispersing fog and guessed that Zhou Yu was waiting for them a few dozen miles away. However, Zhuge Liang's perception was even sharper. "Why would there be three Inner Qi practitioners, though?"

"It's not my brother—it's another familiar face who always gets under my skin." Zhuge Liang's expression darkened. "That guy should be studying at Lumen Academy right now."

"Lumen Academy?" Chen Xi couldn't help but recall Xu Shu, who had boasted confidently in front of Liu Bei. It's been over three years—he wondered how Xu Shu had progressed.

"Achoo!" Xu Shu sneezed loudly in front of Cui Jun, his companion. Despite three years of cultivating himself, Xu Shu couldn't quite shed his streetwise demeanor.

Rubbing his nose furiously, Xu Shu gave Cui Jun an apologetic look. "Zhou Ping, my bad. I didn't mean to, but your reflexes are slow. You should've dodged when you saw me sneeze."

Cui Jun wiped his face impassively, having grown accustomed to Xu Shu's shameless antics. It was precisely this carefree attitude that had helped Cui Jun let go of the guilt over his father's death, which had been caused by his own mistake. "Forget it, let's just drink. I don't feel like arguing with you."

As they spoke, Cui Jun pulled out a white porcelain bottle and poured wine into several cups, handing one to Xu Shu. "Here, drink up. This is new wine from Taishan. It's good, but I only have this much."

"Big families sure have their perks." Xu Shu downed the cup in one gulp. "This stuff is great."

"I'm still the legitimate heir, after all. The Cui family can't get around me. I should probably head back and take over as head of the family. It's a shame that even with the combined strength of several families from Ji Province, we still can't match the Zhen family." Cui Jun and Xu Shu continued drinking without restraint, discussing the situation in their northern homeland.

"Hahaha, well, you were all in the wrong with the Yuan family, so it's no surprise. Under Yuan Shao's indulgence, none of you would want to offend the Zhen family, right?" Xu Shu's eyes gleamed briefly before he laughed.

"The Zhen family has sided with Liu Bei," Cui Jun stated calmly, and sure enough, Xu Shu's hand trembled as he held his cup.

"Don't worry, I haven't told anyone about it. After all, you're slated to be Liu Bei's future commander-in-chief. As for my father, who was the Grand Commandant, his death was due to my actions. I've already come to terms with everything. The Zhen family's true backer is Liu Bei, even though they seem to stand behind the Yuan family," Cui Jun continued calmly. "I'm planning to return to Ji Province and become the head of the Cui family."

"No wonder you brought so much stuff today," Xu Shu said, suddenly understanding. "Leave the goods here, and you can go. Just don't go blabbing about anything."

"Do as you wish. I'll leave after finishing this drink," Cui Jun sighed. "One can't live in the past forever. My father's legacy of glory—I'll rebuild it. Farewell, Yuan Zhi."

After downing his drink, Cui Jun nonchalantly shed his outer robe and walked out the door without any hesitation.

"Master, are we really leaving just like that?" Cui Jun's servant hurried after him.

"I must reclaim my position as head of the Cui family," Cui Jun said, gazing northward with determination. "Only I, Cui Jun, as the head of the Cui family, am the rightful heir!"

In that moment, the aura of dominance emanating from Cui Jun was far from the image of the drunken man he had been for years—it was befitting of a true scion of a thousand-year-old aristocratic family.

"But sir, Cui Ying and the others have been in charge for years. Returning now might not be easy," the servant cautioned, unaware of the cold smile playing at the corners of Cui Jun's lips. Did they really think he didn't know?

Cui Jun climbed into his carriage, recalling a letter from Licheng in the north. He couldn't help but feel a surge of emotion. Though he had always considered himself brilliant, a letter from Guo Jia had pierced

straight to his core, leaving him in awe. The letter contained a plan—not aimed at conquering lands but at something more subtle—that made Cui Jun completely yield.

Reflecting on Guo Jia's words about Yuan Shao's virtues, Cui Jun was filled with admiration. Such a man would have been a formidable lord in any era.

Even figures like Xun Yu and Guo Jia had acknowledged that they had initially underestimated Yuan Shao when they were in Ji Province. Back then, Yuan Shao, who had been living under someone else's roof, lacked the charisma he now possessed. If they had seen him as he was today, they would never have left such a dominant figure. It could only be said that fate had played its hand.

After reading Guo Jia's letter one more time, Cui Jun made up his mind and then burned the letter to ashes, mixing them into his inkstone as he began to grind ink.

Meanwhile, in Licheng, Guo Jia was drinking with Guan Yu when suddenly a flush of red appeared on his face. Without warning, he coughed up a mouthful of blood and collapsed onto the table, shocking Guan Yu so much that he immediately ordered Wei Yan to fetch a doctor. But just as Guan Yu was about to rise, he saw Guo Jia, lying in a pool of his own blood, weakly raising a hand to wave him off, signaling that he was fine. Then, with blood still dripping from his face, Guo Jia slowly lifted his head.

"Go get the doctor! Why are you still drinking?!" Guan Yu shouted, panicking. If Guo Jia died here, it would be a disaster. Guan Yu still didn't understand what had happened. Just moments ago, Guo Jia had been talking about going to the Manhua Brothel to digest his food, and now this!

"General, Doctor Hua's apprentice is here," Wei Yan announced, carrying Li Dangzhi into the room.

"Hurry, hurry! Military Advisor Guo is on the verge of death—Li Dangzhi, save him!" Guan Yu urgently urged as he stepped aside, terrified that Guo Jia might die. Up until now, Guan Yu had no idea what had gone wrong. Just moments ago, Guo Jia had been boasting about his plans, and now this sudden collapse had left him completely at a loss.