

Mythical 501

Chapter 501: A Single Word Reveals the Secret of Heaven

"Yes, a mysterious ability that I suddenly acquired. It's strange. One day, while I was reading, I realized I could observe the materials of others. Later, I researched many ancient texts and finally confirmed that it was a result of some essential sublimation," the old man said with a smile.

"Indeed, it should be that way," Chen Xi nodded. "Everything falls into place naturally."

"Sort of, but I am far inferior to you all. You are still very young," the old man replied with a smile. "Kong Wenju invited me to Taishan to take a look, and along the way, I encountered many people of extraordinary talent. However, very few can compare to the three of you."

"True genius cannot allow others to compare. A prodigy of heaven, unique and unparalleled!" Chen Xi said firmly. He himself had a millennium of heritage, and the two people behind him were rare geniuses. It was only natural.

"Indeed, this is your era. I recently visited Chenliu and met someone who was considered a genius in our time. Back then, his glory overshadowed the entire era," the old man said with a touch of nostalgia. "But now, he is old and no longer has the brilliance of his youth. I'll tell you some good news—he has high hopes for Liu Xuande!"

"Xun Clan's Eight Dragons, Ciming is unparalleled," Chen Xi said through gritted teeth. The only one in the previous era who could be called a genius and overshadowed the glory of that time was Xun Shuang, a person who surpassed that era in both knowledge and vision.

"Yes, it's him. Back then, he didn't reach your level. He only awakened his spiritual talent after he was over thirty," the old man said with a smile. "Your talents are far more terrifying than his."

Chen Xi remained silent, but inwardly, he began to speculate about this person's identity. Xun Shuang's survival was an accident, primarily because Dong Zhuo had not successfully recruited him in this life. However, if Hua Tuo had not overstepped his bounds, Xun Shuang probably wouldn't have had many years left to live.

"Chen Hou, you need not worry about this old man. Although I have some reputation, I harbor no ill intentions toward Liu Xuande. On the contrary, I greatly admire his grand ambition. Whether or not he can achieve it, just daring to declare 'every child should be educated' in front of the world is enough to earn my respect," the old man said with a deep intellect, seeing through Chen Xi's thoughts with ease.

"So, what guidance does the elder have?" Chen Xi asked calmly. "To be familiar with Xun Sima and to be so close, you must be an outstanding figure of that era. And now, few can claim to be a guest of Xun Sima. If you say you are just an ordinary person, I won't believe it."

"Chen Hou, don't doubt my intentions. I will not enter officialdom. I will only find a place to teach, and I will bring all my suitable students with me, leaving everything I have learned to assist Lord Xuande. I truly want to see what a well-governed world, where everyone has food, clothing, and education, would be like," the old man said with a powerful conviction.

"In that case, I won't make things difficult for you, elder," Chen Xi nodded, intending to investigate his identity later.

"Ciming's health is failing. If he were still well, he would have come. He also wants to see what an era where everyone is like a dragon would look like. Unfortunately, those who want to come are old and can no longer make the journey," the old man said with a hint of pride, as his own health was still good. "Time waits for no one."

"It's something beyond our control," Chen Xi said calmly. "I want to know why Xun Sima suddenly has high hopes for Lord Xuande. If I remember correctly, he didn't think much of us before."

"Heh, Ciming is just stubborn. He initially didn't think highly of you, but as the founder of Yingchuan Academy, do you think he didn't want to do what you're doing now?" The old man laughed heartily. "He wanted to, but he couldn't! Just establishing Yingchuan Academy consumed most of Ciming's wealth! Let alone an entire county or state, or even the whole world!"

As he spoke, there was a clear trace of fanaticism in the old man's voice. No surprise, this man would likely become one of Liu Xuande's fervent supporters in the future.

"Understandable. With such inefficient teaching methods, it's already impressive that he didn't bankrupt the Xun family," Chen Xi said calmly.

"Yes, the lack of books was a major issue. It was only because Ciming shamelessly borrowed thousands of books that he was able to lay the foundation. Later, with the support of your Chen family, the academy could finally operate," the old man said with a smile. "Money, food, and books are the biggest problems, and you've solved them. Ciming is very happy. He said he would try to live long enough to see that day arrive."

"As long as the Xun family joins us, it will save us a lot of effort," Chen Xi said with a smirk. "Tell him that if he can trick Xun Wenruo and Xun Gongda into coming home, then bring back Cheng Zhongde, the teacher from Yingchuan Academy, and finally issue an order to the auditing student Xi Zhicai, then knock them all out, stuff them into sacks, and send them over to us. I guarantee he'll see the prosperous age in no time."

"Hahaha, that's indeed a good idea. I can discuss it with Ciming!" The old man laughed heartily, showing no signs of mockery, instead looking as if that was precisely what should be done. "Your spiritual talent is one of the main reasons we believe in Liu Xuande. We don't expect an eternal golden age, just fifty years, so we can witness that era where everyone is like a dragon, the era our ancestors have long yearned for!"

"Can you tell me who informed Xun Sima of my spiritual talent?" Chen Xi asked with a slight startle. He didn't recall telling anyone about his spiritual talent, and people like Fazheng were known for keeping their mouths shut.

"Xun Wenruo told Ciming, but don't worry, he won't assassinate you. Let me put it this way: to Xun Wenruo, you are even more important than Liu Xuande. Your spiritual talent is so crucial that no one would dare to assassinate you unless it was absolutely necessary. Moreover, the knowledgeable people in the world will naturally protect you," the old man said solemnly.

"It's not that exaggerated!" Chen Xi said with a smirk, suddenly recalling his previous paranoia.

"The truth is, ever since I met you, I've been following you. Also, do you think Zuo Yuanfang's presence at the Taishan Jingling Shrine was just for show? He's been guarding your hometown," the old man said. As soon as Chen Xi opened his mouth, a Taoist suddenly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. "Dying is not an option for you; that's not a joke."

"Who are you!" Chen Xi instantly became alert, and both Fazheng and Zhuge Liang, as well as the old man on the platform, all looked warily at the suddenly appeared man who looked ageless.

"I'm the one protecting you, ensuring you won't be killed," the man said calmly, but a flash of anticipation gleamed in his eyes. He waved his horsetail whisk and said, "And you, show yourself as well."

As the black-robed man waved his whisk, a strong man appeared on the roof, looking warily at the Taoist who seemed ageless.

Chapter 502: You Are Very Important

The burly man holding a spear leaped down from the roof, landing between Chen Xi and the Taoist, and asked in a deep voice, "Who exactly are you?"

"Like you, I'm here to protect him, though I arrived later than you," the Taoist replied calmly. "Chen Hou, we've already confirmed your spiritual talent. Although we outsiders prioritize cultivating immortality and seeking the Dao, protecting your life is a must."

"Hmph, if I recall correctly, there are quite a few among you who don't follow orders!" the burly man with the spear glared at the Taoist, slightly bowing as he spoke.

After receiving the news about Chen Xi's spiritual talent and confirming it multiple times, Tong Yuan had sent out his biggest card, his junior brother Han Qiong. This was because Tong Yuan hadn't fully recovered yet; otherwise, he would have come himself.

Although Han Qiong wasn't as skilled as Tong Yuan in martial arts, he was not far behind. As one of the earliest top experts to break through to the level of internal energy release, even without secret techniques or martial arts skills, it wouldn't be easy for Lu Bu to defeat Han Qiong. Moreover, Han Qiong had a vast array of secret techniques. For this reason, Han Qiong had been following Chen Xi all this time without being noticed.

Similarly, the Taoist had also been following, but he was even more brazen. When he saw Chen Xi boarding a ship at the coast of Donglai, Nanhua, who had originally planned to return to the mountains to meditate, abandoned his plans. He saw in Chen Xi the hope of ascension. Since ascending through

normal channels seemed impossible, achieving great merits and ascending in a flash seemed like a viable alternative.

At first, Nanhua had regretted his actions, thinking he had caused chaos by unleashing fierce beasts and empowering warriors, which led to turmoil across the land. But after meeting Chen Xi, Nanhua realized he had been mistaken all along!

Upon seeing Chen Xi, Nanhua had an epiphany. Fortune and misfortune coexist. Although his actions had brought about fierce beasts, they had also given birth to a young man capable of creating decades of peace. If he could ensure Chen Xi's safe growth, the Han Dynasty could enjoy favorable weather for a hundred years, with millions of people living in peace and prosperity. Such immense merit would undoubtedly allow him to ascend!

After that realization, Nanhua followed Chen Xi without saying a word, refraining from intervening in any wars, focusing solely on protecting Chen Xi. His task was to deflect any attack that could threaten Chen Xi, which explained why Chen Xi hadn't encountered a single arrow during the entire Yangtze River battle.

"Chen Hou, there's no need to concern yourself with who we are. Just know that we're here to protect you. Rest assured, we mean you no harm. Although I don't particularly like this guy, his strength is such that he won't be at a disadvantage against any of Liu Xuande's generals," Nanhua said, noticing Chen Xi's hesitation.

"You've been following me for half a year?" Chen Xi asked, frowning.

"Chen Hou, your senses are indeed sharp. There were several times I almost got caught," the burly man with the spear said with a smile.

Chen Xi furrowed his brow. From that one sentence, he knew this man was likely a top expert. His senses were extremely keen, just like that time with Zuo Ci. Although Zuo Ci had been careless, Chen Xi's ability to sense things couldn't be denied.

"No wonder I sometimes felt like someone was following me, making me paranoid," Chen Xi said with resignation. If this expert had been following him for half a year, he would have already been dead if

they intended to kill him. Even if they had wanted to kill him, he wouldn't have been able to react in time. This also confirmed that they meant no harm.

Top strategists like Fazheng possess immense spiritual power. If they were to face off against top generals like Guan and Zhang head-on and channel all their mental energy into the general's mind, it would result in the strategist's death, and the general would either die or have a mental breakdown, leading to madness. However, it's hard to imagine any expert at the internal energy release level succumbing as easily as Hua Xiong did in front of Li Ru, where a single blade from afar would be enough to settle the matter.

"However, Chen Hou, we only protect you. We won't show ourselves under normal circumstances," Nanhua said, looking at Chen Xi. "We protect you out of duty. We don't need anything in return, but we will only protect you."

"Hmm," Chen Xi nodded. "I understand."

"Old Taoist, since you're also here to protect him, I have a question for you. Can we kill Yu Ji? He's a dangerous individual, and we've agreed to eliminate him. We don't want to cause a large-scale conflict with you, so I'm asking in advance!" Han Qiong asked coldly, seeing that Chen Xi was no longer on guard.

"Yu Ji? If he targets someone else, that's one thing. But if he dares to come here, I'll kill him without hesitation!" Nanhua's eyes flashed with a cold light. If Yu Ji really tried to disrupt the grand order and kill Chen Xi, Nanhua wouldn't show mercy. Even if they had crossed paths before, he would still kill him without hesitation!

"That's good to hear!" Han Qiong then leaped into the air and disappeared, leaving only a voice from the sky: "Rest assured, Chen Hou. If I leave, I will notify you, and someone will take over my duty."

Chen Xi was left dumbfounded. The man had just vanished. How was that even possible? He couldn't help but look at the Taoist beside him.

"Chen Hou, I appeared only to verify things for you and to avoid any potential accidents in the future. I haven't met that man before," Nanhua said as he looked in a particular direction. He couldn't deny that experience comes with age. Han Qiong's presence had nearly faded entirely, like a stone in that corner. When Han Qiong disappeared, Zhuge Liang unleashed his spiritual talent but still couldn't locate him.

"Am I really that important?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"Extremely important. If things continue as they are, you will save countless people, earning immeasurable merit," Nanhua said solemnly, bowing deeply before silently vanishing, leaving the four of them staring at each other.

"Ahem," Chen Xi coughed a few times, drawing the attention of the other three. He looked a bit uncomfortable. "I didn't even know someone was secretly protecting me."

"This is only natural. You don't realize how crucial your spiritual talent is to the world," the old man sitting on the platform said calmly. "You are too important to the people."

"You make me sound like some kind of mascot," Chen Xi said with a bitter smile. "Let's talk about something else. I don't want to think about how important I am." He then found a stone bench and sat down, abandoning any pretense of formality.

"Feel free, Chen Hou. Zijia, come out," the old man smiled at Chen Xi and then called out to someone inside. Soon, a boy of about eleven or twelve years old emerged and knelt beside the old man.

"Is this your grandson?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"This is Lu Zigan's son, Lu Zijia," the old man replied, shaking his head and pointing to the boy.

Chapter 503: Another Piece Acquired

"The son of Minister Lu?" Chen Xi curiously observed the young boy who was about the same age as Lu Xun. This boy might not be famous in this era, but in the era of the Nine-Rank System, he would be very well-known. He was one of the founders of the clan system and a master of political struggle.

"Yes, Zigan, Ciming, and I were classmates, and we've known each other for a long time. When Zigan passed away, Ciming's grandson, Xun Gongda, was still in Chang'an, so he entrusted his son to Ciming for education," the old man said, shaking his head.

Chen Xi thought for a moment and quickly realized who this elder was referring to—Chen Shi, his granduncle. However, with so many disciples, it was hard to say who this elder really was.

"Naturally, when I visited Ciming in Liaodong, he asked me to bring him to Taishan," the old man continued, looking a bit helpless as he mentioned the boy beside him. "Originally, I was supposed to take him to visit General of the Eastern Command, but in my opinion, Zijia still needs some more guidance. Otherwise, he might displease the General of the Eastern Command."

By now, Chen Xi had already guessed the old man's identity and understood why Xun Shuang had asked Wang Lie to bring Lu Zhi's son to Taishan. Since Liu Bei was now considered Lu Zhi's most outstanding disciple, and in ancient times, disciples revered their masters as they would their fathers, entrusting his son to Liu Bei seemed like the most logical decision.

"I see that this child is clever and full of potential. How about entrusting him to me for guidance?" Chen Xi said, eyeing the sharp-witted Lu Yu. This boy would eventually rise from nothing and navigate through five Wei emperors, becoming a master political strategist and one of the pillars of the five great families of the era.

Wang Lie hesitated visibly. The reason he had kept Lu Yu by his side and left the rest of the Lu family in Taishan was that Lu Yu had a bit of a mischievous streak. Although he was filial and principled, his temperament had been somewhat affected by some significant trauma during his childhood. He appeared sunny on the surface, but there was a shadow beneath it.

Wang Lie, driven by his sense of responsibility toward Lu Zhi, hoped to steer Lu Yu back onto the right path. At the very least, he wanted to curb Lu Yu's tendencies to manipulate others, use power to suppress people, and employ strategies like "driving tigers to swallow wolves" and "removing the ladder after ascending." Wang Lie couldn't help but feel frustrated, wondering if this was how Xun Shuang had taught Lu Zhi's son.

In short, Lu Yu wasn't quite normal. Wang Lie's plan was to keep him close and guide him carefully, ensuring that his temperament didn't become too dark. Right now, Lu Yu's actions could still be seen as self-preservation, and his nature hadn't fully turned bad. But considering everything he had gone through as a child...

After all, it made sense. A boy who lost both parents at seven or eight, then lost two brothers before he was ten, and had to take care of his sister-in-law and nephews—it's remarkable that he could grow up relatively normal, let alone revive the Lu family.

"Elder, if there's anything you're worried about, feel free to tell me. Perhaps I can help solve it," Chen Xi said with a smile. Lu Yu was indeed impressive, but it depended on whom he was compared with. When it came to scheming, Jia Xu was the real master. His famous line, "Did you not see Yuan Benchu and Liu Jingsheng?" had sealed Cao Zhi's fate. Such a talented child should be nurtured in the art of strategy, not wasted on moral cultivation.

Wang Lie frowned. He couldn't explain Lu Yu's issues to Chen Xi, but seeing Chen Xi's interest, he also felt it difficult to refuse. After a long pause, he finally asked, "If I entrust this child to you, Chen Hou, what do you plan to teach him? Will you prioritize moral cultivation or practical skills?"

"Teach him strategy, self-preservation in office, and how to mediate between factions," Chen Xi replied without hesitation. Lu Yu was the perfect candidate for such training. History had proven that he was a master of political struggle, surviving from Cao Cao's time all the way to Sima Zhao's era without falling from power.

Chen Xi wasn't speaking carelessly. Factionalism was inevitable. It might not be visible in the short term, but as Liu Bei's power grew, the emergence of factions was almost certain.

In the next ten years, the faction led by martial generals like Guan, Zhang, and Zhao, along with the veteran civil officials led by Chen Xi, would have a clear advantage. However, as the twelve prefectures were gradually conquered, suppressing all factions would become a joke.

This was unavoidable. Initially, Chen Xi had planned to have Zhuge Liang mediate between factions and resolve future conflicts, but it seemed like a waste and a distraction for Zhuge Liang. After meeting Lu Yu, Chen Xi realized that Lu Yu was even better suited for the role. He was one of the few historical figures who had risen from the beginning to the end of a dynasty, a political genius.

It should be noted that when Lu Yu first entered office, aside from the connections his father had left behind from a decade earlier, he had nothing else to rely on. Yet, within a few decades, he managed to build a foundation comparable to the great families. His political acumen was undeniable!

"That... might not be appropriate," Wang Lie hesitated, then looked at the kneeling Lu Yu beside him. He didn't want Lu Yu to become a ruthless figure, but he had to admit that Chen Xi's approach made sense. Strategy, self-preservation in office, and faction mediation were indeed well-suited for Lu Yu.

"Whether it's appropriate or not, it's not entirely up to you, elder. With your temperament, you wouldn't stop him from leaving if he wished, right?" Chen Xi smiled. "Why not ask him directly? With your virtue, you should understand that only by choosing his own path can it truly be meaningful. Sheltering under your wings—is that really the best for him?"

Wang Lie sighed deeply and turned to Lu Yu. "Zijia, the choice is yours. Will you stay with me to cultivate virtue and rid yourself of your inner demons, or will you follow Chen Hou and learn the art of strategy, advancing further down that path?"

"Thank you, Uncle, for your care in recent days. I am willing to follow Chen Hou and learn the art of strategy. As for virtue, I believe that as long as I remain true to my conscience, it will suffice. Even if one day my hands are stained, I trust I won't lose my way," Lu Yu said solemnly, kowtowing to Wang Lie.

"Well said! You are best suited to wielding strategy, controlling it within your grasp, rather than being blinded by it like others," Chen Xi said with a smile. "Lu Zijia, upon our return to Taishan, I'll find the most suitable teacher for you. Within eight years, you must be ready."

Jia Xu was skilled in strategy, but he focused more on self-preservation, whereas Lu Yu was different. He needed to fight. Only by continually defeating others could he grow stronger and avoid the hardships of his childhood. In eight years, when the various factions begin to rise, Chen Xi would have prepared the stage for Lu Yu.

"Understood," Lu Yu said calmly, a harmless smile appearing on his face. He then stood up, bowed to Wang Lie again, and finally walked over to Chen Xi.

"Elder, rest assured. Lu Zijia will undoubtedly walk a grand path. For him, strategy is a tool, not the most important thing in life. He won't lose himself in it," Chen Xi said, noticing Wang Lie's slight unease.

Chapter 504: Centered on Virtue

After Chen Xi finished speaking, he gave Lu Yu a meaningful look. Lu Yu immediately understood and spoke up, "Uncle Wang, I am deeply grateful for your protection, but an eagle must face adversity to soar high. Without trials, how can I restore the glory of the Lu family?"

Wang Lie lowered his head, remaining silent as he pondered this matter. It was clear that Chen Xi possessed a similar ability to his own—they could both see a person's potential. He knew that Lu Yu was best suited for learning political strategy, but politics was the darkest and most corrupting of all disciplines.

"A lotus grows out of the mud but remains unstained, and it bathes in clear water without becoming demonic," Chen Xi said when he saw the deep frown on Wang Lie's face, trying to ease his concerns.

"White sand in the mud turns black," Wang Lie responded, his frown relaxing slightly, though his expression still carried some reluctance.

"Those who yield to their environment and go against their true selves—how can they be called extraordinary talents? Going against the current and pushing forward, just like a sharp sword is forged through honing, and the fragrance of plum blossoms comes from bitter cold. I have confidence in this. Does the elder not believe as well?" Chen Xi said with a smile, the sharpness and confidence in his words deeply imprinting themselves in Wang Lie's heart.

"What do you think, Zijia?" Wang Lie turned to look at Lu Yu. In truth, by asking this question, he had already tacitly agreed.

Lu Yu took a deep breath and proudly said, "I, Lu Zijia, believe I can stay true to myself and not be swayed by external influences. After the fall of my family, I must rebuild it with my own hands! How can mere temptations shake my resolve?"

The sharpness radiating from Lu Yu brought a smile to Wang Lie's face. "Very well. Since that's the case, you can take with you what both I and Ciming have given you. Although I haven't taught you much along the way, remember this—while political strategy may not spill blood, when you reach the heights this man has, virtue and vision will serve you better than mere tactics."

Chen Xi couldn't help but be amazed. Wang Lie's relationship with Xun Shuang and Lu Zhi was far stronger than he had imagined. Xun Shuang had even entrusted Wang Lie with his family's most treasured works—original classics from the descendants of Xunzi!

"I... Uncle, which book should I study first?" Lu Yu asked, his gaze fixed on the ground, not daring to meet Wang Lie's eyes.

Chen Xi clearly saw the hint of resignation in Wang Lie's expression. "Study 'strategy' first," Wang Lie sighed deeply, his voice heavy with reluctant acceptance. "Chen Hou, please inform Lord Xuande that Lu Zijia is now under your guidance. As for the notes I made, feel free to print them. Whoever wants to read them, let them."

"Since the elder is willing to entrust the Virtue Classics to me, I won't say more. I noticed earlier that you were interested in establishing an academy. How about using the proceeds from the printed books to fund the construction of your academy?" Chen Xi suggested with a smile. Wang Lie was a true gentleman, a moral exemplar of his time.

"I've never heard of anyone printing books and giving me money for it," Wang Lie replied calmly.

"Your books will surely be collected by aristocratic families as treasures, and the income from that will be more than enough to build an academy," Chen Xi said with a grin. He wasn't joking—while Wang Lie's notes might not surpass the original annotations of the Xun family, his reputation was enough for Chen Xi to make a hefty profit.

"That would be acceptable," Wang Lie nodded. He quickly grasped the situation, though he found the idea of pricing his thoughts somewhat distasteful. However, compared to the prospect of educating more students, he didn't mind that small stain.

"Actually, you could also consider renovating this residence," Chen Xi suggested with a smile. "We can advance you some funds. The man behind me, the Chancellor of Qi, will surely allow it, right, Xiaozhi?"

"No problem. This courtyard is too small and lacks the necessary facilities, like eight proper classrooms for thirty students each, a basic library, a proper storage room, and even an exercise area. The entire courtyard needs to be expanded fivefold," Fazheng commented calmly, listing the standard features Chen Xi had designed for academies, all of which required substantial funds.

Wang Lie was speechless. The cost of all that would be significant, and he couldn't help but look at Chen Xi.

"It's affordable, very simple. Once it's built, and if it passes our inspection, you'll receive foundational books for the library, along with some specialized books, and finally, books of your choice for the academy," Chen Xi explained with a smile.

These conditions were designed to attract small local clans and landowners. These families often had some money, and the cost of building an academy wasn't an issue. They could even repurpose one or two courtyards for it. What they lacked was heritage—books. The option to choose their own books was prepared specifically for them!

Chen Xi didn't have enough time to devote entirely to the spread of education. Once Taishan County's education was up and running, and the collected data remained within the range calculated by Liu Ye and Lu Su, Chen Xi would roll out the plan on a larger scale, inevitably involving the local clans.

"Very well," Wang Lie nodded in agreement. "Then I leave it to you, Chancellor of Qi."

"Elder, may I take a look at your work?" Chen Xi asked after some thought. He was sure that Wang Lie's version would differ from the original, likely emphasizing virtue.

Wang Lie called over the young girl who had opened the door for Chen Xi and his group earlier. She quickly ran inside, returning with nine bamboo scrolls and a paper book. The bamboo scrolls were clearly heavy for the little girl, so Chen Xi hurriedly stepped forward to help, taking the scrolls from her.

"Hey, do you think Zichuan is into that sort of thing?" Fazheng whispered.

"Highly unlikely, it's just compassion. I'd say it's more of a habit, like how Zichuan treats maids," Zhuge Liang replied with a glance at Fazheng.

"You two take a look as well," Chen Xi said, handing a scroll each to Fazheng and Zhuge Liang before diving into his own reading. After a while, the three of them looked up at each other, realizing that the person who wrote these scrolls was indeed a paragon of virtue. His actions were those of an ordinary person, not elevated to the level of a sage. But precisely because he was a real person, his writings had depth and warmth, resonating deeply with them.

"What do you think, Xiaozhi?" This time, Chen Xi didn't ask Zhuge Liang but looked directly at Fazheng.

Fazheng pondered for a while before answering, "The foundation is your harmony, followed by studying this."

Chen Xi nodded, agreeing with Fazheng's assessment. "Since we're in agreement, I'll propose that we make this book a required study upon our return to Taishan. Our primary goal is to establish virtue. With food, clothing, and shelter gradually being addressed, once virtue is established, our future path will be much smoother!"

Chapter 505: Going Against the Current

"You mean not teaching anything else?" Zhuge Liang asked in confusion.

"Just learning these subjects will take at least three years, and once they've mastered them, it's enough. At the very least, they'll be able to achieve a modest level of wealth and stability," Chen Xi nodded, confirming Zhuge Liang's assumption.

"But we talked about universal education before. Why are we only teaching these subjects now?" Zhuge Liang sighed as he asked.

"We don't have enough money and resources!" Chen Xi spread his hands helplessly. "I'm just one person. Initially, universal education was meant to be rolled out step by step, but Xuande suddenly decided to expand wherever we conquer. I don't have a better solution."

Chen Xi's tone clearly carried some resentment. He had noticed that Liu Bei was beginning to treat him like a magic solution for all problems. Although Chen Xi had once confidently told Liu Bei that "no matter how big the problem is, it's a small matter, and all small matters are no big deal," he hadn't expected things to go this far.

"But this is completely different from what you said before," Zhuge Liang remarked with a bitter smile.

"I'm just a guide, opening a door for them. After that, it's up to them to choose whether to continue their studies or give up and start earning a living," Chen Xi replied calmly. "I can only give them the opportunity, not everything. The rest of the journey is theirs to walk."

"Konming, by the time they finish these studies, they'll be around your age or a little older. They'll still have the right to borrow books from the academy and continue self-studying if they wish," Fazheng added calmly. "Whether they can seize the opportunity depends on them."

Zhuge Liang remained silent for a long time. Although his family had fallen on hard times, he had never experienced real hardship in his youth. Balancing survival with excellence was incredibly difficult.

"If someone is truly talented, having that opportunity is enough to take flight," Chen Xi said calmly. "What I can offer might seem small, but it's already much better than the darkness they faced before. As for those who aren't exceptionally talented, the opportunity I'm giving them will at least allow them to live in comfort."

"But..." Zhuge Liang began to speak, only to be interrupted by Fazheng.

"Konming, you're looking at this from the wrong perspective," Fazheng said calmly. "Our task is to give them an opportunity. How far they go with it is their own business. As for connections, lineage, and family background—if they have nothing, that's not our concern."

"Konming, fairness isn't something you need to focus on too much. In this world, everything is relative. The blessings of one's ancestors benefit their descendants, whether you like it or not. If you lack those blessings, then you need to bring something else to prove your worth. If you can't, then don't blame the heavens," Chen Xi added calmly.

"Exactly. Our ancestors cleared the way, starting from nothing and building great families. If you're truly extraordinary, there's no need to say more. I, Fazheng, didn't rely on my family's influence. I came to Taishan on my own and reached this point without external help!" Fazheng said with a cold laugh.

Zhuge Liang remained silent, knowing that Fazheng had every right to say this. Fazheng had earned the respect of figures like Liu Bei, Chen Xi, and Guo Jia entirely through his own abilities. He had become a governor before turning eighteen and had commanded that position with competence and authority.

"I won't bring this up again, but I hope that if there are examinations, the requirements for ordinary students will be relaxed," Zhuge Liang said after thinking for a moment.

"I don't recommend that," Chen Xi replied calmly. "While it might give commoner students a slight advantage in the short term, it will ensure the aristocratic families remain unchallenged for millennia."

"Pride in one's talent is more important than temporary success or failure," Fazheng added. "If the government does that, commoner students will be finished—they'll never surpass the aristocrats."

Zhuge Liang looked at Chen Xi, unsure whether Fazheng's words were true.

"They are true. If you do that, the outcome won't be good. At first, commoners won't be able to compete with aristocrats, and if you separate the exams, they'll lose their drive over time," Chen Xi said, shaking his head. "Once that confidence is lost, even the most extraordinary talents will struggle to surpass their opponents."

Zhuge Liang bowed his head in thought, gaining some understanding. Just as he was about to speak, Chen Xi asked, "Why could the Xiongnu in the early Han dynasty fight ten-to-one against the Han, but later they couldn't even manage one-to-ten?"

"It was a matter of morale. In the early Han dynasty, the Xiongnu had over a century of accumulated dominance over the Han, so despite the Han's wealth, they lacked the resolve to win. They only fought when forced," Chen Xi explained calmly.

"But later, the Han dynasty went against the current and reached the peak of its momentum. After countless bloody battles, the Xiongnu were left with an indelible mark of defeat, reducing their strength to a fraction of what it once was. They never recovered," Chen Xi continued, his previously calm expression showing a hint of emotion. Going against the current is incredibly difficult.

"Do you know why, despite the internal strife within the Han dynasty, no foreign power dares to invade on a large scale? They still pay tribute on time. It's not because they lack strength—it's because of the long-standing deterrence! They don't have the courage to invade. Even the mighty Xianbei of Tan Shihuai's time didn't dare to enter Han territory. That's what it means to command the world with authority," Chen Xi said, a rare passion in his voice, filled with pride for the Han dynasty's strength.

"The White Horse Volunteers, the Xiliang Cavalry, and the Bingzhou Wolf Riders—how much stronger are they than the Xiongnu, Qiang, or Xianbei? All of them are horse-riding peoples, and those who can become cavalry are the best among them. Yet, why can't five foreign cavalrymen defeat one of ours? Is

it their equipment? The Xiliang Cavalry often lack even proper armor, but they have no problem fighting Qiang cavalry five to one!" Chen Xi sneered.

Zhuge Liang and Fazheng pondered this in silence, ultimately sighing in agreement. The facts were undeniable. The Xiliang Cavalry's equipment was on par with the Qiang, and their diet was similar too, yet the Xiliang Cavalry had no trouble defeating the Qiang.

"This is morale. The Han people have an unshakable confidence against any foreign force. It's ingrained in them, making them fearless. So, when they face foreigners, they fight like tigers descending from the mountains, while the foreigners do the opposite. This is the national confidence forged over three hundred years!" Chen Xi emphasized.

Fazheng stroked his beard thoughtfully before finally speaking. "Let's set aside the matter of aristocrats versus commoners for now. Even if fewer commoners succeed initially, it doesn't matter. What interests me now is what you just said, Zichuan. Are you suggesting that the Xianbei are also accumulating the foundation to go against the current?"

A glint of coldness flashed in Zhuge Liang's eyes, though he said nothing. But the implication of Chen Xi's words was clear: following the current doesn't guarantee victory, and going against it doesn't guarantee defeat—it just makes things much harder.

Chapter 506: Establishing Virtue for the World!

Fazheng and Zhuge Liang both took Chen Xi's words to heart, planning to use their own resources to verify them later. If what he said was true, with their sharp minds, they would surely start planning accordingly.

"Heh, it's good that you remember. Whether it's true or not, you'll need to verify it for yourselves. What I said might not be entirely accurate. For now, the Han Dynasty remains dominant over the surrounding tribes," Chen Xi said with a smile. "Though the Xianbei are strong, they can't easily shake the foundation."

Chen Xi was confident in this. The Han Dynasty still held a significant advantage, and even Yuan Shao in the north alone would be enough to crush the likes of Helian and Kebineng completely.

The Xianbei were still in a state of dormancy. Before the central plains were weakened to the point of no resistance, the surrounding tribes had no chance of invading.

Chen Xi had never considered violently conquering the grasslands. Such bloodshed should not be imposed on the common people, whether they were border residents or nomadic herders. Whether they belonged to the wild nomadic civilizations or the currently dominant Han civilization, both were ultimately seeking survival, and there was no irreconcilable conflict between them.

Chen Xi could not bring himself to massacre the entire grassland. After all, humanity is divided into good and evil. Deciding the fate of millions with a single word, leading to national decline and civilian suffering, was not Chen Xi's goal. What he sought was a prosperous and strong nation.

A trace of mockery appeared on Chen Xi's face.

Compared to the Xianbei, with their mere three million people, the Han Dynasty, which had managed to prevent the spread of typhoid due to Chen Xi's early preparations, still had a population of around fifty million. As a nomadic tribe that hadn't even fully developed a civilization, the Xianbei had only one possible outcome after being defeated: slowly integrating into the Han people.

Chen Xi didn't believe that a tribe with an incomplete cultural framework could resist the world's most assimilative people, especially when the Han had such a comprehensive advantage.

Chen Xi's expression remained calm as he mused that sometimes, actions must be taken almost unconsciously.

Fazheng and Zhuge Liang had no idea that this issue would become a critical task once Yuan Shao was dealt with and the central plains were secured.

Ensuring the long-term stability and peace of the population under his rule was something Chen Xi needed to plan for in advance. Unbeknownst to them, Fazheng and Zhuge Liang had already started working on Chen Xi's behalf, their interest piqued prematurely.

"Enough about these matters that won't be relevant for some time," Chen Xi said, turning to pat Fazheng on the shoulder before proudly walking toward Wang Lie.

"Lord Wang, I've heard it said, 'The way of nurturing people lies in making virtue the foundation.' This book is a model of virtue for ordinary people. Would you permit me to spread it widely across the land? In return, Taishan will cover the expenses of your academy. I believe this book can establish virtue for the people of the world!" Chen Xi bowed deeply before Wang Lie, showing deference as a junior for the first time in front of others.

Given his rank, conferred through genuine military accomplishments, Chen Xi didn't need to show deference to anyone outside of royalty or elders. However, sometimes it was better to lower one's status.

"Chen Hou, there's no need for this!" Wang Lie, whose legs were not very nimble, tried to move but ended up using his cane to help Chen Xi up.

"Lord Wang, would you permit it?" Chen Xi no longer lowered himself, feeling that one show of respect was enough.

"Sigh, very well!" Wang Lie sighed deeply, as if releasing a heavy burden, and said, "I won't stop you. You don't need to put my name on the book or spread it across the world. Just ensure that people understand what virtue is. The rest has nothing to do with me."

Chen Xi was stunned. This meant that Wang Lie was abandoning all rights to the book and even relinquishing the legacy he had created!

Chen Xi had been prepared for Wang Lie to make things difficult for him, which was why he had shown deference in advance. However, he hadn't expected Wang Lie to be so generous.

This book was the culmination of Wang Lie's life's work, essentially his legacy. In this era, such things were typically reserved for one's closest disciples, with perhaps a few exceptional students allowed to copy it. If the core principles were published and widely distributed, the only outcome would be for this school's teachings to be absorbed by others.

The reason the Mohist school eventually declined, aside from suppression, was that its core ideas were absorbed by other schools of thought. This shows how crucial a tradition's core teachings are.

For people of this era, the importance lay not in the text itself, but in the interpretation of those words. Previously, the books from prominent families like the Pang and Huang families that Chen Xi had published lacked the core annotations, which had become a standard rule for Taishan's publishing house.

Similarly, the version of the Virtue Classics that Wang Lie had lent Chen Xi previously did not include the core annotations. Yet, even without them, the book's clear depiction of virtue had left a strong impression on Chen Xi and his companions.

"If you can use this book to establish virtue for the people, I have no regrets. There's no reason to lament the loss of its essence. Lier, bring the box from the bookshelf," Wang Lie said, having fully let go of his previous concerns. His virtue was nearly complete. The idea of establishing virtue for the world had never crossed his mind before. He now recalled what Bing Yuan had once told him: "To educate more people, you need to sit in a high enough position."

Wang Lie took the box from the young girl and handed it to Chen Xi. "Chen Hou, the essence of the entire book is in this box. But to establish virtue for the world, this book alone won't be enough."

"At the very least, it can be a seed. With three generations of effort, the nation may begin to change," Chen Xi said with a smile. Establishing virtue wasn't something that could be accomplished with just one phrase. He had considered this before but never found a suitable text, as many books on virtue seemed flawed to him.

Some books seemed to stifle the nation's fighting spirit, others corrupted it, and some twisted it. Overall, none were quite right.

Chen Xi valued Wang Lie's book because it didn't advocate forgiveness or tolerance but instead proposed different teachings for different people. For the powerful, it emphasized moral influence, while for the weaker, it relied on strength and authority. The book taught virtue at different levels according to the individual, but always with a clear standard.

Chapter 507: This is a Tragedy

Wang Lie was very open-minded, and Chen Xi's response pleased him greatly. He wrote this book to educate the people, and if it could be used to enlighten the world, he was more than satisfied. As for the

core ideas, he wasn't too attached—gains and losses, fortune and misfortune, were all determined by fate.

“Master Wang, if you wish to establish an academy in Linzi, three days from now, I will send officials to discuss the construction site and building requirements with you. The new city in Linzi is under construction. If you have any specific needs, please consider them in the next three days. Once the planning is finalized, it will be difficult to make changes,” Fa Zheng calmly said to Wang Lie, even though he didn't know the old man's exact name. But any great scholar capable of writing books was never easy to deal with.

“Thank you, Chancellor of Qi,” Wang Lie said with a smile.

“No need. I am simply doing my duty. Additionally, constructing certain foundational infrastructure for the new city is essential,” Fa Zheng replied, his tone indifferent. He wasn't moved by Wang Lie, treating the matter as strictly business. But in reality, the initial city planning carried immense significance—something unimaginable to those unfamiliar with such work.

“Master Wang, thank you. I will take my leave now and not disturb you further,” Chen Xi said, holding the scrolls as he bowed to Wang Lie.

“Zijia, you should go with Zichuan now,” Wang Lie waved his hand dismissively, but Lu Yu seemed hesitant.

“Is there something else?” Chen Xi asked curiously as he noticed Lu Yu's reluctance, but Lu Yu's face reddened and he remained silent.

Wang Lie glanced at Lu Yu, then fumbled through his belongings before handing a jade pendant to his daughter. “You go with him. And boy, if you ever disappoint my daughter, humph!”

Lu Yu was overjoyed, and the girl who had been standing quietly by Wang Lie's side, Lier, looked a little shy but was slowly inching towards Lu Yu.

“Girls grow up and can't be kept at home,” Wang Lie grumbled. “Chen Marquis, look after them for me.”

"Of course," Chen Xi nodded. He cast a glance at Lu Yu with a hint of amusement. This fellow had only stayed with Wang Lie for a few days, yet had managed to win over his daughter. Truly impressive.

As they exited with Lu Yu, Chen Xi handed the scrolls over to the soldiers standing guard outside. Although today's primary task was not completed, a greater opportunity had presented itself.

"What a pity that Boyan has to stay in Linzi for a while. Otherwise, I'd introduce you to a remarkable peer," Chen Xi said with a smile to the slightly excited Lu Yu.

Lu Yu raised his eyebrows and glanced at Chen Xi, his gaze sliding over to Fa Zheng before finally settling on Zhuge Liang. "Rather than meeting someone I haven't seen before, I'm more interested in this Zhuge Kongming, who's only slightly older than me."

"He's looking for you," Chen Xi shook his head. Fa Zheng walked over and patted Zhuge Liang on the shoulder, grinning mischievously.

"You should seek out someone closer to your age," Zhuge Liang said, shaking his head. He didn't care much for Lu Yu's somewhat calculating demeanor and was confident that Lu Xun could easily outmatch him.

"What's this all about?" Lu Yu asked, puzzled, as he looked at Chen Xi. He had thought that Zhuge Liang might react differently, but Zhuge Liang's calm demeanor after first glancing at Chen Xi and then Fa Zheng left Lu Yu feeling that his planned actions had little effect. Zhuge Liang was utterly unfazed.

"You should have crushed him," Fa Zheng said with great enthusiasm after Zhuge Liang caught up with him.

"It's meaningless. Let's give Boyan a chance to rebuild his confidence. He's been learning from you, after all," Zhuge Liang said calmly. "Geniuses should have their sharp edges. Lately, Boyan has been under too much pressure from both me and Zichuan."

"Tch," Fa Zheng scoffed, "If he can't handle a little pressure, what kind of genius is he? When I was learning from Guo Fengxiao and Jia Wenhe..."

At that point, Fa Zheng stopped talking. He had been through hell back then, and if not for the obsession Guo Jia had instilled in him, the grinding method they used might have completely broken him.

“Why did you stop?” Chen Xi fell back a few steps to walk alongside Fa Zheng, asking curiously.

“Too depressing,” Fa Zheng replied, his tone flat.

“...” Zhuge Liang and Chen Xi were left speechless.

After a series of twists and turns, the group returned to the relay station. “Boyan, come out. Let me introduce you to a peer. He’s quite remarkable, so play nice, no fighting,” Chen Xi said, deliberately speaking as if he were cautioning two young children not to quarrel. Naturally, when Lu Xun came out to greet them, his expression became somewhat strange as he looked at Lu Yu.

Lu Xun wasn’t one for childish antics. He would rather spend his time reading, trying to find ways to close the gap between him and Zhuge Liang. And Chen Xi, as his teacher, wouldn’t normally remind him of such trivial matters, so the warning was clearly meant for Lu Yu. Thus, Lu Xun concluded that the newcomer had a somewhat immature disposition.

“Greetings, Master,” Lu Xun bowed respectfully.

“This is Lu Yuxu, son of Minister Lu Shangshu—Lu Yu, styled Zijia. I, along with Fa Zheng and Kongming, have some matters to attend to, so you show him around, read some books, and eat something,” Chen Xi said, patting Lu Yu on the shoulder.

“Yu greets Brother Boyan,” Lu Yu said, his tone polite and refined, as he performed the perfect etiquette. However, internally, he was irritated by Lu Xun’s gaze, which had unnerved him. Yet his upbringing and years of schooling had taught him well how to conceal his true feelings.

“Alright, you’ve met each other. Boyan, he’s in your care,” Chen Xi said with a smile. Without waiting for Lu Xun to respond, he left with Fa Zheng and Zhuge Liang.

Standing at the entrance, Lu Yu snorted coldly before heading inside with Lier. Lu Xun merely shrugged, thinking that perhaps the other was just indulging in childish arrogance, and followed them in.

With a proud and smug demeanor, Lu Yu walked into the inner room, determined to fully exert his abilities and deliver a surprising blow—like a lion putting all its strength into capturing a rabbit!

“Are we doing the right thing? I remember Kongming’s face turning black back then,” Fa Zheng said while stroking his beard, his tone suggesting disapproval, though his expression betrayed his excitement.

“...” Zhuge Liang shot Fa Zheng a glance but remained silent.

“They need to understand that there are always others stronger than them. Though scheming is important, sometimes even the most elaborate plan can’t match a single, effortless strike from a superior force. The greatest flaw in strategy is incomplete information,” Chen Xi shook his head. “It won’t take long to figure out who the novice is.”

“This won’t be over quickly. Though it will soon be obvious who’s stronger, there will be repeated probing. Boyan and Lu Zijia are very close in age, and if Lu Zijia is truly talented, he must have something he’s confident in,” Zhuge Liang recalled how Lu Xun had continued to test him despite realizing that Zhuge far surpassed him. The final result had been an overwhelming defeat.

“This is a tragedy,” Fa Zheng sighed, shaking his head. “But in this way, he’ll be more cautious in the future. Let’s hope that one setback won’t ruin him.”

“Don’t worry, he won’t be destroyed. For geniuses, talent alone isn’t enough—effort and resilience are just as important. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be called geniuses,” Chen Xi said with a smile.

Chapter 508: Firefly and Bright Moon

Lu Xun continued reading his book while casually answering Lu Yu's questions without even looking up. He truly regarded Lu Yu as a little child, not taking him seriously at all.

Soon, Lu Yu approached him again, but Lu Xun maintained his posture, offering a few solutions without lifting his head. He didn't notice the increasingly dark expression on Lu Yu's face.

Lu Yu had many questions. At first, Lu Xun could easily answer them while reading, but as time passed, some of Lu Yu's inquiries made Lu Xun pause and think. However, he still didn't find them overly challenging.

Finally, when Lu Yu presented a genuinely difficult case, Lu Xun closed his book. This one required some thought. He looked up at Lu Yu and said, "You're here to test me, aren't you? But if you're doing this on behalf of Zhuge Kongming, you should come up with something more substantial. This kind of test won't show how much I've improved recently."

Lu Yu's face turned completely red. The question he had just posed had stumped him when he asked Wang Lie, so out of frustration, he brought it to Lu Xun.

To be honest, Lu Yu was now thoroughly convinced of Lu Xun's abilities. However, Lu Xun's remark hit him hard. Even if he hadn't fully grasped the situation, he could tell that Zhuge Liang far surpassed the person in front of him. How could he compete when the person in front of him was already abnormally strong, and Zhuge Liang seemed almost divine by comparison?

One thing Lu Yu had learned well was knowing when to advance and when to retreat. After realizing that he was far from being a match for Lu Xun, he quickly admitted his earlier frustration with being ignored and sought to draw Lu Xun's attention back.

"Do you want to know how much of a genius Zhuge Kongming is?" Lu Xun smirked. Lu Yu nodded vigorously like a pecking chicken.

"Though I hate to admit it, the difference between me and Zhuge Kongming is like that between a firefly and the bright moon. The gap is immense, so large that I can't even fathom the depths of his abilities," Lu Xun said with a bitter smile, though his expression also held a trace of admiration. "That guy is a monster."

To Lu Xun, Zhuge Liang left a deeper impression on him than even his own teacher, Chen Xi. Although Zhuge Liang appeared calm and composed, his brilliance was unmatched—beyond any description.

Lu Yu felt a chill in his heart. If Lu Xun's level of genius already made him feel inadequate, then what kind of monster was Zhuge Liang, who Lu Xun admitted to being far inferior to? No wonder Wang Lie had called him unparalleled, beyond compare. It seemed that Zhuge Liang truly was that extraordinary.

"You might not believe this, but Zhuge Kongming taught me everything I know. My teacher thought I was too weak and had Zhuge Kongming guide me first. But at this rate, I don't think I'll surpass him, let alone graduate from his teachings," Lu Xun revealed, leaving Lu Yu utterly shocked.

"I just tried to provoke Zhuge Kongming," Lu Yu said with a twitching face. "I think I might have just signed my own death warrant."

"Don't worry, he won't trouble you. Right now, he's busy dealing with Fazheng and has no time to bother with you," Lu Xun waved dismissively. "Here, take this book. I need to get back to my studies. Even though it's unlikely, I still want to try my best."

With that, Lu Xun buried himself in his studies again. He planned to solidify his foundation before putting his knowledge into practice. He wouldn't challenge Zhuge Liang until he was fully prepared, especially after witnessing Zhuge Liang's overwhelming superiority.

Seeing Lu Xun quickly return to his focused state, Lu Yu picked up the book Lu Xun had handed him and began reading. If his talent couldn't match others, there was nothing he could do. But if he didn't put in the effort, that would be his own fault.

After thoroughly reviewing his book, Lu Xun looked up and saw Lu Yu deep in thought. "If you have any questions, feel free to ask. I'll help wherever I can."

"Who wrote this book?" Lu Yu felt a strong urge to study under the author of this work, as it resonated deeply with him.

"It's an anonymous work from Cai Da's collection," Lu Xun replied calmly. "Cai Da has many rare books. It's said that when the old Lord Cai was alive, he had a collection of tens of thousands of scrolls."

"Wasn't it thirty thousand scrolls?" Lu Yu asked, his jaw dropping.

"Who knows? The entire Taishan Library has over a hundred thousand scrolls, most of which Cai Da transcribed himself," Lu Xun said, glancing at Lu Yu. "You'll definitely go to Taishan. When you do, you can ask Zhuge Kongming about it."

"What a shame," Lu Yu said regretfully. The ideas expressed in this book aligned perfectly with his own thoughts. If he could fully inherit this school's teachings, he was confident that he would experience a breakthrough in his growth. Unfortunately...

"If not, you can always ask Zhuge Kongming. There's nothing he doesn't know. Even if you ask him how to make something, he could explain it in detail," Lu Xun said with a wry smile.

Worried that Lu Yu might provoke Zhuge Liang again, Lu Xun advised, "Zijia, you'd better not challenge Zhuge Kongming. He awakened his spiritual talent at our age, and according to my teacher, Zhuge Kongming's spiritual talent is one of the most terrifying in the world!"

Lu Yu felt cold sweat trickling down his back. He knew what spiritual talent was and couldn't help but mutter, "Is that guy even human?"

"Who knows? Just don't get yourself into trouble. But don't worry—he's a good person. Although he sometimes sets inhuman standards because of his abnormal strength, he doesn't go out of his way to target others," Lu Xun said, recalling how all the foundational knowledge he had worked so hard to master seemed insignificant to Zhuge Liang.

Unbeknownst to Zhuge Liang, both Lu Xun and Lu Yu had mentally classified him as an abnormal person. However, it made no difference to him.

For Zhuge Liang, aside from completing his spiritual talent and marrying Huang Yueying, nothing else seemed too significant. His knowledge was already sufficient; now, he just needed experience.

Chapter 509: The Smoke of Battle

By the time Chen Xi returned in the afternoon, Lu Yu had become much more composed, with his previous arrogance completely gone. It seemed that Lu Xun had given him quite a rough lesson. Chen Xi, however, didn't ask about what had happened earlier. After giving a few instructions to Lu Xun and Fazheng, he set off again with Zhuge Liang, Lu Yu, and some equipment.

Chen Xi headed back to Taishan in a carefree manner, unaware that at the same time, the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans had fallen into a dire situation. Aside from the combined efforts of Xun Chen and Tian Feng, part of the reason for their predicament was Guo Jia's decision to remain passive.

"Boss, this won't work. Our brothers are no match for Yuan Shao's forces," Li Damu said bitterly, clutching the wound on his chest. "And let's not even mention the others—Yan Liang alone is too much for us. Even with the suppression of his spiritual energy, it takes over ten of us just to barely hold him off."

"We need to hold out. For now, we still have the advantage of knowing the Black Mountain terrain. Their cavalry can't fully deploy here, and their infantry isn't as familiar with the terrain as we are. Once we establish contact with Liu Xuande, we'll have hope," Zhang Yan said with great reluctance. The only reason they had managed to hold out this long was that he had succeeded in uniting the Black Mountain army under Yuan Shao's pressure. But even that wasn't enough to resist.

"It's been so long. If Liu Xuande wanted to help us, he would've come by now," Yu Du said angrily, taking a bite of a steamed bun and washing it down with a gulp of water.

"If he won't come to us, then we'll go to him!" Zhang Yan said bitterly after thinking for a long time. It had come to this, after all. The reason he had been able to unite the Black Mountain army in the first place was precisely for this purpose.

The sound of a bowl falling to the ground echoed as Guo Daxian, who had been carrying water, froze in shock. Everyone stared at Zhang Yan in disbelief. Though they had anticipated this day might come, they hadn't expected it to arrive so soon.

"Does it have to be this way, Commander?" Zuo Xiao asked, his expression dark.

"It was decided from the beginning. The Black Mountain army can have a commander, but that commander must protect everyone," Zhang Yan said calmly. "Bring me a map. I need to figure out how to get to Taishan."

Bai Rao and the others exchanged glances. Although this had been agreed upon when they first formed their alliance—to resist Yuan Shao, the commander must protect the Black Mountain army—over the

past few months, as Zhang Yan had proven himself in battle, even those who initially doubted him had come to recognize him as the rightful leader of the Black Mountain army.

Yuan Shao was indeed powerful—this was something Bai Rao and the others had come to understand through their escalating conflicts with him. They had begun to grasp the terrifying strength of Yuan Shao's forces.

If it weren't for Zhang Yan's rapid growth in each battle, the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans would have already been history. It was precisely because of this that Bai Rao and the others had fully accepted Zhang Yan as their commander, no longer out of mere necessity but out of genuine respect.

"You'll die if you do this," Yu Du said bitterly.

"It's better than all of us dying. Besides, do you really want to keep fighting? Liu Xuande is not bad—the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou are doing well under him," Zhang Yan said with a calmness that was almost eerie.

Yu Du was silent for a moment before sighing. "I'll help you find a way."

"Right now, Yan Liang's army has sealed off the road from Jizhou to Qingzhou. Although Licheng is not far, breaking through will cost us dearly. The only other route is through Yanzhou, which, fortunately, is still in disarray due to Lu Bu's rebellion. Otherwise, even that path wouldn't be easy," Zhang Yan said calmly.

Zhang Yan had already made up his mind to die. In fact, the moment he took up the mantle of leadership for the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans, he had resigned himself to this fate. To exchange his life for the future safety and prosperity of nearly a million Yellow Turbans—how could he not gamble on such a possibility, especially when others had already proven it was feasible? Unlike Guan Hai, who hesitated, Zhang Yan had no qualms. If he had to die, so be it.

The examples set by the two great leaders of the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans had left a profound impact on Zhang Yan, and the current state of the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou had filled him with longing. Even before taking up the mantle of leadership, Zhang Yan's heart had already turned toward Taishan. Compared to Yuan Shao's rule, Taishan was much closer to a paradise for the people.

Meanwhile, several miles away, Yan Liang's army was stationed at a camp. Since his defeat at Hulao Pass years ago, Yan Liang had trained tirelessly, and just last year, during a chance encounter, he had received guidance from a mysterious spear master, significantly improving his skills.

"I can finally catch a glimpse of Lu Bu's shadow at Hulao Pass. It turns out Zhao Zilong isn't as terrifying as Lu Bu," Yan Liang exhaled a breath of cold air and slowly stood up.

Thanks to the fortuitous encounter last year, Yan Liang's skills had greatly improved, even surpassing those of Wen Chou. However, to avoid undermining Wen Chou's confidence, Yan Liang had subtly passed on his insights to his brother rather than showing off his progress.

"Ultimate techniques, huh?" Yan Liang mused as he looked at the rising sun. "They're just obstacles on the path to greater heights. Lu Bu doesn't rely on any secret techniques yet remains invincible. I won't waste time creating such techniques—explosive power is fleeting."

"Ha!" Yan Liang shouted, and his spear erupted with a crimson glow, the stench of blood filling the air. A blood-red dragon coiled around the spear, and Yan Liang slammed it into the ground. The entire mountain peak sank several feet, while the spear only penetrated the rock by half a foot.

"Still not enough," Yan Liang muttered in frustration. What he wanted was for the spear to remain unscathed while the entire mountain sank three feet. He needed to fully grasp this technique and embed it into his body, for only then would his strikes carry the weight he desired.

After finishing his morning training, Yan Liang returned to the camp to oversee operations. However, before he could bathe and change, a messenger arrived, informing him that Tian Feng and Xun Chen wished to see him.

Though Yan Liang didn't particularly like Tian Feng and Xun Chen, Yuan Shao had ordered him to follow their commands. So, regardless of his personal feelings, Yan Liang would obey Yuan Shao's orders.

"Lead the way," Yan Liang said, removing his helmet and following the messenger to the central tent where Tian Feng and Xun Chen awaited him.

Upon entering the tent, Yan Liang handed his helmet and spear to the guards and, wearing only a sword at his side, stepped inside. There, he immediately noticed two unexpected figures—Ju Yi and Zhang He.

"Zhengli!" Yan Liang laughed heartily and gave Ju Yi a bear hug, pounding his back twice. "What are you doing here? Weren't you dealing with Gongsun Zan?"

"Hmph, Gongsun Zan's strength is nothing to me. I've already driven him out of You Beiping, and most of Youzhou now belongs to our lord. Gongsun Bogui no longer has the power to look south," Ju Yi said arrogantly, but Yan Liang appreciated that kind of attitude.

Chapter 510: Tian Feng's Strategy

"Let's save the reunion for later. General Ju, it was I who requested our lord to have you transferred here," Xun Chen said as he stepped out from behind the scenes, interrupting the conversation between Yan Liang and Ju Yi.

"Greetings, Military Advisor Xun," Ju Yi, Yan Liang, and Zhang He all bowed in respect. Whether they liked him or not, they would never be disrespectful toward Xun Chen in public.

"May I ask why Military Advisor Xun has summoned both Junyi and me here? If it's to deal with the Yellow Turbans, I believe General Yan should have no difficulty defeating them," Ju Yi asked bluntly, not waiting for Xun Chen to speak.

"Hehe, General Ju, please be patient," Xun Chen replied with a slight glimmer of displeasure in his eyes, though he kept his composure.

"This plan is my doing. General Ju, please hear me out," Tian Feng stepped forward from behind the curtain as well.

"Greetings, Military Advisor Tian," Ju Yi greeted Tian Feng with utmost respect.

Unlike his feelings toward Xun Chen, Ju Yi had great respect for Tian Feng. After all, back when everyone doubted him, it was Tian Feng and Yuan Shao who supported him. To someone as straightforward as Ju Yi, repaying a debt of gratitude was a given, so he fully supported Tian Feng without hesitation.

Fortunately, Tian Feng was extremely intelligent, so Ju Yi's blind loyalty had never led to any mishaps. Over time, Ju Yi's political naivety had only deepened his unwavering support for Tian Feng. Whatever Tian Feng proposed, Ju Yi would back without question.

"General Ju, the purpose of your transfer here is not to deal with the Yellow Turbans. Zhang Yan may think we don't know his hiding spot, but in reality, the weather is dry right now. If we set the mountain on fire, we'll force him out," Tian Feng said with a smile. Zhang Yan had grown rapidly, but he was still too inexperienced. If the goal weren't to push him toward Yanzhou, they could have easily forced the Black Mountain Army out with fire long ago.

"Oh, I see," Ju Yi said, his expression one of sudden realization. "If we're not targeting the Yellow Turbans, then who are we after? There's no one else nearby besides us. Are we going after Liu Bei?" Ju Yi's eyes lit up with excitement—he relished the challenge of facing powerful opponents.

"Liu Xuande? Yes, but he's not our primary target. Our main goal is to eliminate Lu Bu. Ideally, we would absorb his entire force, even Lu Bu himself. Our lord has grand ambitions, and I believe he can conquer this fierce tiger!" Tian Feng nodded before explaining further.

Tian Feng had carefully considered Lu Bu's forces, both his military and his advisors. He concluded that if they could fully absorb Lu Bu's territory, his advisors, and his generals, it would lead to a significant boost in the power of Jizhou.

At the current level of strength between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei, as long as Yuan Shao didn't make any major mistakes and his subordinates remained united, they could leverage the combined intelligence of Xun Chen, Tian Feng, Ju Shou, Xu You, Shen Pei, and Xin Pi to maintain an advantage in strategy.

However, despite the strong lineup of civil advisors, Tian Feng was acutely aware of their deficiency in top-tier generals. While Jizhou had plenty of competent commanders capable of leading armies, what they lacked was a legendary warrior to boost morale. Yan Liang and Wen Chou were among the finest in Hebei, but they still fell short of the very best—at least, that's how Tian Feng saw it.

In this era, where morale could allow common soldiers to overwhelm elite troops, the presence of a peerless general could create a decisive advantage. The difference in morale could trigger a chain reaction, leading to a crushing defeat for the opposing side.

For this reason, Tian Feng's plan was to recruit Lu Bu. If that failed, the next best option was to have Liu Bei eliminate Lu Bu and then recruit Chen Gong and Lu Bu's remaining forces. Failing that, they could use Lu Bu to weaken Liu Bei's forces.

One of Tian Feng's strengths was planning for the worst-case scenario. His strategies always had multiple layers, with contingency plans in place. If he could achieve just one of his three objectives, Tian Feng would consider it a success.

Additionally, by pushing the Black Mountain Army into Yanzhou, Tian Feng also aimed to establish a connection with Yuan Shu. With Yuan Shu's only son, Yuan Yao, on the verge of death, the territories Yuan Shu controlled in Yuzhou, Yangzhou, and Jingzhou were left without a successor. Tian Feng was contemplating whether to reach out to Yuan Shu.

When Yuan Yao was still alive, Tian Feng believed that merging the Yuan family would be difficult without relying on Yuan Shu's impulsive loyalty to open the door. However, his lord wasn't the type to do such things. But now, with Yuan Yao near death, merging the Yuan family seemed much more feasible. If Yuan Shu's spirit was broken, he would likely let go.

That was why Tian Feng and the others were planning ahead. After all, if Yuan Yao were to die, Yuan Shu's only option would be to ask Yuan Shao to adopt one of his sons. Currently, Yuan Shao's most suitable candidate was his eldest son, Yuan Tan. This would effectively merge the two branches of the Yuan family. It wasn't that Tian Feng looked down on Yuan Tan, but compared to the brilliant and heroic Yuan Shao, Yuan Tan fell far short.

"Fight Lu Bu?" Ju Yi's eyes narrowed. Given his straightforward nature and close relationship with Yan Liang and Wen Chou, he knew full well just how powerful Lu Bu was—a nearly inhuman force.

"Only as a last resort, and only if we need to defeat him to demonstrate the difference in strength and make him more amenable to joining us," Tian Feng quickly doused Ju Yi's enthusiasm with a bucket of cold water. He had no desire to see Yuan Shao's limited number of elite troops wasted on Lu Bu—those troops were far too precious.

"But if there's an opportunity, I definitely want to face Lu Bu's Bingzhou Wolf Riders. If I can't defeat the world's finest cavalry, how can my Xian Deng Death Warriors truly take shape?" Ju Yi said with unbridled

pride. "Only warriors forged in the crucible of battle can become an invincible army. I want to see firsthand the strength of these legendary Bingzhou Wolf Riders!"

"Your Xian Deng Death Warriors aren't fully trained yet?" Zhang He asked, astonished. He had personally witnessed Ju Yi leading the Xian Deng Death Warriors to a resounding victory against vastly superior numbers of Youzhou troops in the snow.

"Not yet. They've only just taken shape. They'll need at least two more battles on the scale of the Battle of Jieqiao to be truly ready. Only soldiers who have faced and survived desperate, life-or-death battles can develop an unshakable resolve. Right now, the spirit of my soldiers still depends on me—they need to find their own spirit," Ju Yi said, shaking his head. "As for forming a unified military soul, I haven't figured that out yet."

Zhang He felt a chill run down his spine. Ju Yi's leadership had already driven the Xian Deng Death Warriors into a near-berserker state, fearlessly charging into battle. Yet, under any other commander, while they remained elite, they lacked that unstoppable momentum. Now, Ju Yi was intent on forging that momentum into the very soul of his army.

"Does it really matter whether or not your troops have a unified soul when you're the one leading them? Why go through the trouble of creating one?" Zhang He asked, puzzled. Thanks to Ju Yi's guidance, Zhang He had fully mastered the Dajishi, and now, under his command, they could perform at their peak. With the addition of a legion's innate abilities, they had become one of the most formidable units in the land.