

Mythical 481

Chapter 481: Not Perfect

Taishi Ci felt awkward, and Guan Hai felt even more so. Unsure whether to stay or leave, he eventually stomped his foot and jumped onto another ship.~~~

"Who was that guy?" Taishi Ci asked after Guan Hai left.

"If you've figured it out, there's no need to ask," Gan Ning replied, looking in the direction where Guan Hai had gone. "Everyone has their difficulties. Try to understand. You can see he left because he felt embarrassed."

"..." Taishi Ci fell silent, giving Gan Ning a glance before deciding not to speak. At this point, he realized that this unusual figure with an internal energy that could manifest outside his body could only be the supposedly dead chieftain of the pirates.

"We should retreat quickly and without stopping. Once we're out of the Yangtze River, we'll be safe," Gan Ning sighed. "Our navy still needs more training. Even Zhou Gongjin's bandits were this tough to deal with."

Gan Ning had also noticed the gap between himself and Zhou Yu. Even with just bandits under his command, Zhou Yu had managed to suppress him. If it hadn't been for the fog cover and the fact that Zhou Yu's troops were bandits whose military formations couldn't be fully utilized, Gan Ning's forces would have been in an even worse situation. The mere presence of Zhou Yu's legion ability would have rendered Chen Xi's mental assaults almost ineffective.

"Zhou Gongjin knows too many things. Once someone catches him off guard, it's hard for him to quickly switch between his abilities," Chen Xi said, waving at Gan Ning and Taishi Ci as they leaped onto the flagship. He then quickly answered Zhuge Liang's earlier question.

"Indeed, knowing too much can be a disadvantage," Zhuge Liang nodded. He had seen Zhou Yu's performance earlier and recalled what Chen Xi had mentioned about the battle at Lujiang. Zhou Yu clearly had better methods at his disposal, but due to the chaos, he ended up using less optimal ones. It confirmed that there was indeed a problem with switching between abilities.

On the other side, Pang Tong had also realized something. Zhou Yu's calm demeanor might just be a habit, not necessarily a reflection of his true mental state during moments of panic.

Pang Tong had recovered by now and, looking at Zhou Yu's composed expression, couldn't help but let out a smile.

"Why are you staring at me?" Zhou Yu asked, raising an eyebrow, his thoughts elsewhere.

"I just thought of something amusing," Pang Tong replied with a smile as he stood up and walked toward the deck. He had already sensed the unhidden auras of Sun Ce and Ling Cao.

"Let's go meet them together," Zhou Yu said, following Pang Tong to greet Sun Ce and Ling Cao.

Pang Tong couldn't help but admit that it was Zhou Yu's detached and seemingly unconcerned demeanor that gave Sun Ce's forces their unwavering confidence.

"Bo Fu, it looks like you've taken quite a beating! And Kun Tao doesn't seem to be doing much better either," Zhou Yu said, frowning slightly, letting his true emotions show for a rare moment. "How was Taishi Ziyi as an opponent?"

"A formidable rival, but next time, I'll definitely defeat him," Sun Ce replied nonchalantly, pulling off his armor and tossing it aside. "I also need to train more with the bow. I suffered a lot from arrows today."

Sun Ce pointed to the arrow marks on his armor with his foot, two of which had fully penetrated through.

"I was careless. Although he was strong, it shouldn't have turned out this way," Ling Cao said with a wry smile, instinctively touching his neck, which had just healed. Earlier, he had narrowly escaped death.

"Alright, let's retreat. We've learned enough about Gan Xingba's navy. Once the Jiangxia navy arrives, we'll fight together. This time, no one should leave their posts without permission, Bo Fu," Zhou Yu warned, fixing Sun Ce with a stern gaze.

"Fine, I'll remember to use my legion ability. As long as no one provokes me, I won't leave," Sun Ce reluctantly promised, as if Zhou Yu were the one in charge. He then muttered, "Your legion ability alone is enough to cover everyone. Why do you need us?"

"To reinforce the army's momentum and prevent any further mishaps," Zhou Yu replied sharply, his keen hearing catching every word Sun Ce muttered.

"Make sure all the commanders are prepared to arrange their cloud formations. Do you still remember which commanders your legion ability will cover? Shi Yuan, ensure the cloud formations are connected properly. One mistake is enough," Zhou Yu instructed, casting a glance at Pang Tong, who was gazing skyward.

Pang Tong looked at Zhou Yu's serious expression and silently cursed. You really think you've got it all planned out, don't you?

"Got it. I'll be more careful next time," Pang Tong replied with a long drawl. He could guarantee that Zhou Yu wouldn't use his elite Jiangxia navy to fight Gan Ning's forces, even if he was sure of victory. Zhou Yu simply wouldn't do something so unprofitable because it wasn't the right time.

Zhou Yu glanced at Pang Tong but didn't say anything. He knew that such things couldn't be hidden from Pang Tong, and seeing Sun Ce yawning beside them, he resignedly gestured for Sun Ce to change into a set of golden armor before showing off his grandeur again.

"When we get near Jiujiang, disperse the ships and find places to hide. The rest will be handled by the Jiangxia navy. After this, everyone will return to their respective waters. You Ping will deliver supplies, armor, and weapons to you all," Zhou Yu said, arranging for the bandits after Sun Ce, relieved, had gone to change his armor.

"Understood!" The remaining bandit leaders bowed their heads in compliance. None dared act out. The previous troublemakers had already been eliminated by Ling Cao and Lu Fan's orders. Those who survived had either long since submitted or were too timid to rebel against Zhou Yu.

"Stay in your own waters. If you get wiped out, don't blame me. Also, if You Ping's supply ships can't find you, don't expect any supplies," Zhou Yu said coldly.

"Understood!" The bandits bowed their heads even lower.

"Alright, you can take your ships and scatter. Disband and leave," Zhou Yu waved them off.

The bandits, who had barely dared to breathe in Zhou Yu's presence, were relieved when he dismissed them. They quickly departed, rowing their small boats away from Zhou Yu's ship.

"Tsk, tsk, why are they so obedient?" Sun Ce blurted out, having just returned in his golden armor. With Zhou Yu around, Sun Ce often didn't bother thinking much about such matters. If this continued, he feared his muscles might grow into his brain.

"They're in awe of your martial prowess," Zhou Yu replied sarcastically. "Soon, we'll be the rulers of the Yangtze. The officials, the bandits, and the soldiers—all will be under our control."

"I knew it would be like this," Sun Ce said smugly, radiating confidence in his new armor.

Chapter 482: Li Jue's Worries

After the battle of Jiujiang, the Jiangxia Navy, under Zhou Yu's command, trailed behind Gan Ning's navy, maintaining a distant pursuit without engaging. Whenever Gan Ning's fleet stopped, so did the Jiangxia Navy, until they reached the mouth of the Yangtze River, where they reunited with Gan Lan. Only then did the Jiangxia Navy slowly turn around and depart, leaving both Gan Ning and Chen Xi to breathe a sigh of relief.

Every time they saw the enemy navy, with its unified cloud formations and the four legion abilities—one large, three small—both Gan Ning and Chen Xi felt a sense of helplessness. That kind of imposing military presence rendered tricks like cold fog ineffective. Indeed, most mental abilities were more about catching the enemy off guard than anything else.

"Finally, they're gone. I thought they were really going to engage us," Chen Xi exhaled, leaning against the side of the ship.

"The Jiangxia Navy is truly formidable!" Gan Ning remarked with admiration.

"Send orders to Zilong and Shuzi to return to Xuzhou, Xiapi, and continue with the garrison and training. Xuzhou has vast plains, so have Zilong select and train cavalry extensively, especially around the borders of Xuzhou, Yuzhou, and Yangzhou. Also, have Shuzi intensify the training of the Danyang troops and remain vigilant while guarding Xuzhou," Chen Xi commanded, feeling more at ease now that they were safe, and sent messengers to inform Zhao Yun and Chen Dao, who had been lying in ambush along the shore.

"Ships are just one part of the equation, but we in the Lu family will strive to improve them further," Lu Jun said, still shaken by the display of the Jiangxia Navy's military power. The difference between bandits and regular soldiers was immense.

"I'll handle the training of the troops. The psychological pressure from those soldiers was intense. No wonder Zhou Gongjin personally selected them as elite soldiers," Gan Ning said with a hint of envy as he looked back at the Jiangxia Navy disappearing into the horizon.

"The Jiangxia Navy has a long history. After Zhou Gongjin defeated Huang Zu, he absorbed 90% of Huang Zu's navy and then selected the most elite 8,000 soldiers from both the Jiangxia Navy and the thousands of bandits under his command. He trained them rigorously. If they weren't this strong, I'd have to question it," Chen Xi reassured them with a smile.

Huang Zu was a capable commander in naval warfare, but unfortunately, he faced Zhou Yu. Underestimating the young Zhou Yu, Huang Zu repeatedly suffered defeats. Zhou Yu, taking advantage of this, never gave Huang Zu a chance to recover and eventually killed him.

Throughout those battles, the Jiangxia Navy suffered minimal losses, only losing their commander. Most of the navy was absorbed by Zhou Yu, who selected the elites and dismissed the rest to join the ranks of river bandits. This tactic allowed Zhou Yu to control most of the bandit groups along the Yangtze River, leading to the rapid expansion of Sun Ce's forces. Without this, Zhou Yu wouldn't have been able to maintain control over the Yangtze.

"Hmph, let him enjoy his success for a few years. In time, I'll return to the Yangtze and challenge him again!" Gan Ning coldly remarked, his eyes filled with determination. Zhou Yu's military prowess inspired him, and he was determined to rise to that level.

"That's the spirit! Keep it up, Xingba. If you need anything, I'll make sure you get the support you need," Chen Xi encouraged with a smile. "Our navy can't be weaker than theirs, can it?"

While Chen Xi was boosting Gan Ning's morale, Sima Lang had already made his way through Henei to the current capital of the Han Dynasty—Chang'an.

Gazing at the blood-stained city walls, Sima Lang couldn't help but feel bitter. The lower part of the wall, stained with dark red marks, was still somewhat visible. Sima Lang knew well that this was the spot where Minister Wang Yun had leaped to his death—a place that left the hearts of loyal men cold whenever they thought of it.

Sima Lang pondered silently as he entered the city, paid the entrance fee, and presented his credentials to enter Li Jue's residence.

"Sima Lang of Henei greets General Cheqi," Sima Lang greeted with a smile that immediately put Li Jue at ease.

"Please, take a seat, take a seat, Nephew Sima. No need for formalities. How is your esteemed father?" Li Jue asked with a broad smile as he had someone bring a chair. "What brings you to Chang'an, Nephew Sima? We haven't seen each other in years. Back when Prime Minister Dong was still with us... Alas! Nephew, would you be interested in serving as an official? My Cheqi General's residence just happens to be short of a Sima."

Li Jue's words carried a dual meaning.

Back when Dong Zhuo was still alive, there wasn't much connection between the Sima family and Dong Zhuo. In fact, Dong Zhuo initially intended to deal with the Sima family but, after meeting Sima Lang, was reminded of his deceased son and, moved by the encounter, decided not to trouble Sima Fang. Instead, he even extended some care.

"Thank you, General, for your kindness. I am deeply grateful," Sima Lang said, flattering Li Jue. "However, I came to Chang'an this time with another matter that requires your assistance."

"Tell me about it," Li Jue said, delighted by Sima Lang's acceptance.

"My younger brother, Sima Zhongda, is only fifteen years old. He went out to travel and... got lost..." Sima Lang said with some embarrassment, blushing slightly. "I hope the General can help me find him."

"Hahaha, that's a trivial matter. Leave it to me," Li Jue laughed heartily. "Rest assured, you'll have news soon."

"Thank you, General," Sima Lang said, bowing deeply. After sitting down again, he noticed a troubled expression on Li Jue's face. "General, when I entered, I sensed some concern in your expression. If there's anything troubling you, perhaps you could share it with me. I've heard it said that two heads are better than one. If you trust me, we could discuss it together, and perhaps a fresh perspective might help."

Li Jue thought for a moment, agreeing that Sima Lang had a point, and began to explain, "Ah, Nephew, you wouldn't know, but the situation in Sili is dire. After all the recent conflicts, our food supplies are running low. Guo Si, Fan Chou, and Lao Zhang are all asking me for grain, but where can I find any to give them?"

Li Jue went on to detail the situation, and Sima Lang quickly grasped the context. Originally, there had been a surplus of grain hoarded by Dong Zhuo, and the Xiliang soldiers had managed to scrape by through looting. However, the prolonged standoff with Ma Teng had drained much of their resources, and now their supplies were nearly depleted. But reducing the number of Xiliang soldiers was out of the question for Li Jue, leaving him in a dire situation.

"So that's the issue. Perhaps you could negotiate peace with Ma Teng?" Sima Lang suggested cautiously. "Though it may hurt your pride, it's the quickest solution."

"I'm afraid that won't work. Ma Chao and Han Sui are both determined to drag this out until we're dead! It's a matter of who blinks first!" Li Jue replied, his tone full of frustration.

Chapter 483: This Matter is Easy

Sima Lang found himself at a loss for words. Such a simple problem, yet Li Jue couldn't resolve it. It really made him question Li Jue's intelligence. However, given his own position, Sima Lang decided it was best not to voice his thoughts.

"Ah, Berda, don't worry too much," Li Jue said, patting Sima Lang on the shoulder as they sat across from each other. "We may be struggling, but Ma Teng isn't faring any better. So, don't fret."

"General, while I may not have a solution, there is someone here in Chang'an who definitely does," Sima Lang said with a thoughtful smile. He had just remembered someone who could be of great help.

"Oh? There's such a person in Chang'an? I wasn't aware. Tell me more, Berda," Li Jue said with interest. Although the Xiliang soldiers still had some grain left, they were concerned about the future. Li Jue understood the importance of planning ahead, and with people like Zhang Ji asking for supplies, he couldn't help but worry.

"Yingchuan's Zhong Yuanchang is a man of exceptional talent, with countless strategies at his disposal," Sima Lang said with a smile, echoing the high praise given to Zhong Yao by Xun Yu.

"Oh, you mean Zhong Yuanchang?" Li Jue's initial enthusiasm faded quickly. "That guy always looks like he hasn't slept enough. He barely shows up to court and spends his days doing who knows what. He's technically part of our faction from Dong Zhuo's time, but he just coasts through life."

Despite this, Li Jue and his group still respected their old connections from the days of Dong Zhuo. After retaking Chang'an, they took care of anyone who had been part of Dong Zhuo's circle, whether they knew them personally or not. This loyalty was what kept the Xiliang forces together, but Li Jue knew that if this loyalty ever wore thin, the Xiliang cavalry would eventually fall apart.

"General, you mustn't underestimate Zhong Yuanchang. If you truly have no other solutions, why not give him a chance? You may find that his methods are unexpectedly effective," Sima Lang said with a smile.

Sima Lang's calm demeanor reassured Li Jue, and after some thought, he agreed. If nothing else, it was worth trying. Success or failure, it didn't matter at this point.

"Hmm, you have a point. Very well, no time like the present. I'll go see him today, bearing gifts," Li Jue said, quickly reverting to his more uncultured manner. "Someone, prepare the finest paper, ink, jade, and precious stones. And bring the best carriages and beautiful women."

"General, there's no need for all that," Sima Lang interjected quickly. He knew that these things wouldn't impress Zhong Yao. They wouldn't serve any purpose in this case.

"And why not?" Li Jue asked, puzzled by Sima Lang's objection.

"General, Zhong Yuanchang has little interest in wealth or beauty. His true passion is calligraphy, especially that of Cai Bojie. If you bring him something related to that, he'll be more than willing to help, even if it's a difficult task," Sima Lang explained, pointing out Zhong Yao's weakness.

Zhong Yao was a die-hard fan of Cai Yong's calligraphy. He hadn't come to Chang'an for power but for the opportunity to study Cai Yong's works. As someone who had once dug up a friend's grave for a chance at Cai Yong's calligraphy, Zhong Yao would do anything for it.

"Cai Bojie's calligraphy?" Li Jue mused. "When we entered Chang'an, Cai Bojie was already dead, and his daughter was gone too. When I went through his home, I found several of his handwritten books. What if I gave those to Zhong Yuanchang?"

To Li Jue, Cai Yong's handwritten books were worthless—he never read them anyway.

"Hahaha, General, if you have those in your possession, why not take one to Zhong Yuanchang and see what happens?" Sima Lang suggested with a smile.

"Alright, let's go now," Li Jue said, abandoning his initial plan and instead grabbing the books to bring to Zhong Yao.

"Master, Cheqi General is here to see you," Zhong Yao's old servant said, bowing as he approached his master.

"Not now, not now. I'm studying Cai Dajia's calligraphy," Zhong Yao said without even looking up. "Tell him I'm not here."

"Zhong Shangshu, what a grand display of authority! You won't even see me?" Li Jue grumbled. At this point, he was one of the most powerful men in the land—at least within the confines of Sili.

Zhong Yao didn't even bother to raise his head. He simply gave a half-hearted bow in the direction of the voice before resuming his study of Cai Yong's calligraphy. It was clear he didn't care much about Li Jue's presence, nearly driving Li Jue to storm out.

Seeing the situation, Sima Lang quickly stepped in to smooth things over. "Master Zhong, General Li has brought a gift for you. Look, it's a manuscript by Cai Bojie himself. The General knew of your passion for such works and went to great lengths to find it for you..."

Before Sima Lang could finish, the manuscript was already in Zhong Yao's hands. His eyes lit up with fervor as he exclaimed, "A genuine manuscript by Cai Dajia! Wonderful, wonderful! General, please sit—take the seat of honor. Quickly, prepare tea, bring in the musicians, and set up a banquet!"

Despite his newfound enthusiasm, Zhong Yao's gaze remained fixed on the manuscript. He didn't even glance up to acknowledge his guests, leaving Li Jue feeling even more irritated. If not for Sima Lang's intervention, Li Jue would have stormed out in anger.

"Master Zhong, my lord has a pressing matter and would greatly appreciate your advice..." Sima Lang said, placing a hand over the manuscript. Zhong Yao finally looked up, his face darkening as he realized who was before him.

"Ah, it's General Piaoji," Zhong Yao said, finally noticing Li Jue. He quickly offered a formal bow, realizing his mistake.

Li Jue, his face still dark with displeasure, returned the gesture. If not for Sima Lang's insistence, he would have left by now.

Sima Lang quickly recounted the situation, ending with, "Master Zhong, do you have a strategy to resolve this? If you succeed, the General has more of Cai Dajia's manuscripts to offer."

"More?" Zhong Yao gasped. Recently, he had scoured Chang'an for any remaining works by Cai Yong and had come up empty-handed. Now, hearing that there were more, his eyes lit up with an intense fervor that made Li Jue feel uneasy.

"Yes, if you can resolve this matter, all the manuscripts I have will be yours," Li Jue said, irritated by Zhong Yao's intense gaze.

Suddenly, Zhong Yao's mind kicked into high gear. His intelligence surged, his mental abilities activated, and countless strategies flashed through his mind in mere seconds. He looked up, glanced at Sima Lang, and confidently declared, "This matter is simple!"

Chapter 484: Zhong Yao's Strategy

Upon hearing Zhong Yao's words, Li Jue was momentarily stunned. When he finally reacted, he was overjoyed but then quickly became a bit annoyed.

"Minister Zhong, if you have a good plan, speak of it quickly," Li Jue demanded, his face darkening slightly. He couldn't help but think this was too good to be true.

Zhong Yao extended his hand toward Li Jue, and Sima Lang instantly understood what he meant. He quickly returned the scroll to Zhong Yao.

"To the north of Chang'an lies the abandoned Zhengguo Canal, as well as the Six Auxiliary Canals from the reign of Emperor Wu of the Former Han. If we reopen these canals, they can instantly turn barren land into fertile fields, providing enough food to sustain all of Guanzhong and Xiliang, eliminating any future worries about grain shortages," Zhong Yao explained, outlining a plan almost identical to the one Xun Yu had considered before.

"What? Impossible! We don't have enough manpower. It would take tens of thousands of laborers years to complete such a project," Li Jue objected, shaking his head vigorously. This didn't seem like a good plan at all. He knew it was a trap. Li Ru had proposed a similar idea before, but he never had the opportunity to carry it out.

"We may not have enough people, but the Qiang tribes do. The Qiang have plenty of people but little grain. Ma Teng holds great influence among the Qiang. If we entice them with the promise of restoring the Qin Dynasty's old granary, they will surely agree to help," Zhong Yao said with a smile. "It's simple: send someone to Ma Teng with this proposal, and he won't be able to refuse."

Sima Lang silently stared at the ground. Zhong Yao's confident demeanor reminded him of Xun Yu, who used to sit calmly in the imperial court, always in control.

Li Jue was momentarily taken aback, but then it all made sense. The Qiang had followed the Xiliang forces before, seeking food. Now they were allied with Ma Teng for the same reason. If they had access to such a large granary, food wouldn't be an issue!

The Qiang tribes could be controlled by Li Jue just as easily as by Ma Teng. The only reason they had turned to Ma Teng recently was due to the Xiliang army's lack of grain. With food, the Qiang's loyalty would be up for grabs.

"Thank you, Minister Zhong," Li Jue said, overjoyed. He bowed repeatedly. "This is a brilliant plan. There are at least two to three million Qiang people in Xiliang. As long as we solve the grain problem, Ma Teng and Han Sui will be nothing more than minor nuisances."

"Why worry about them? In times of great change, everything can be manipulated. Ma Teng and Han Sui can be lured with official positions, or alliances can be formed to gradually absorb their forces. It's a simple matter. Now, where's the scroll?" Zhong Yao said, abruptly changing the topic and leaving Li Jue momentarily speechless.

However, having served under Li Ru, Li Jue still respected the wisdom of strategists. Although his character had not yet fully deteriorated, his ingrained habit of following intelligent advice remained. Zhong Yao's words gave him a sense of security, as if Li Ru were still alive, and he instinctively followed Zhong Yao's instructions.

"Quickly, fetch all of Minister Cai's calligraphy for Minister Zhong!" Li Jue ordered, pushing Sima Lang aside and gazing at Zhong Yao with admiration. "Minister Zhong, please wait here. When we gathered Cai Yong's belongings, we found many of his works. I'll have them brought to you immediately."

Soon enough, Sima Lang returned with several scrolls. When Zhong Yao saw them, he eagerly rushed forward, practically pushing Li Jue aside in his excitement. His eyes gleamed with joy as he seized the scrolls.

"Minister Zhong, here are all the scrolls we collected. Now, please continue," Sima Lang said with a smile.

"Certainly, certainly. This matter is quite simple. Send someone to explain the situation to Ma Teng and Han Sui clearly. As for the previous imperial edict, just declare it a forgery. You can blame whichever warlord you prefer. Then, spread word throughout Xiliang that we plan to reopen the Zhengguo Canal and restore the Three Qin Granary," Zhong Yao said, casually stuffing the scrolls into his sleeves, not caring that his robe was now lopsided.

"Excellent, excellent," Li Jue said, ecstatic. Everyone in Chang'an knew how important the Zhengguo Canal had been. Reopening it would mean tens of thousands of acres of prime farmland. With that, Li Jue could ensure his Xiliang cavalry would be well-fed, and he could begin to restore the military discipline that had been eroded by hunger.

"With your influence in Xiliang and among the Qiang, you're not any less respected than Ma Teng. If you take an oath and have the emperor issue an edict to oversee the project, you'll solidify your position and erase any past... indiscretions," Zhong Yao said, letting his words trail off. But the meaning was clear to Li Jue. If this plan succeeded, it would serve as a shield, ensuring his legacy as the savior of a province. Even in death, he would be remembered.

"Thank you, Minister Zhong!" Li Jue bowed deeply. "If this succeeds, I will restore discipline to the Xiliang army. But please, Minister Zhong, recommend someone to handle the negotiations. Most of my men are warriors, not scholars. I need someone skilled in diplomacy to carry this out."

"He will do," Zhong Yao said, pointing to Sima Lang. "The Sima family of Henei has the status and talent needed. I can see you hold him in high regard, and I owe him a debt for securing these scrolls. Let him handle it. This way, you won't have to worry about his future prospects either."

Sima Lang kept his head bowed, knowing that Zhong Yao had likely already figured out his true identity, even though he hadn't explicitly revealed it.

"Excellent!" Li Jue laughed. The Xiliang forces had long wanted to connect with the powerful clans, but the Guanzhong aristocrats had always kept their distance. Now, with the opportunity to ally with the Sima family, Li Jue saw a path to bringing more noble families under his influence. He knew that the real power in the land lay with the aristocracy.

"Thank you, General, and Minister Zhong, for your trust. I will do everything in my power to secure this alliance!" Sima Lang said solemnly.

"Good, good, good!" Li Jue laughed heartily. "Berda, don't worry. On your journey, when you pass through Changping Pass, Old Fan and Old Zhang will ensure your safety. And remember, the top warrior of Xiliang will be protecting you as well. You're in good hands."

Li Jue's mention of Zhang Xiu made Sima Lang pause. Zhang Xiu, one of the few warriors who could defeat two other Inner Qi experts at once, commanded great respect. In this era, Inner Qi experts were not only powerful fighters but also wielders of military strategies.

"Thank you, General, for your trust. I will devote all my efforts to achieving this alliance!" Sima Lang said earnestly.

Chapter 485: The Wisdom of the Foolish

Li Jue, after confirming that this plan would indeed solve the grain problem, extinguished all the negative thoughts he had previously harbored towards Fan Chou, Zhang Ji, Guo Si, and the others. That very night, Li Jue invited Guo Si over, hosted a banquet, and during the feast, he openly admitted to the underhanded things he had done before, punishing himself by downing a large jar of wine. He then revealed Zhong Yao's strategy in full.

Back in the day, they had all shared the same hardships, and although Li Jue had been somewhat over the line before, when everything was laid bare, it was clear that it all stemmed from the issue of grain. Now that Li Jue took all the blame upon himself, Guo Si began to feel guilty. After all, it wasn't like he, Zhang Ji, or Fan Chou were without their own selfish thoughts.

"Brother Duo, I, Li Jue, owe you and the others an apology," Li Jue said, his tongue a bit thick from the alcohol, but with a light heart now that his worries were gone, he let everything out.

"Zhi Ran, we brothers know your struggles now. We were wrong too. Drink!" Guo Si, grinning drunkenly, slurred his words. "But we're all brothers who once rebelled together—what's there to fear? If the sky falls, we've got each other. Let's drink away all the past unhappiness!"

"Drink!" Li Jue grinned foolishly, clinked his cup with Guo Si's, and then promptly collapsed under the table, not even getting the wine to his lips.

"Hahaha! Zhi Ran, you're drunk! You're drunk..." Guo Si raised his hand and laughed, spilling wine all over himself.

On the other side, Li Jue, half-conscious, mumbled in response to Guo Si's words, "I'm not drunk." Struggling, he tried to climb back onto the table.

The next day, when Sima Lang was supposed to bid farewell and depart after meeting Li Jue, it was already mid-morning when he finally saw Li Jue and Guo Si emerge together from the main hall.

"This must be Sima Xianzhi, right? Handsome fellow!" Guo Si said, slinging his arm around Li Jue's neck and smiling broadly.

"Sima Lang greets General Guo," Sima Lang said, bowing deeply.

"Zhi Ran, I'm going with you this time. Whether our Xiliang army gets to eat or has to scrape by on thin gruel depends on this mission. No way I'm letting Ma Teng and Han Sui mess things up. If they try anything, I'll just take Han Sui's head! As for Ma Teng, we'll keep him around," Guo Si said, letting go of Li Jue's neck to speak more seriously. His strategic vision might be limited, but his prowess on the battlefield was unmatched.

If it had been before the previous night, Guo Si wouldn't have dared to leave Chang'an, fearing he'd never return. But now that everything had been laid bare among the old brothers, he had complete confidence in Li Jue. This was, after all, the man who had once shielded him from a blade.

"Alright. While you're at it, make sure to explain everything to Old Zhang and Old Fan. If there's any mistake, put the blame on me. No more misunderstandings like before. As for Ma Teng and Han Sui, if they don't comply, get rid of Han Sui. Keep Ma Teng alive," Li Jue agreed after some thought. He still had some foresight, knowing that killing Ma Teng might upset the Qiang tribes in the Fufeng area. While it wasn't a major issue, it was unnecessary trouble.

"Got it. I'll take 12,000 cavalry and give them a good beating. As for Old Zhang and Old Fan, they'll understand once they know what's been going on. You can rest easy now. After all, we've been through thick and thin together, and we've taken blows for each other on the battlefield. It's nothing to worry about," Guo Si said, laughing heartily as he patted Li Jue on the shoulder.

Then, perhaps to ensure that Li Jue had no lingering doubts, Guo Si pulled off his outer robe and tossed it at Sima Lang, pointing at the scars on his chest. "Look at this knife wound, this arrow scar, and this

spear wound. I've taken plenty of hits for you guys. If they say you're not being fair, just strip down and show them your scars—they'll let it go. It's not a big deal!"

Li Jue, looking at Guo Si's carefree grin and the scars all over his body, couldn't help but remember the hard path they'd taken from Xiliang soldiers to where they were now. "Hahaha, you're right. What's the big deal? I've got plenty of scars too!"

With that, Li Jue ripped off his robe and threw it on Sima Lang's head. At that moment, Sima Lang couldn't help but feel frustrated. How had he, a top strategist, ended up being used as a clothes rack?

Pointing at his own scars, Li Jue declared, "Damn right! I've taken plenty of hits for you guys too. Let's grab the supplies and go help Old Fan and Old Zhang sort out the mess. Oh, and I've prepared the rewards for Bo Yuan. Take a look." He snatched the imperial edict from Sima Lang's hands and handed it to Guo Si.

"You scoundrel! Trying to fool me because I can't read!" Guo Si exclaimed, not even bothering to glance at it before handing it back to Li Jue. He then put his robe back on.

"I forgot. Just hand it to Old Zhang when you get there. He'll know what it means," Li Jue laughed, then handed the edict back to Guo Si. To them, the edict was something they could just get another one of if it got lost.

During the journey, Sima Lang had little chance to demonstrate his skills, as Guo Si led his troops directly to Changping Pass. When they arrived, Fan Chou and Zhang Ji were perplexed by Guo Si's arrival.

"Zhang Bo Yuan, hear the decree!" Guo Si smiled as he saw Zhang Ji and Fan Chou. He pulled out the edict, opened it upside down without noticing, and prepared to read it out. When Zhang Xiu stepped forward to receive it, Guo Si laughed and tossed it to him. "Bo Yuan, you know I can't read. This is from Zhi Ran. Take a look, and I'll get the official seals for you later."

After skimming through the edict, Zhang Xiu was overjoyed. The titles of Marquis of Xuanwei and General Who Breaks the Qiang were even more than Zhang Ji had expected, leaving him slightly surprised. He hadn't thought Li Jue would grant such high honors, especially given the recent tensions.

"Enough of that, Old Zhang, Old Fan, I've got something to tell you," Guo Si said as he dismounted, still grinning.

"Let's go inside," Fan Chou and Zhang Ji exchanged glances, feeling slightly uneasy.

Inside the tent, Guo Si threw off his armor and robe, pointing to a scar on his chest and asking Zhang Ji, "Old Zhang, do you remember how I got this scar?"

"During the battle of Jincheng, you blocked a Qiang spear for me," Zhang Ji replied, his voice tinged with nostalgia.

"And this one, Old Fan?" Guo Si pointed to a small wound near his heart.

"At the battle of Beidi, you took an arrow from a Qiang sharpshooter for me. You almost died that day," Fan Chou said, equally nostalgic. Back then, they had all been on the battlefield together, and many of the scars on their bodies were from protecting each other. "If Bo Yuan and Zhi Ran hadn't fought off the Qiang king, we'd all be dead by now." A melancholy laugh followed, as they all remembered how much had changed since those days.

Chapter 486: Time to Show True Strength

Guo Si pointed to the scars on his body, asking Zhang Ji and Fan Chou about them one by one. This brought back memories of their glorious days and made them reflect on how things had soured between the four of them. Once, they were brothers who would take blows for each other on the battlefield. When had things changed?

"We are brothers, brothers who can take blows for each other!" Guo Si extended his hand to the other two. "Maybe in the past, because of various reasons and misunderstandings, we had ill thoughts, but those were just small issues that caused rifts between us. We all know each other's loyalty! We are still brothers!"

"Just say it, Ah Duo," Zhang Ji said, placing his hand on Guo Si's. "I admit I had other thoughts before, but since you're being upfront, I'm willing to trust you. No matter what you say this time, I'll believe you! We are brothers!"

"I feel the same. I trust you," Fan Chou added as he removed his armor. "I believe the comrades I protected with these scars won't stab me in the back. I trust you, I trust Old Zhang, and I trust Old Li too!" Saying this, Fan Chou let out a long sigh of relief, feeling a weight lifted off his shoulders.

"Hahaha, now that's brotherhood!" Guo Si laughed heartily. "Zhi Ran has already figured out how to solve the grain problem. We won't have to worry about food anymore. If we think about it, the rift between us started because of the grain issue, didn't it?"

"Are you serious, Ah Duo?" Zhang Ji looked at Guo Si in disbelief. "Can Zhi Ran really solve this?"

Guo Si laughed so hard that tears nearly came out. "It's true! That's why I'm here. Zhi Ran asked me to tell you that all the mistakes were his. But I didn't want to say that because I know I've made mistakes too, so I couldn't bring myself to say it. I think you wouldn't want to hear it either!"

Fan Chou remained silent, knowing Li Jue well after decades of friendship. He understood that Li Jue, though small-minded, was deeply loyal. For Li Jue to say such a thing meant he was genuinely taking the blame upon himself.

"Old Zhang, stop overthinking it. Our Xiliang army can only dominate the world if we stand united. Even without Advisor Li, we are still the world's most elite force. Even if we are trapped in a desperate situation, the Xiliang army will remain undefeated!" Guo Si laughed wildly and began explaining the entire strategy to them.

"So it's that simple..." Zhang Ji sighed bitterly. If he had seen a way out before, he wouldn't have had his nephew bow to others. Zhang Ji now realized that as long as they had food, they could reassemble the strength of the old Xiliang army. Even if he died, with Li Jue and others supporting him, his nephew Zhang Xiu would be fine.

"Yes, some things are simple, but we just couldn't see them," Fan Chou sighed as well. "Without Advisor Li, we had the strength to dominate but didn't know how to use it. Now we've even caused internal strife. But forget it. The past is behind us. The Xiliang army must remain as united as it once was. Advisor Li left us a letter, telling us to stay united!"

"We'll encircle the Qiang soldiers. If they don't cooperate, we'll kill Han Sui and Ma Teng," Guo Si suggested with a grin. "Old Zhang, let your nephew lead the charge. We'll wipe out these troublemakers."

"Let's not kill Ma Teng. We need the Qiang people to help reopen the Zhengguo Canal and the Liufu Canal. If we kill Ma Teng, we'll have to fight the Qiang people in Fufeng and the Three Adjuncts, which isn't worth it," Zhang Ji, with a slightly broader vision than Li Jue, advised. He understood that while Ma Teng might be a problem, killing him would create more trouble.

"What a hassle!" Guo Si grumbled, clearly displeased.

"Let's follow Zhi Ran's plan. It's a good thing he thought of it quickly. If we had waited another year, even doing this might not have saved us..." Fan Chou shuddered, realizing that had they delayed any longer, even Guo Si's efforts might not have been enough to turn things around.

"Yes, we'll start with diplomacy, but if they don't listen, we'll kill them. Their influence among the Qiang people means nothing compared to food. I don't believe the Qiang won't submit for the sake of grain!" Guo Si was still keen on eliminating Ma Teng, showing his deep-seated animosity towards him for some unknown reason.

The next day, Zhang Xiu accompanied Sima Lang to Ma Teng's camp for negotiations. Zhang Xiu felt confident that no one would dare act against him, especially after his previous exploits had left Ma Teng's army in awe. He also wanted to ensure that if the negotiations fell through and Ma Teng or Han Sui tried anything, he could protect Sima Lang and ensure their safe departure.

"General Zhang, I've heard you single-handedly fought and defeated two internal qi masters," Sima Lang said with a smile as they rode, expressing admiration for Zhang Xiu's legendary feats.

"It's true!" Zhang Xiu replied with a proud smile, his tone slightly arrogant. After all, in the entire realm, only he and Lu Bu had the ability to simultaneously face and defeat two internal qi masters, which filled him with pride.

"With you by my side, I have no worries as we enter enemy territory," Sima Lang said with a smile. "If negotiations fail, I'll rely on you to protect me."

"Leave it to me. With me here, you'll be safe!" Zhang Xiu replied confidently. He wasn't underestimating the Xiliang generals; it was just that Ma Chao and Pang De, despite their natural talent, were still inexperienced. They weren't as strong as the newly advanced Sun Ce, and since they favored a fierce and aggressive fighting style, they were quickly overpowered by Zhang Xiu's speed and skill.

"Thank you, General," Sima Lang said with a smile, then continued chatting with Zhang Xiu about their experiences in Chang'an.

Sima Lang's smile made Zhang Xiu feel even more satisfied with their conversation. Since Sima Lang intended to build rapport with Zhang Xiu, the two got along quickly.

In the short thirty li to Ma Teng's camp, Zhang Xiu, nearly dragging a bewildered Sima Lang along, was already preparing to kneel in the dirt and burn incense to swear an oath of brotherhood.

"Stop right there!" A group of about a hundred Qiang soldiers charged forward and surrounded Sima Lang's party as they approached Ma Teng's camp. The lead guard shouted a warning.

"Go, tell Ma Teng that Zhang Bo Yuan is here to see him!" Zhang Xiu rode to the front, sneering at the guard. The sweat-drenched Qiang soldiers were so terrified that their armor was soaked through.

"Go now!" Zhang Xiu roared, his voice booming. The guards scrambled back to the camp, shouting, "The Spear King is here! The Spear King is here!"

"Hahaha!" Zhang Xiu laughed at their reaction.

"Bo Yuan, your reputation precedes you! Even the guards are this scared of you," Sima Lang said with a smile as he rode forward.

"Hahaha, I gave them a good beating once and took their command banner. Then, I'd beat them up every few days. After a while, they became like this," Zhang Xiu said, clearly pleased with himself.

"Zhang Bo Yuan, prepare to face my spear!" Just as Zhang Xiu was basking in his glory, a loud shout rang out. A young general, clad in golden armor, with a fair complexion, sharp eyes, and a strong physique, charged at him with a spear.

As Li Jue had said, Xiliang's grain stores were running low, but they had enough to last at least six more months. Meanwhile, Ma Teng's Qiang soldiers barely had a month's worth of food left.

With their situation so dire, Ma Teng and Han Sui were forced to consider retreating. However, with the Xiliang forces still holding firm, they feared that a large-scale retreat could turn into a full-scale rout, which could lead to their destruction.

Despite the danger, retreat was inevitable. Ma Teng and Han Sui had decided to pull back, and this decision had reached Ma Chao's ears. Proud and headstrong, Ma Chao couldn't accept the idea of retreating without having achieved anything, especially after suffering repeated defeats.

What angered Ma Chao even more was his inability to defeat Zhang Xiu. Despite his confidence in his natural talent, Ma Chao had failed to best Zhang Xiu, even when he and Pang De fought together.

At first, Ma Chao had attributed his losses to inexperience, but even after mastering his internal qi techniques, he still couldn't defeat Zhang Xiu. This fueled his rage.

Convinced that he could eventually win, Ma Chao was furious when his father decided to retreat. After a heated argument with Ma Teng, Ma Chao stormed out of the camp. While venting his frustration, he stumbled upon a small, curly-haired red horse that was struggling to stand. Feeling pity, Ma Chao helped the horse vomit up a stone, which seemed to revive it.

The curly-haired little red horse stubbornly followed Ma Chao, refusing to leave. Ma Chao, finding the horse comfortable to ride, felt his mood improve slightly and rode the horse back to camp. However, just as he arrived at the camp gates and encountered the current situation, Ma Chao's still lingering anger flared up, and he charged at Zhang Xiu.

"Ding!" As Zhang Xiu saw Ma Chao's attack coming, he swung his spear in an arc toward Ma Chao, producing a loud clash. Zhang Xiu, riding his horse, was forced back five steps, while Ma Chao, on his curly-haired little red horse, slid back three steps.

"Zhang Bo Yuan, prepare to die!" Ma Chao, seeing this, patted his horse's neck, laughing wildly as he charged forward with his spear.

Zhang Xiu frowned, eyeing the curly-haired red horse. He remembered that Ma Chao hadn't been riding this horse before.

"Ding!" Another loud clash echoed, but this time Zhang Xiu only swayed slightly, while Ma Chao felt a powerful force surge through him, numbing his hands.

Without hesitation, Ma Chao unleashed his golden internal energy, and his horse's fiery red internal energy surged as well, blending with Ma Chao's aura. Man and horse became enveloped in a golden-red glow.

"Ma Mengqi, I'm not interested in playing with you today," Zhang Xiu said, wary as he observed the golden-red energy flowing over both Ma Chao and his horse.

"Hmph, today we'll settle this!" Ma Chao ignored Zhang Xiu and spurred his horse, charging straight at him.

Zhang Xiu's expression darkened as he let his internal energy, a blend of red and blue, flow through him, merging into a purple hue. He then charged directly at Ma Chao. When the two met, a series of explosive sounds erupted as Zhang Xiu unleashed his energy, pulling the reins to send his horse flying through the air.

"Ungrateful fool!" Zhang Xiu sneered. He had no qualms about seriously injuring Ma Chao, knowing that any alliance they had would fall apart if Ma Chao died here. In his mind, once Guo Si arrived, their strength would surpass that of the Qiang forces. If necessary, they could simply crush them.

Zhang Xiu's spear spun into a near-perfect circle, while Ma Chao charged toward him, a streak of fire racing toward the purple light in the sky. The two clashed in the air, exchanging nearly a hundred blows in an instant, the explosive sounds in the sky never ceasing.

"Ma Chao, you seek death!" Zhang Xiu roared as a massive explosion sent a burst of purple energy blooming like fireworks, expanding like a chrysanthemum of golden threads before collapsing back in on itself. The continuous, deafening explosions sounded like the very air was being torn apart.

The two warriors separated again, and Zhang Xiu glanced at his horse's neck with a pained expression. His eyes blazed with fury—his horse had been bitten by Ma Chao's little red horse.

"Hahaha! Zhang Xiu, you're nothing special!" Ma Chao laughed as he panted heavily, not hiding his exhaustion, but his eyes sparkled with exhilaration.

Ma Chao had poured all his strength into that last move, yet he emerged unscathed, and so did his horse. Zhang Xiu's horse, on the other hand, was injured. That was enough for Ma Chao, and the long-pent-up frustration in his chest melted away in his laughter. He hadn't felt this good since he first encountered Zhang Xiu.

Zhang Xiu's eyes glinted with cold determination as he stopped wasting words. The purple energy around him retracted into his body, leaving only his spear glowing with purple light. His horse, a gift from his master Tong Yuan, had been with him for over a decade, and had reached the level of a novice internal energy beast. Yet, it had been bitten by Ma Chao's horse. It seemed Zhang Xiu's suspicions were correct.

Zhang Xiu pulled the reins and shot downward like a purple comet, thrusting his spear at Ma Chao. "Die!"

The attack was simple—no fancy moves, just a straightforward thrust. Ma Chao countered with his spear, but the moment the spears met, he felt an unstoppable force crash into him. His right arm, which held the spear, emitted a sharp crack, and before he could react, he was sent flying, his body turning into a golden streak of light.

"Boom!" A thunderous impact echoed as Ma Chao crashed into the ground, creating a deep crater that made Sima Lang's eyes widen in disbelief. Dust and dirt flew everywhere, but before Zhang Xiu could react, the little red horse darted into the cloud of debris like a streak of fire.

"Hmm." Zhang Xiu slowly descended, his horse landing gently on the ground as he stared at the dust cloud. Then he turned his gaze back to see Ma Teng, Han Sui, Pang De, and the eight Xiliang generals approaching with their elite cavalry.

"Zhang Bo Yuan, are you trying to start a battle with us?" Liang Xing shouted angrily when he saw the swirling dust. The eight generals had fully committed to Ma Teng and Han Sui, so they couldn't allow Ma Chao to be harmed.

"Hmph, who are you to challenge me? Someone earlier wanted me dead, but I wonder if he's still alive now," Zhang Xiu sneered.

Despite his words, Zhang Xiu knew that Ma Chao had only broken his right arm and a few ribs. If they had been on solid ground, Ma Chao would have died, but because they fought in the air, the power of Zhang Xiu's ultimate move, the "Seven Points of the Phoenix," was reduced by Ma Chao's evasive maneuvers. When Ma Chao crashed into the ground, his injuries were limited to a few broken bones.

"You!" Liang Xing was furious but hesitated to attack Zhang Xiu, knowing full well how dangerous he was.

"What are you 'you-ing' about? Apart from Ma Mengqi and Pang Lingming, the rest of you aren't even worth one of my hands!" Zhang Xiu taunted with a cold smile.

The eight Xiliang generals, known for their prowess, turned pale at his words. Yet, they dared not challenge him, knowing he spoke the truth.

Meanwhile, Ma Teng, though eager to check on his son, was held back by Pang De. Unlike the others, Pang De had a good grasp of internal energy and was confident in his assessment. Though the earlier clash was intense, the golden streak indicated that Ma Chao's internal energy was still intact. He was probably hurt, but not fatally.

As expected, the dust settled, revealing a battered Ma Chao climbing out of the crater. He leaned heavily on his spear, his right arm hanging limp, dripping blood. Yet, his eyes were not filled with fear of Zhang Xiu. Instead, they gleamed with excitement.

For the first time, Ma Chao truly understood Zhang Xiu's power. That final attack showed him Zhang Xiu's overwhelming strength. But rather than discourage him, it wiped away the last of his doubts. Zhang Xiu, though powerful, had limits. The goal was distant, the path arduous, but it was no longer shrouded in darkness. There was a way forward, and that was all he needed.

"Zhang Bo Yuan, I owe you for today. I, Ma Chao, will repay this debt in the future!" Ma Chao growled through gritted teeth, hauling himself onto his little red horse. He leveled his spear in a salute toward Zhang Xiu.

"Hmph! We'll see about that when the time comes!" Zhang Xiu sneered, turning away from Ma Chao. He then faced Ma Teng, who led his army, surrounded by clouds of energy. "General Ma, is this how you discipline your troops? As an envoy from Xiliang, I was attacked. Is this how you Qiang people treat your guests? No wonder they call you barbarians!"

Ma Teng's face flushed with anger and shame. Zhang Xiu's words struck a deep nerve. The general prided himself on his descent from the famous General Ma Yuan, which allowed him to claim Han heritage despite his Qiang blood. Nothing angered him more than being called a barbarian. Zhang Xiu's remark stung him deeply, and he found himself unable to retort.

"Please wait, General Zhang!" Ma Teng took a deep breath and gestured for his troops to part, making way for Zhang Xiu. "My son, Mengqi, was merely indulging his martial spirit. Please, come in. We have prepared a banquet for you. As an envoy, you are most welcome."

"Very well!" Zhang Xiu glanced at the thinned army formation, showing no fear. He patted his horse and rode in, with Sima Lang following behind, his face full of wry amusement.

Soon, they reached the main tent, where Ma Teng and Han Sui sat at the head of the table, while the eight Xiliang generals watched warily from the side. Zhang Xiu, unfazed, took his seat and said with a smile, "Relax, everyone. As long as no one provokes me, I won't cause any more trouble today. This here is the envoy of our army, Sima Bo Da from the Sima family of Henei. If you have anything to discuss, talk to him. I'm just here to protect him."

Sima Lang could only smile bitterly at Zhang Xiu's words, but he stepped forward, bowing to Ma Teng and Han Sui. "Sima Lang

Chapter 487: Water Can Overturn the Boat...

Chen Xi, who had just set foot on the port of Donglai in Qingzhou, had no idea that such a great upheaval had occurred in Yongzhou during his absence. He also didn't know that Sima Lang, with his extraordinary charisma and unmatched eloquence, had managed to convince Han Sui and Ma Teng to cease hostilities. What's more astonishing was that Ma Teng was even persuaded to enter Chang'an personally to negotiate an alliance with Li Jue and the others.

As a result, under the dual incentives of the "stick" and grain, the Xiliang Qiang people were pacified. The originally planned excavation of the Zheng Guo Canal and Liu Fu Canal officially began. However, while the ideal was grand, the reality was harsh. Although the Qiang people were willing to work on these canals for the sake of their future livelihood, Li Jue lacked the capability to manage such a vast project. Mobilizing a million laborers is no small feat.

It wasn't just Li Jue—realistically, there were only a handful of people in the entire world, aside from Chen Xi and Lu Su, who had actually done this kind of thing and had the confidence to handle it. Mobilizing a million laborers efficiently would require decades of experience, and Sima Lang, despite his exceptional talents, simply wasn't equipped to handle it.

In the end, as Xu Shu had predicted, the task fell to Zhong Yao. With a mindset of not bothering two masters for one task, Li Jue, along with Guo Si, Zhang Ji, Fan Chou, and Ma Teng, took a large number of Cai Yong's scrolls to visit Zhong Yao. The commotion was so large, and the number of people involved was so great, that it nearly resembled an official court meeting.

Zhong Yao accepted the gifts with a sigh, expressing that he would take care of the matter. Internally, however, he was cursing Xu Shu. He knew Xu Shu was paving the way for him, but taking on a project involving a million laborers was no small matter. If it succeeded, he would undoubtedly be the top civil official under Cao Mengde after Xu Shu. But if it failed? He'd be lucky if he wasn't buried alive.

"Berda, why are you here again?" Zhong Yao sighed as he looked at Sima Lang. "Xu Wenruo really had the nerve to give me such a difficult task. With the arrow already on the bowstring, I have no choice but to take it on. Ah, what a Xu Wenruo—always thinking three steps ahead."

"Lord Zhong, the Chamberlain asked me to give you this letter, saying that you'd understand everything once you read it," Sima Lang replied, bowing as he handed over a letter. He then stood quietly with his eyes downcast, waiting.

Since arriving in Sili, Sima Lang had observed the Xiliang army closely. Having over-fulfilled Li Jue's mission, Li Jue trusted him and allowed him access to much of the military affairs. This made Sima Lang lose all confidence in Xu Shu's plan. After all, it's easy to have a strategy, but executing it requires strength—and the Xiliang army was indeed strong.

After a moment, Zhong Yao finished reading the letter. He calmly burned it in an oil lamp and looked at Sima Lang with a serene expression. "Berda, from now on, follow Li Jue's orders. The fruit of Yongzhou will not fall into Xiliang's hands. Xu Wenruo truly plans three steps ahead. Go back and inform the Cavalry General that I will need a large number of civil officials for administration."

"Yes!" Sima Lang's eyes flashed with surprise. Although he didn't know the contents of Xu Shu's letter, Zhong Yao's words indicated that Xu Shu's plan for Yongzhou was already well underway.

After Sima Lang left, Zhong Yao sighed. "Xu Wenruo, you're indeed impressive. These people have all become your chess pieces. I just wonder what role I play in your scheme."

He gazed eastward with another sigh. "But this makes things interesting. There are still people in the world who can challenge you, forcing you to this point. Let's see who can outmaneuver the other in the end."

Chen Xi, just stepping off the boat, was unaware of these developments. Even if he knew, the distance would make it difficult for him to intervene. Moreover, the reopening of the Zheng Guo Canal had become the desire of millions of people in Yong, Liang, and Sili, fueled by the influence of the Xiliang army and Ma Teng. At this point, the canal had to be dug, whether they wanted to or not.

In the late Han period, all the people wanted was a full stomach. Why did the Yellow Turban Rebellion occur? It was all for food. When Li Jue and the others promised that reopening the canal would feed the people, the project became inevitable. To oppose it would be to block the people's path to survival.

The tide of public opinion is unstoppable. Once an issue is raised, it must be resolved. Li Jue may not realize it, but when he decided to reopen the canal, he set in motion an unstoppable force. And now, the one holding their fate in his hands was Zhong Yao...

"Zhuge Liang, Boyan has left. Let's see how Donglai has developed. We may not excel in everything, but when it comes to construction, I'm confident that no one can match us," Chen Xi said with a smile as he patted Zhuge Liang and Lu Xun on the shoulders, surveying the bustling scene around them.

When Chen Xi had left, this place had been nothing but barren land. Now, upon his return, he found that the port was not only complete but already bustling with activity.

Chapter 488: Sun Qian's Fundamental Construction

On one side, Lu Xun remained oblivious, but Zhuge Liang couldn't help but smirk. This was no longer just a matter of being skilled. Over the entire span of the Spring and Autumn period through the Qin and Han dynasties, only a handful of people had dared to undertake such endeavors. Among them, very few had succeeded without causing public outrage. Yet Chen Zichuan had managed it, and he called it mere competence?

Chen Xi didn't pay much attention to Zhuge Liang's expression and led the two of them on a stroll around the port. However, before long, Xun Yan himself appeared in front of Chen Xi.

"Xun Yan, Governor of Donglai County, greets the Marquis of Ying," Xun Yan said with a formal bow. His stern and rigid demeanor left Chen Xi with no choice but to respond in kind, though dealing with such strict and doctrinaire individuals was not his strong suit.

"At ease, Governor. What brings you here?" Chen Xi asked, not believing for a moment that Xun Yan was just wandering around aimlessly.

"My lord has instructed that upon your arrival in Donglai, you should quickly escort the Lu family back to Taishan. Additionally, Guo Fengxiao has sent a letter for you," Xun Yan replied, his expression as stiff as ever, oblivious to the curious onlookers around them.

Chen Xi took the letter without even looking at it and tucked it into his sleeve. "I've received the letter. It's the first time that fellow has written to me. As for returning to Taishan, I'll be heading back soon. Is there anything else, Governor?"

Xun Yan shook his head. "No, everything is prepared. The materials required by each department are ready, and the shipyards for constructing sea vessels have also been established. The funds are in place, awaiting the Lu family's arrival."

After Chen Xi distanced himself from Xun Yan, Lu Xun finally breathed a sigh of relief. "Who was that? Standing next to him scared me half to death. He's so rigid."

"That was Xun Xiuruo. He's incredibly capable but somewhat arrogant. Clearly, he doesn't want to get too involved with Zichuan," Zhuge Liang said nonchalantly. "He's a very capable man, but that's about it."

"Indeed, he's impressive. If not for him, the reconstruction of the Lu family's shipyards wouldn't have been possible this year. But thanks to him, once the workers arrive, construction can begin immediately. If Xun Xiuruo is this capable, I can't help but wonder how extraordinary Xun Wenruo must be," Chen Xi remarked, nodding in approval.

Donglai had been developed well, and Xun Yan's foresight in preparing everything had earned Chen Xi's admiration.

"Xun Wenruo is a key figure under Cao Mengde, always holding down the center," Zhuge Liang mused, gazing up at the sky. Even he had to acknowledge Xun Wenruo's prowess. Though his approach differed from Chen Xi's steady and long-term planning, Xun Wenruo managed to keep things stable despite constantly borrowing from one area to patch up another.

"Yes, he's among the most formidable people of our time," Chen Xi agreed. "But it's a shame that his vision limits his abilities. Kongming, you must strive harder. You're not yet a match for him, but aside from Zijing, you're the most suitable to hold down the center under Lord Xuande."

"Aren't you and Mr. Wenruo qualified for that role?" Zhuge Liang asked, initially pleased but then realizing that Chen Xi himself should be the obvious choice to oversee the central administration.

"I can only provide the framework, and Wenruo is good at filling in the gaps. The only one who can truly manage everything is Zijing," Chen Xi replied with a wry smile.

Li You was capable of overseeing the central administration as well, but his methods didn't align with Liu Bei's principles. Left unchecked, Li You would likely resort to ruthless measures, making him more suited for plugging gaps rather than holding down the fort.

Chen Xi was well aware of his limitations. He might not be able to govern even a county effectively, but when it came to devising far-reaching plans, he could produce strategies that would astonish everyone. The problem was executing those plans...

Zhuge Liang thought back on past events and couldn't help but chuckle. It seemed that the person working the hardest in all of Taishan was truly Lu Su—he had to handle everything.

Lu Xun, meanwhile, kept glancing up at the sky, feeling increasingly dissatisfied with Chen Xi's praise of Zhuge Liang and even more disgruntled that Chen Xi hadn't bothered to evaluate him at all.

"In that case, with Zijong working so diligently, he'll be exhausted in no time," Zhuge Liang chuckled, already envisioning Lu Su's grim fate as Chen Xi completed the plans and then washed his hands of the details.

"Don't worry, we'll all lend a hand. Besides, we're also training you to eventually take over central administration," Chen Xi said with a laugh. "And anyway, the burden is heavy now, but it will lighten over time. By the way, Lord Xuande's education initiative has begun, and Kong Chenggong is already in place. All that's left is to gather virtuous talents."

As they continued to chat and observe their surroundings, Chen Xi, Zhuge Liang, and Lu Xun arrived outside the port. Seeing the wide road, paved with a rough version of cement and wide enough for four horse-drawn carts to travel side by side, Chen Xi patted Zhuge Liang on the shoulder. "Gongyou did a great job, didn't he?"

"More than just great. If I'm not mistaken, this is the lowest grade of road. Above it are the county roads and state roads, wide enough for twelve carts to travel side by side. Gongyou is truly skilled at road construction," Zhuge Liang remarked in amazement. "With improved transportation, prosperity will follow more quickly. The abundant aquatic resources here can be transported more efficiently as well."

"Exactly. But we still need to maintain the roads," Chen Xi added with a smile. "Gongyou has really excelled in this task."

Meanwhile, Lu Xun was stunned. This was the first time he had seen such a smooth road. And to think that Zhuge Liang mentioned roads wide enough for twelve carts! The sheer manpower and resources required boggled his mind.

"Can everyone use these roads?" Lu Xun finally asked after a long pause.

"Of course, they're for everyone. Although there will be some exceptions where the roads are occupied, those will be rare cases," Chen Xi replied with a laugh. His approach involved both warfare and construction, ensuring that every territory conquered received equal treatment. Otherwise, he would have already begun pushing into Jizhou.

Initially, Chen Xi had considered weight limits for the roads, but he soon realized that this was a joke. The carriages and carts of this era couldn't carry more than two tons. Even though his cement roads were of a lower quality compared to modern standards, they were still more than sufficient for the load.

When Chen Xi figured this out, he was frustrated for a long time. In ancient times, overthinking could sometimes be counterproductive. Both high-strength and low-quality cement were considered wonders in this era...

"How will the costs be recovered?" Lu Xun muttered. "If the treasury runs dry, what then?"

"The costs will be recovered quickly. These projects are done at cost, and they also provide relief work. Improved transportation will stimulate the economy, and the investment will pay off within a year at most. Seasonal goods can be delivered quickly, and, most importantly, transport losses will be reduced," Zhuge Liang explained with admiration. "Generally, Zichuan's endeavors are never unprofitable."

Chapter 489: Lu Xun Emerges from Zhuge Liang's Shadow

"Usually, when I mess up, there's no stopping the losses," Chen Xi muttered, causing Zhuge Liang to fume, instantly halting the praise he had intended for Chen Xi.

"What are you laughing at!" Zhuge Liang snapped at Lu Xun, who was giggling to himself. "Have you learned accounting yet?"

"Hmph, you're underestimating me. Not only have I mastered accounting, but I've also learned ciphers, adapting to different situations, and the mathematical methods you taught me. I've even studied the Bagua, Qi Men Dun Jia, and formations," Lu Xun boasted, puffing out his chest proudly.

Although Lu Xun had found it overwhelming at times, he couldn't deny that he was quick to grasp concepts. Zhuge Liang had only taught him the basics, but Lu Xun, driven by the pressure of Zhuge Liang's high standards, had studied diligently. Thanks to his near-equal intellect, he had now mastered everything.

"You've learned it all?" Zhuge Liang asked skeptically, though he didn't show it, maintaining a composed demeanor. "That's good. I won't test you, then. I'll give you some new materials later; study them on your own, and ask me if you have any questions."

Lu Xun, who had been brimming with pride moments before, suddenly felt like a bucket of cold water had been poured over him. He had hoped to see a look of surprise on Zhuge Liang's face, maybe even disbelief, prompting a test of his knowledge. Instead, Zhuge Liang's nonchalant attitude made Lu Xun feel like he was standing before an insurmountable mountain. It dawned on him that the pace at which he had learned was nothing extraordinary to Zhuge Liang. How long did it take Zhuge Liang to learn all this?

"Wow, Bo Yan, you're amazing!" Chen Xi exclaimed, genuinely impressed by Lu Xun's long list of accomplishments.

"It's nothing," Lu Xun muttered, waving off the praise with a deflated expression. Chen Xi's compliment barely registered with him.

"But come to think of it, Kongming didn't seem to study any of these basics when he started," Chen Xi recalled, thinking back to when he first taught Zhuge Liang. He had just handed him a pile of books and told him to figure it out. Much like learning in school, if you don't get it in elementary, you'll understand it later in university.

"I didn't learn the basics. I remember the initial material was too advanced for me to understand, but eventually, I got it. I started with the difficult stuff first," Zhuge Liang said, glancing at Chen Xi. He still felt a bit irritated whenever he thought about the textbooks Chen Xi had given him back then.

"Oh, well, as long as you get the gist of it," Chen Xi said casually, completely oblivious to the impact his words had on Lu Xun, who now felt even more disheartened. It seemed that all his hard work had been for nothing. "Ah, keep at it. Let's get on the carriage and head back to Taishan. Once we reach Fenggao, you'll see what true prosperity looks like. I put a lot of effort into building that city," Chen Xi added, noticing that Xun Yan had already arranged the carriages and guards. He patted the dejected Lu Xun on the shoulder.

"Sure, I'll keep that in mind, Master," Lu Xun replied weakly. After a moment, as Chen Xi boarded the carriage, he asked hesitantly, "Master, how can I surpass that guy?"

"You want to surpass him? You two aren't the same type. How can you surpass him? If you use your weaknesses to compete with his strengths, you'll never win. But if you play to your own strengths, you might not overshadow him, but you can at least stand on equal footing," Chen Xi said, patting Lu Xun. "Don't put too much pressure on yourself. He's not a normal person. Don't compete with him in areas you're not good at."

"Oh," Lu Xun nodded, feeling somewhat disappointed but also relieved. "Master, do you have any quick ways I can at least give him a run for his money? That guy is so annoying," Lu Xun whispered to Chen Xi, glancing at Zhuge Liang, who had already climbed into the carriage.

"Let me think..." Chen Xi chuckled. Lu Xun was somewhat proud, while Zhuge Liang had a more aloof personality. Since Zhuge Liang currently outclassed Lu Xun in every way, it was understandable that Lu Xun felt frustrated. The fact that Lu Xun confided in Chen Xi showed that he truly regarded him as a master.

"Oh, when we get to Taishan, I'll introduce you to someone who can teach you for a while. You might not be able to surpass Kongming, but you'll at least have a few chances to get the better of him. How about that?" Chen Xi suggested, after some thought. After all, he couldn't afford to let his apprentice be overshadowed.

"There's such a person? Thank you, Master!" Lu Xun's face lit up with joy.

"Yes, you can also learn military strategy from him. In that area, he might even be better than Kongming. At least in terms of cunning schemes and tricks, he excels," Chen Xi reassured him. It seemed that Fazheng's personality had become more lively after being repeatedly outwitted by Guo Jia, making him more flexible and creative.

"That's great! I love military strategy!" Lu Xun exclaimed, his mood brightening instantly. "Who is he?"

"Zichuan, you're planning to have him study under Fazheng?" Zhuge Liang suddenly poked his head out of the carriage, causing Lu Xun to retreat in surprise.

"Oh, Bo Yan seems a bit wary of you," Chen Xi remarked, nodding at Zhuge Liang. "Fazheng's personality is more compatible with his. Plus, Fazheng won't be staying in Beihai for long, so it'll be good to give him something to do."

"Alright," Zhuge Liang agreed, retreating into the carriage. As he did, he glanced at Lu Xun, who suddenly felt as if Zhuge Liang's gaze held a hint of pity. This puzzled Lu Xun—was there something he didn't know?

"When we get back, I'll take you to pay your respects to Madam Cai, and then you'll have access to the Eastern Archives," Chen Xi said as he climbed into the carriage, pulling Lu Xun up with him. He couldn't help but think of how young Cai Yan had been burdened with memorizing the entire collection of the Eastern Archives, leaving her with a childhood shadowed by responsibility.

"Thank you, Master," Lu Xun replied, feeling much better now that he had seemingly escaped Zhuge Liang's shadow. He was thrilled with Chen Xi's plans, his tone much more spirited. However, he failed to notice Zhuge Liang's sympathetic expression. Poor Lu Xun—at only twelve years old, could he handle what was coming?

"When we get back, come to see me. I'll give you a military strategy book and another on psychology," Zhuge Liang said, patting the now-enthusiastic Lu Xun. He didn't want to dampen Lu Xun's spirits too much, allowing him to enjoy the ride before facing whatever awaited him under Fazheng's tutelage.

Meanwhile, Chen Xi opened the letter from Guo Jia. It was filled with six-line hexagrams and centered on the Bagua diagram. The entire sheet was cut into a perfect square, making it impossible to tell where it began or ended. In one corner, only the phrase "Gen over Kan" indicated the fourth hexagram.

As Chen Xi slowly began to decipher the complex code, he silently cursed Guo Jia for making things so convoluted.

Chapter 490: Preparing in Advance

"Can you make sense of this?" Chen Xi turned to Lu Xun, who was sitting beside him. "If you can, help me decode this. Fengxiao really has too much time on his hands, using such a complex cipher for a letter."

"Uh, sure, I should be able to crack it," Lu Xun nodded and took the letter from Chen Xi. After Chen Xi had skimmed through it, he realized that there was no direct translation information—it was a message that had been encoded, then further encrypted, with no cipher key provided. Though he hadn't fully decoded it, he knew the result would definitely be numbers.

Lu Xun worked through the cipher at a slow pace, unlike Chen Xi, who might have used experience to deduce that the result would be pure numbers. Instead, Lu Xun spent a considerable amount of time on it, eventually deriving the numbers, but he found himself stuck, staring at the string of digits. He looked up at Zhuge Liang, who was resting his eyes nearby.

"Hmm, you've decoded it all?" Chen Xi noticed Lu Xun looking up from the numbers and nodded approvingly. It seemed that Zhuge Liang had taught him well.

"I can't go any further," Lu Xun sighed, scratching his head in frustration. "At this point, it feels like I'm missing a key to decipher these numbers. They seem to be raw data that just need the right key to unlock the meaning."

"Not bad at all, that's more than enough. This cipher doesn't come with a key, and Fengxiao rarely leaves anything out," Chen Xi chuckled. "We'll find the key when we get back to Taishan. It's probably somewhere in Fengxiao's house."

Chen Xi had already guessed that the key to the cipher would be hidden in one of Guo Jia's books, given that Guo Jia had intentionally used silk paper when other more convenient options were available. He figured it was likely tucked away in some bamboo or silk book.

At this point, Zhuge Liang looked up at the pleased Lu Xun and remarked, "You still need to study more. Guo Jia left a hint for the key to this cipher."

Lu Xun looked at Zhuge Liang in disbelief and then turned to Chen Xi, who nodded in agreement. This made Lu Xun lower his head, trying to figure out what he had missed, but he just couldn't put his finger on it.

"Kongming, do you want to take a look?" Chen Xi asked, shaking the improved silk paper in his hand.

"I've seen enough to translate the entire letter. I already know what the key is. When you weren't around, I browsed through Fengxiao's collection, so I know where the key is hidden," Zhuge Liang replied calmly. His photographic memory allowed him to recall exactly what Guo Jia had copied from Liu Ye's silk manuscript.

"Go ahead and translate it then. You're not one to blurt out anything unnecessary," Chen Xi said, handing the letter to Zhuge Liang.

Zhuce Liang shook his head, suspecting that Chen Xi was simply too lazy to search for the silk manuscript back in Taishan. Nevertheless, he took the letter and quickly began translating it. As the decoded message came to light, a look of surprise crossed Zhuge Liang's face.

"What does it say?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"The letter is all over the place. It mentions Gongsun Bogui, the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans, and the Hebei clans of Zhen and Cui. Oh, and he also advises us to prepare early," Zhuge Liang replied with a wry smile. The contents seemed random and scattered, with no substantive information.

Chen Xi instinctively furrowed his brow.

Zhuce Liang remained silent, pondering the meaning behind Guo Jia's seemingly nonsensical message. He couldn't believe Guo Jia would waste time sending something so trivial to Chen Xi.

Chen Xi rubbed his temples, deep in thought.

It didn't take long for Chen Xi to consider the potential situation.

As he continued to analyze the message, when he reached the mention of the Zhen and Cui clans, he suddenly understood the underlying message and Guo Jia's intentions.

A cold glint appeared in Chen Xi's eyes. Compared to Cao Cao, Yuan Shao was currently the biggest obstacle. If a conflict broke out, it would mean that Liu Bei's faction was ready to face Yuan Shao, Lu Bu, and Sun Ce simultaneously!

Chen Xi quickly compared the current situation, calculating the odds.

After piecing everything together, Chen Xi glanced at Lu Xun, who was still deep in thought, trying to figure out what he had missed. The sight made Chen Xi chuckle as he patted Lu Xun on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it. When we get to Taishan, you'll understand. Sometimes the simplest things are the easiest to overlook."

"Are we ready for this?" Zhuge Liang asked, looking at Chen Xi.

"We've been preparing all along, but we're never truly ready. However, when the time comes to act, we can't afford to hold back. Even if we're not perfectly prepared, we still have the upper hand," Chen Xi said with a smile. "Besides, fate won't wait for us to be fully prepared."