

Mythical 521

Chapter 521: Some Things Were Predestined (2)

"Take your time finding your future husband. Look around more, search more—maybe you'll find someone pleasing to the eye," Chen Xi said, glancing at Mi Zhen. Thinking about Cai Yan's current situation, he felt that Mi Zhen being more cautious now was justified.

"Actually, you're quite pleasing to the eye," Mi Zhen replied with a smile.

"Don't tease me," Chen Xi said, looking into Mi Zhen's clear eyes. He could tell she was playing with him again. Initially, he felt a bit excited—not that he would marry Mi Zhen—but being admired by a beautiful woman was something most men would enjoy, a common weakness.

"It didn't work?" Mi Zhen exclaimed in surprise.

"What were you expecting?" Chen Xi said, exasperated. "You should learn from Zhen Mi—look at how well-behaved she is."

"He said you're well-behaved," Mi Zhen remarked, turning to Zhen Mi. Instantly, Zhen Mi's face turned crimson.

"Alright, enough playing around. You're the only one here who can choose your future husband freely. The others don't have that luxury, so don't make your friends feel bad," Chen Xi said, glancing at Zhen Mi before speaking in a gentle tone.

Among the girls surrounding Mi Zhen, some were already married, others were engaged, and some, like Zhen Mi, were treasured gems of their families. But their marriages were not theirs to decide—whether through alliances or social status, they had no freedom to choose their husbands like Mi Zhen did. Cai Yan's method of taking control of her own fate was far too distant for these girls.

When Liu Liang once praised Zhen Mi with a single sentence, many saw it as admiration. But now, Zhen Mi understood the weight of those words. She realized that because of that one sentence, her only possible future husband could be an emperor or a prince, as only someone of royal status could match

the title of "unparalleled in nobility." Since only those of the Liu family could hold the title of king, it became clear to her that any connection with Chen Xi was destined to remain unfulfilled.

At the time, when Zhen Mi looked in the mirror, she thought her fate had changed. But after a period of uncertainty, she realized that her status had not shifted—she was still the same Zhen Mi, unmatched in nobility. This realization made her gradually suppress her feelings for Chen Xi because, knowing their paths were destined never to cross, she didn't want to create awkwardness between them.

Although Mi Zhen was somewhat mischievous, she had a kind heart. After Chen Xi's words, she quickly realized her mistake. Glancing back at Zhen Mi and the others, she felt a pang of guilt. Fortunately, Zhen Mi calmly nodded to her, easing the tension Mi Zhen had inadvertently caused.

"Lord Chen, we won't disturb you any further. May we borrow your study?" Zhen Mi stepped forward, her expression serene as she bowed to Chen Xi.

"Sure, go ahead. Just don't burn it down," Chen Xi replied with a nod, understanding that these girls seemed to be searching for something in his study.

After Zhen Mi and the others left, only Chen Xi, Fan Jian, and Chen Lan remained in the courtyard.

"Husband, are you still thinking about her?" Fan Jian asked, glancing in the direction Zhen Mi had gone before turning back to Chen Xi.

"Not really, it's just a passing thought. Without that unique charm, she's beautiful, but that's all," Chen Xi replied calmly. "Come, let's go inside. The wind is strong, and another year has passed."

Chen Xi couldn't help but recall Liu Liang's famous remark about Zhen Mi and then think back to his first encounter with her in Jizhou. That unforgettable charm still lingered in his memory, but as he had said, it was just a thought—people cannot live in the past.

As Chen Xi left the house that evening, Zhen Mi and the others were still rummaging through his study. However, it was clear they hadn't found anything of significance. Chen Xi couldn't recall anything particularly special in his study. If there was something, it would likely be the notebook where he recorded yearly events that he could remember.

But even if Zhen Mi and the others got hold of that notebook, they probably wouldn't be able to decipher it. It wasn't just a code—it was something far more complex.

"What are you looking at, Zhen Mi?" Mi Zhen asked curiously, noticing that Zhen Mi had stopped searching and started reading a book.

"Nothing, nothing at all!" Zhen Mi hastily closed the book, her expression flustered. The way she acted made it seem even more suspicious.

Mi Zhen eyed Zhen Mi skeptically, then glanced at the plain-covered book in her hands. After a moment's hesitation, she decided it was best not to provoke Zhen Mi, who now seemed like a mother hen protecting her chicks.

"Phew..." After Mi Zhen left, Zhen Mi exhaled deeply, her face slightly flushed. She quickly slipped the book into her sleeve, pretending as if nothing had happened before resuming her search. Soon, she found another book with a misleading cover and, after skimming through it, quietly slipped it into her sleeve as well, her expression showing a hint of irritation.

"What are you up to?" Cai Yan's younger sister suddenly tapped Zhen Mi on the shoulder, startling her so much that she almost dropped the book.

"Just reading," Zhen Mi replied calmly, though a faint blush remained on her cheeks. She didn't show any signs of guilt for lying.

"Oh..." Cai Yan's sister glanced at the book in Zhen Mi's hands, noting the split in its cover. As a woman who had been married for several years, she instantly recognized what kind of book it was. Though it wasn't in scroll form or silk-bound as usual, the essence remained the same.

"Once you're done reading, go take a bath and cool off," she teased with a mischievous grin, leaving Zhen Mi feeling flustered.

Chen Xi, of course, had no idea that the indecent book Liu Bei had prepared for his wedding had ended up in Zhen Mi's hands. Not that Chen Xi cared much—he already knew all he needed to know.

While Zhen Mi dealt with her embarrassment, Chen Xi had his own troubles. He had been cornered by someone outside, and it was clear that anyone daring to block his path in Mount Tai wasn't just anyone. If they weren't insane, they had to be someone not to be trifled with—especially since they dared to stop him right outside Liu Bei's residence.

"Tell me, Zichuan, will you have this work done by tomorrow?" Lu Su asked with a smile, pointing to the stack of plans Wang Xiu was holding—a stack a foot thick.

"Yes, yes, don't worry," Chen Xi said, wiping the sweat from his brow as he quickly agreed. It was clear Lu Su was already angry, and no one wanted to provoke an angry man known for his patience.

Chapter 522: Lu Su Rounds Up People

After cornering Chen Xi, a smile appeared on Lu Su's face, and he continued to wait at the entrance. A short while later, a black carriage arrived, and Jia Xu slowly stepped out.

"Long time no see, Wenhe," Lu Su said, placing a hand on Jia Xu's shoulder before Chen Xi could greet him.

Jia Xu immediately felt a weight on his shoulder, realizing for the first time just how strong Lu Su's grip was. However, he maintained his calm demeanor and raised his hand to greet Lu Su. "Zijing, why so formal? It hasn't been that long since we last met. Oh, Zichuan, you're here too?"

As he said this, Jia Xu tried to slip past Lu Su into Liu Bei's residence, but Lu Su grabbed his shoulder, preventing him from moving forward.

"Wenhe, it seems we need to have a good talk," Lu Su said with a rather stern expression. He held onto Jia Xu with a gentle smile, but the combination of his gaunt face and pale complexion from being cooped up in the government office made him look rather intimidating.

"Cough, cough, just joking, just joking," Jia Xu quickly backtracked. He was someone who knew how to adapt to the situation, and it was clear that Lu Su had no intention of letting anyone off easy today.

"Hehe," Lu Su chuckled. "Wenhe, can you handle some administrative work?"

"I can, though it's not my strong suit," Jia Xu replied, still trying to evade responsibility. In his mind, with Chen Xi back, there were already enough people to handle the workload, so there was no need for him to step in.

"Shuzhi!" Lu Su called out to his deputy, Wang Xiu, who immediately responded by pulling out a stack of documents as tall as half a person from the carriage.

"If administrative work isn't your forte, then perhaps you can handle this. Just review the personnel situations in Taishan, Qingzhou, and Xuzhou for the year, approve the cases reported from each district, and plan for the coming year. After that, submit everything to Xuande Gong," Lu Su explained calmly. Jia Xu instantly broke out in a cold sweat.

While these tasks weren't particularly challenging, the sheer volume made them overwhelming. Year-end summaries, case reviews, and planning for the upcoming year—there was no end to it. Jia Xu realized that if he took this on, he'd be stuck working until the new year, and there was no way to avoid it.

Wiping away non-existent sweat from his forehead, Jia Xu decided to take on something more challenging instead. "I was a bit confused earlier. Actually, I can handle administrative work just fine, Zijing. No need to be so polite. Ahem."

"Shuzhi," Lu Su called out again, and Wang Xiu quickly put the stack of documents back in the carriage and handed Lu Su a single sheet of paper.

"How about this? Can you manage it?" Lu Su asked, handing the paper to Jia Xu. Even though it was getting dark, Jia Xu could still make out the contents on the page.

"I can, but I'll need the authority to assemble a new management team, appoint officials and scholars, and allocate resources from the treasury," Jia Xu replied after reading the paper. Though he was reluctant, he couldn't refuse outright given Lu Su's current mood.

"No problem," Lu Su said casually. "Shuzhi!"

Without hesitation, Wang Xiu handed Jia Xu a prepared order, complete with the seals of Lu Su, Man Chong, and Mi Zhu.

"...Zijing, you really came prepared!" Jia Xu said, somewhat surprised as he looked at the document in his hand.

"I'm here to round up everyone who's needed. Anyone who shows up today won't get away," Lu Su said grimly, clearly fed up with the mountain of administrative work and determined to share the burden with others.

Jia Xu shrugged and walked over to stand beside Chen Xi, waiting to see if anyone else would fall into Lu Su's trap.

"Wenhe, you got caught too, huh?" Chen Xi said, patting Jia Xu on the shoulder.

"You're not much better off. At least my workload has an end in sight, while yours is indefinite," Jia Xu said, comparing their situations and feeling a bit better. Indeed, everything is relative.

Chen Xi sighed, realizing that his decision to abolish most death sentences and replace them with indefinite hard labor had come back to haunt him. It hadn't taken long for Jia Xu to grasp the concept of limited versus indefinite sentences.

"Whatever, whatever. What did he give you to handle?" Chen Xi asked out of curiosity.

"Horse administration, military dogs, and the government's poultry operations," Jia Xu replied with a sigh. This wasn't going to be an easy task.

"Forget the poultry for now. The horses and military dogs are the key issues here. The poultry will probably just be something you inherit from Mi Zizhong," Chen Xi said after some thought. "How do you plan to handle it?"

"The military dogs are easy. Dogs are everywhere, so we'll start by giving each of you one. Set an example, and others will follow. Eventually, when there are too many dogs, we can round them up—it'll even be seen as a benevolent act. As for the horses, this area isn't suitable for building large stables, but I'll still construct one. Beyond that, we'll rely on the common people, and we'll need to assess the value and provide subsidies," Jia Xu explained. Although he claimed not to be good at administrative work, his intelligence made him more than capable.

"Alright, alright. Setting an example is a good idea. As for horse administration, it's a real headache. This year, we've finally ended the famine, so we have surplus grain to feed horses. But there's still a lot to consider, so take your time with it," Chen Xi said, understanding the complexity of the task.

"Yes, I suspect Zijing doesn't expect me to complete this in a few months. He's likely aiming for a complete and feasible plan within one or two years. He has big ambitions," Jia Xu said with a smile. The task Lu Su had given him was clearly not just for one county or province.

"Indeed, he's probably thinking of turning the entire grasslands into Han's horse pasture. What Emperor Zhao and Emperor Xuan couldn't achieve, he sees as possible. Having big ambitions is a good thing," Chen Xi agreed. He, too, had noticed that Lu Su had grand visions. Coming from a powerful family, Lu Su truly wanted to create a prosperous era with his own hands.

"It's difficult. You haven't lived on the northern frontier, so you don't know how harsh the conditions are. I was born in Xiliang, and let me tell you, even if we conquer that land, it'll be hard to hold onto it," Jia Xu said with a sigh. "It's too barren. The land we're standing on now is far too fertile—no one would willingly go to such a place unless they had no choice."

"Yes, I know. Let me tell you a secret, but don't share it with anyone," Chen Xi said, a mocking smile appearing on his face.

Chapter 523: Everything Has Its Use

Jia Xu felt dizzy, his mind spinning from the information Chen Xi had just shared with him. If it hadn't been Chen Xi who calmly said these words, Jia Xu would never have believed it, even if beaten to death.

"Are you sure?" Jia Xu's eyes gleamed with a sharp light. "Are you sure that the place where the Wuhuan and Xianbei reside is really like you described? If it's true, why haven't they started farming there?"

"Because they're too foolish, or maybe they never considered that the land could be farmed. Although you can only harvest once a year, Wenhe, do you think it's worth it?" Chen Xi said with a mocking tone, gazing towards the northeastern plains. The Xianbei and Wuhuan would never have imagined that the land they occupied could be such a treasure.

"If it's true, then there's no question about it. That land must be secured. Five million acres of fertile land—conquering the Central Plains wouldn't compare to occupying that place!" Jia Xu's eyes gleamed coldly. If it were indeed true, there was no need to discuss further. They would need to take it all, as fertile land has always been the most valued asset in Chinese tradition.

"So, how do you like the path I've paved for the future?" Chen Xi smiled and continued, "You can send people to investigate. After all, we have good connections with Liaodong. Although the northern frontier is dangerous, I believe it shouldn't be a problem for you to scout it out."

Chen Xi could already see the eagerness in Jia Xu's eyes. A place like that, with thousands of acres of land, would be a perfect legacy to secure the future of one's descendants.

"I'll send people to investigate. If there are indeed five million acres of fertile land, then there's no need for further discussion. We'll eliminate anyone who stands in our way. But let me ask you, what about the money? The grain? What about the money?" Jia Xu pressed, locking eyes with Chen Xi. He had decided to take on this task.

"We'll have to wait on the money front. Many powerful families live off lending to the common people. I'm waiting for the right moment. There are still many things that haven't been put in place yet. I'm preparing to reform the currency. This time, copper must be abundant," Chen Xi said, his expression darkening at the thought of those parasites.

Chen Xi had long wanted to reform the currency, but the lack of copper mines held him back. Moreover, Liu Bei was not yet the strongest warlord in the land, and mishandling the currency could have adverse effects. So, Chen Xi was simply waiting—waiting for Gan Ning to bring him solid news.

As long as the information was confirmed, Chen Xi would wait for the right opportunity to deliver a heavy blow. Copper was valuable, but it couldn't equate to its exchange value. Besides, the Han Dynasty was short of copper coins, and large transactions relied on guarantees, which was full of loopholes that could ruin people.

"You've certainly prepared well in advance. That's expected of you, Chen Zichuan. But who are you planning to target?" Jia Xu nodded, impressed by how Chen Xi always seemed to be thinking three steps ahead.

"Why do you think the powerful families lend money to the common people? It's the end of the year again. If it weren't for the abundance of resources we distributed last year, how many people do you think would have been torn apart by loans?" Chen Xi said, glancing at Lu Su, who was still gazing into the distance. "Do you think they really care about the meager earnings of the common folk?"

"This has been a problem for hundreds of years," Jia Xu murmured. His own family lent money too, though they were far better than 99% of other families. If the money was repaid in early spring, they only charged a 10% interest rate, which was much more reasonable compared to those who demanded double or even more.

"They're holding onto too much money. They'd rather bury it than use it. But what happens when the currency devalues? Devalues to one-tenth, one-twentieth, or even to the value of the copper itself?" Chen Xi said with a smile that sent chills down Jia Xu's spine. "And then, to maintain stability, I abolish the old currency and introduce new copper coins into circulation."

Jia Xu looked at Chen Xi and smiled bitterly. Although he didn't fully understand the implications, he could guess the outcome. The powerful families hoarding the old currency would lose at least half of their assets, and it was possible that Chen Xi had been deliberately buying up physical goods beforehand.

"Ruthless, but I admire it," Jia Xu praised. "Using this method, you could evaporate more than half of the wealth of the powerful families."

"It's just an idea. I wouldn't actually go that far. When the time comes, I'll handle it differently," Chen Xi said calmly. Sometimes, he did feel like delivering a harsh blow to those shameless aristocrats, but the potential upheaval was too great. Although this tactic would leave the opposition too weakened to fight back, it was ultimately too extreme.

"I knew it," Jia Xu said with a sigh. Such a brutal strategy wasn't something Chen Xi would actually use. It would take someone like Li You to carry out such a plan. Normal people, even himself, wouldn't go that far.

"We'll decide when the time comes. We won't do anything drastic until we have the absolute power to dominate the world. After all, handling it this way would cause a lot of trouble," Chen Xi said with a sigh. Some things, though obviously correct, still required consideration of their impact.

"Yes, let's start with the horse administration and military dogs. By the way, do you have any specialists in these fields?" Jia Xu nodded, then smoothly shifted the topic.

Jia Xu would quietly put an end to his family's lending practices. They didn't need that little bit of money, and it was just something they did to follow the crowd and provide additional layers of protection. But he didn't want to get caught in Chen Xi's violent crackdown.

"If not, look for some of the aristocrats who love cockfighting and dog-fighting. Or perhaps some who are skilled at handling horses," Chen Xi suggested after thinking for a moment. "Although they're not experts, they'll have their own techniques for making dogs more aggressive and obedient. The same goes for those who love racing horses."

"Hmm, makes sense," Jia Xu said as he scrutinized Chen Xi. "You always think from unusual angles, but I have to admit that these people would be very suitable."

There was no shortage of people who enjoyed cockfighting and dog-fighting, especially in a prosperous city like Fenggao. Even though entertainment options had expanded, it didn't stop the aristocrats from indulging in such activities.

As Chen Xi and Jia Xu continued chatting, they kept an eye on Lu Su. If he didn't let them through, they would be stuck outside, left to enjoy the breeze. Fortunately, the autumn wind wasn't too cold yet.

If it were truly cold, Lu Su would probably be the first to leave. After all, as a top strategist with an ice-based spiritual talent, it was ironic that he couldn't endure his own power. How tragic.

"Finally, someone's here," Chen Xi said with a smile as he saw a small carriage slowly approaching.

"Kongming?" Jia Xu remarked, clicking his tongue in wonder. He hadn't expected Liu Bei to invite Zhuge Liang. "He's finally ready to take the stage. You won't have the chance to lead him anymore."

Chapter 524: Sharpening the Blades for Lu Bu

"Yes, just like with Fazheng back then, they're growing quickly," Chen Xi nodded, watching as Zhuge Liang stepped down from the carriage, with Lu Su quickly moving to greet him, giving Zhuge Liang the respect he deserved.

"It's been a while, Kongming," Lu Su said with a smile, offering a hand to help Zhuge Liang down. Experiencing such high-level treatment for the first time, Zhuge Liang couldn't help but feel a bit excited.

"It has indeed been a while," Zhuge Liang responded politely, maintaining his composure.

"Hey, Zichuan, what do you think Zijing will assign to Kongming?" Jia Xu nudged Chen Xi with his elbow.

"Heh, it won't be a small task. Although Kongming appears calm and unaffected by all of this, he's no different from Fazheng. The only difference is that Fazheng is expressive, while Kongming hides his emotions," Chen Xi chuckled, turning to Jia Xu.

"Zijing is lucky," Jia Xu smiled as well. "Back then, when we were all busy with military affairs, Fazheng had already learned everything he could from Guo Jia and had moved on to working with Zijing. At that time, Fazheng was full of energy, eager to prove himself through hard work."

"I'll bet you a jade pendant that Zhuge Kongming will be twice as diligent as Fazheng. He'll still be working on government affairs even after Zijing has gone to bed," Chen Xi said without hesitation, pulling a jade pendant from his waist and handing it to Jia Xu.

"While it's true that Kongming is low-key and doesn't like to show off, being new, he'll definitely work hard. And given his personality, it's likely he'll put in more effort than Fazheng. But saying he'll work twice as hard is a bit exaggerated. As for outworking Zijing..." Jia Xu trailed off, accepting the jade pendant as he continued explaining.

"You'll understand soon enough," Chen Xi said with a teasing smile.

On the other side, Zhuge Liang and Lu Su were already deep in conversation. Among the civil officials in Taishan, Zhuge Liang admired Lu Su the most and found Chen Xi the most exasperating.

The reason was simple: Lu Su's diligent and hard-working nature perfectly matched Zhuge Liang's ideal image. Additionally, Lu Su's warm and gentle demeanor resonated well with Zhuge Liang.

"Kongming, come to my office tomorrow. I'm short on staff, and you're no less capable than the rest of us," Lu Su said warmly. He had high hopes for the young man before him.

"I'll be counting on you, Zijing," Zhuge Liang replied with a gentle smile, which complemented his scholarly appearance.

"Of course. Come with me now; we'll discuss official matters in the government office tomorrow. Let's not keep Xuande waiting," Lu Su said with a smile.

"Look at them," Chen Xi shrugged and said to Jia Xu, "Don't you feel a bit envious?"

"My teeth aren't aching, but don't you feel it's getting a bit chilly?" Jia Xu asked, turning to Chen Xi.

"Maybe you're just weak. This breeze feels quite refreshing..." Chen Xi started to remark, but then a gust of cold wind snuck into his sleeves and collar. "Achoo! Zijing, you rascal..." he muttered as he hurried into Liu Bei's residence, while Jia Xu simply shook his head.

By the time Chen Xi and Jia Xu had taken their seats, most of the civil and military officials of Fenggao had already gathered. However, compared to last year when the likes of Guan Yu, Zhao Yun, Gan Ning, Taishi Ci, Wei Yan, and Chen Dao were present, the military ranks were noticeably thinner this time. However, this time Xu Chu was seated among the military officers.

Chen Xi squinted slightly. Xu Chu was seated in the military section, right next to Zhang Fei. The two were already guzzling wine from large jars like old friends.

"Zichuan, long time no see! Soon, I'm planning to challenge Lu Bu one-on-one!" Zhang Fei bellowed the moment he saw Chen Xi. Then, like beating a drum, he slapped Xu Chu on the back and laughed, "Zhongkang here is also eager to measure Lu Bu's strength. Want to join us?"

Hearing the dull "thump, thump, thump" of Zhang Fei's slaps, Chen Xi couldn't help but grimace. It was fortunate that Xu Chu was the one receiving those blows. If it were anyone else, they'd likely be dead. But Xu Chu, with his thick skin, continued drinking without a care, his hand steady as ever.

"Haha, we'll see. I don't think I'll be going, though. Just be careful," Chen Xi replied with a smile.

"Don't worry, your third brother's got your back. I've been training in Taishan for three years, and now I can lift a giant cauldron with my spear without even using inner energy," Zhang Fei boasted proudly.

The battle at Hulao Pass had left a deep impression on Zhang Fei, giving him much to think about. It had also left a mark on him—Lu Bu's arrogant, confident demeanor had been seared into his memory!

That was Zhang Fei's only defeat, and now he sought to erase that shame. Only by facing Lu Bu head-on could he truly measure his progress!

Zhang Fei wasn't entirely confident that he could defeat Lu Bu. Although his strength had grown to rival that of Xu Chu, he knew that raw power alone wouldn't be enough to overcome Lu Bu.

After the battle at Hulao Pass, Zhang Fei had spent a long time contemplating. Ultimately, he chose to abandon secret techniques and specialized skills. While those could enhance his combat prowess, they were short-term solutions. They might make him invincible against similarly skilled opponents, but Zhang Fei preferred to aim higher.

Before Hulao Pass, Zhang Fei might have believed that reaching the level of projecting inner energy was the pinnacle of martial prowess. He might have thought that such power would allow him to match even Xiang Yu. But after Hulao Pass, Zhang Fei understood that while projecting inner energy might be the limit for warriors, one must actually reach that limit. At Hulao Pass, Lu Bu could have killed him in just a hundred moves!

Now, Zhang Fei had reached his peak, driven by the memory of Lu Bu. Following Lu Bu and Huang Zhong, he had become another super-general who had reached the pinnacle of projecting inner energy. He had surpassed top experts like Guan Yu, Zhao Yun, Tong Yuan, and Wang Yue, who were still striving for perfection in their inner energy projection. Zhang Fei had reached the end of that path!

While Tong Yuan and Wang Yue might still be slightly stronger than Zhang Fei in a fight and capable of contending with Lu Bu, Zhang Fei had ventured further along this path. He had reached the finish line, while Tong Yuan and Wang Yue were still walking it.

Zhang Fei was only vaguely aware of this. At this level, there were no guides—he had to rely on himself. After breaking through the limits of inner energy projection, Zhang Fei had gained a deeper understanding of Lu Bu's strength. But instead of feeling intimidated, he was even more eager. He needed this battle—a battle with Lu Bu!

Chapter 525: I Am Truly Lucky!

Liu Bei personally helped Lu Kang to the seat right next to his own, showing him the utmost respect. Although Liu Bei hadn't fully grasped the importance of Lu Kang and the Lu family, both Chen Xi and Li You had made it clear to him that the Lu family would play a significant role in his future plans to restore the Han dynasty. Therefore, Liu Bei felt it was necessary to treat Lu Kang with great courtesy.

Glancing at Liu Bei's expression as he looked back at him, Chen Xi casually nodded. If they had truly organized a grand reception for him and invited everyone, Chen Xi would have felt a bit awkward, particularly because it would have been difficult to handle the situation with Lu Su.

Lu Kang, understanding his position, was quite satisfied with Liu Bei's treatment. Despite his previous concerns that Liu Bei might hold a grudge against the Lu family for their cautious behavior, Liu Bei had not even mentioned it. Instead, he sincerely expressed his hope that the Lu family would join him in Taishan, and if they chose not to, he would still offer them protection due to their previous amicable relationship.

Given the circumstances, Lu Kang had no intention of refusing Liu Bei's offer. The respect Liu Bei showed him had already exceeded his expectations, so he humbly expressed his willingness to rely on Liu Bei in the future.

As a result, the atmosphere at the banquet was lively and harmonious. After about an hour, Lu Kang excused himself, citing his old age and declining health, and Liu Bei and Chen Xi personally saw him off to his carriage.

"I didn't expect the head of the Lu family to be so sensible," Liu Bei remarked as he watched Lu Kang's carriage roll away.

"It's because we've become strong enough that even the most cautious families have no choice but to be sensible," Chen Xi said with a smile. "We've grown powerful enough that most forces have no choice but to submit."

"Indeed. I remember when we passed through Yingchuan, we tried to visit the Xun family but couldn't even get an audience, and you were even removed from the Chen family's registry," Liu Bei said with a sigh, reminiscing about the past.

"Yes, it wasn't easy back then. How are Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping doing now?" Chen Xi asked, recalling the two merchants who had helped him early on. Though they couldn't compare to the foundations of the Zhen family or the foresight of the Mi family, they were by no means ordinary.

"They're doing well. Among the wealthy merchants of the world, they're now among the top," Liu Bei replied with a nod. He had never forgotten the two who had helped him in the beginning and had continued to support them, though their foundations were still somewhat weak.

"Time flies," Chen Xi said, gazing up at the stars. "I imagine many people regret their decisions now. When we first came to Taishan, we tried to recruit Zhang Zhao and Zhang Hong from the Zhang family in Xuzhou. Unfortunately, only Zijing came. I bet they regret it now."

Without a doubt, Chen Xi was sure that Zhang Zhao, in particular, regretted his decision. The Zhang family had been forced to relocate, while Liu Bei had grown to a level where they could only look up to him as a dominant force in the world. Unfortunately for Zhang Zhao, he had rejected them too thoroughly back then.

"Hahaha, they must regret it deeply. I remember you insisted that our soldiers visit them twice, and on the third departure, you made sure they were told, 'You will regret this,'" Liu Bei laughed heartily. Back

then, he hadn't understood Chen Xi's actions, but as his power grew, he increasingly understood the impact of those words after being rejected three times.

"It's more than just regret; they must be filled with regret as they watch us grow stronger and stronger," Chen Xi said with a grin. "And as we continue to grow, they'll regret it even more because we will become unstoppable!"

"Yes, we will only grow stronger!" Liu Bei said firmly. "But even back then, I was content to have Zijing join us. Hahaha."

"That's luck," Chen Xi shrugged. "Just like how I initially planned to follow Cao Mengde's forces to gain some experience. But because of Lan'er, I was delayed a few days, and had to travel on my own. Then, my steward took the wrong path, and I ended up running into you, was caught spying on the camp by third brother while you were training, and you didn't pursue the matter..."

Hearing this, Liu Bei realized how many coincidences had led to their meeting. If any one of those events hadn't occurred, he would have missed the greatest opportunity of his life.

"What are you thinking about, Xuande?" Chen Xi noticed the silence beside him and turned to look at Liu Bei.

"I'm just thinking that I am truly very lucky," Liu Bei said, patting Chen Xi on the shoulder before heading back inside, leaving Chen Xi standing there, slightly bewildered. "Why is he walking so fast? It suddenly feels a bit chilly."

When Chen Xi returned to the hall, the banquet had already been cleared away, and Liu Bei was seated at the head of the table, with the seat to his left empty, reserved for him.

"Come, Zichuan, we've been waiting for you," Liu Bei called out with a hearty laugh.

Chen Xi rolled his eyes. He had only been a few seconds behind Liu Bei, yet Liu Bei was teasing him as if he had been late, though he did tend to be late quite often.

Once Chen Xi took his seat, the meeting proceeded smoothly—well, it was mostly Lu Su speaking while everyone else listened. After all, this year's tasks had largely been handled by Lu Su, while everyone else had been slacking off. Of course, Chen Xi had planned out the year's work the previous year, but Lu Su's attention to detail sometimes made him want to strangle someone.

"In the next three months, we need to complete the registration of new households, update household records, establish markets outside the city, thoroughly audit year-end accounts, evaluate officials, and finalize tax assessments," Lu Su said calmly, though the list of tasks made everyone behind him groan internally. Lu Su's insistence on meticulous work was a burden for many.

"Zichuan, what about next year's work plan? Or perhaps some long-term planning?" Lu Su asked, turning to Chen Xi, who was seated diagonally from him. If Chen Xi was in Taishan, Lu Su would always sit in the second position on the left.

"Long-term planning?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow. "Have you finished the entire northern plan?"

"I've completed that part of the plan over the course of this year. Before Yuan Benchu falls, all the foundational infrastructure and basic planning will be finished. Now we just need Gongyou to complete the strategic reserves, and we can begin the campaign. Wherever we conquer, I'll build, and we won't delay any of the people's needs!" Lu Su's pale complexion and thin frame couldn't conceal the intense confidence he exuded in that moment.

"Alright, I'll handle the next phase. I'll complete the second batch of mid-to-late-stage strategic plans before the end of the year. Gongyou, how far along are we on the strategic reserves that started two years ago?" Chen Xi nodded and stood up to address the room.

Chapter 526: Yuan Shao's Strength

Sun Qian stood up and reported the total consumption and reserves of resources for the year. As the precise figures were presented, Jia Xu, Liu Ye, and the others who understood the significance of the numbers began calculating. They soon exchanged glances filled with joy, each seeing the excitement in the other's eyes.

"The situation is as expected. Zichuan's estimates were quite accurate. After next year's summer harvest is stored, we'll have enough grain to sustain ten months of continuous warfare!" Lu Su said calmly. They had made extensive preparations for this day. While other warlords would be thrilled to have three months' worth of war supplies, they had stockpiled several times that amount.

"Total war—starting from the borders of Bingzhou and Jizhou, we'll launch a full-scale attack!" Li You said, tapping on the table in front of him. Although he hadn't previously revealed his sharp military insights in front of Liu Bei, Lu Su's words had stirred a sense of grandeur within him, compelling him to speak out.

Liu Ye was momentarily stunned, but in the next instant, he understood Li You's strategy. His expression shifted to one of shock and awe as he realized that Li You's plan surpassed any of the ideas that had briefly crossed his mind.

"Yuan Benchu's strength is not inferior to ours. With control over two and a half provinces, Yuan Benchu's Jizhou is the essence of the north. It is not only the best grain-producing region but also a land that produces horses. Furthermore, southern Bingzhou is a treasure trove, despite its limited population and grain production due to the lack of strong forces to suppress the northern nomads. However, if I'm not mistaken, Tian Yuanhao and others are currently relocating the population to Bingzhou," Li You continued, ignoring Liu Ye's stunned expression.

In fact, Li You knew that his display of insight might have been excessive, as even someone as brilliant as Liu Ye might not have considered such a strategy. But once he had started speaking, it was better to finish his thoughts to leave a lasting impression rather than abruptly stopping and drawing even more attention.

"Both Youzhou, Bingzhou, and Jizhou are horse-producing regions. Yuan Benchu has well-trained troops and ample grain supplies. The people of Bingzhou may not openly express their feelings about Yuan Shao's efforts to repel the Xianbei, but as long as Yuan Shao helps them clear the land a hundred miles north of the Great Wall, they will willingly join his forces!" Li You said, feeling a pang of nostalgia.

He couldn't help but think of Dong Zhuo in the past, who initially relied on infantry. However, like what Tian Feng was doing now, Li Ru had once helped Dong Zhuo crush the Qiang people in Liangzhou using just one-third of the Han forces. That's how the Xiliang cavalry had come together. When Dong Zhuo departed, the men of Xiliang followed on horseback, becoming the most elite of his forces—later known as the Flying Bear Army.

The men of the borderlands value loyalty, and if Yuan Shao brings an end to their war with the nomads, allowing them to dominate the barbarians, they will sell their lives to him!

The true elite cavalry of the late Han, whether it was the Xiliang cavalry, Bingzhou wolf riders, or the White Horse Volunteers, were all formed by such men. These cavalry units were unmatched in loyalty and ferocity, making them some of the finest troops of their time.

This is also why, despite the elite equipment of the Tiger and Leopard Cavalry, they were only marginally stronger than the Xiliang cavalry, yet their numbers were a mere fraction. A group of mercenaries motivated by rewards could never surpass those who followed out of loyalty and righteousness.

"When the time comes, our main opponents will likely be cavalry. Their combat effectiveness might rival that of the two elite cavalry units we faced before," Li You said calmly. "In terms of troop strength and unit types, we do not have the advantage, and we may even be at a disadvantage. However, we have enough valiant generals on our side."

"Wenru, your strategy is worth considering, but it's not yet time for us to engage Yuan Shao in a full-scale war. When the time is right, we can revisit this plan. For now, let's hear more from Zijing," Liu Bei said with a smile. It wasn't yet the right moment for an all-out war.

"Understood." Li You quietly returned to his seat.

Li You knew that he had been somewhat hasty, but he also understood that Yuan Shao would not turn away the Bingzhou wolf riders who had pledged their loyalty to him. These men, who brought their own horses and pledged their lives to Yuan Shao, only needed some training to surpass the majority of Yuan Shao's existing forces. Moreover, they came out of gratitude and were guaranteed to be loyal.

"Ha, Wenru, you're still as formidable as ever," Chen Xi whispered.

"Horses consume too much grain. Without someone like you who brings good fortune, it's impossible to sustain more than 20,000 cavalry. And when the fighting starts, the consumption of grain will increase exponentially," Li You whispered back, the two of them secretly chatting under Liu Bei's watchful eye.

"You mean we should launch an attack, let them drive us back, and then hold our ground at the border?" Chen Xi frowned. "It doesn't seem entirely necessary. I agree that we might not stand a chance against Yuan Shao in a head-on battle, given his superior forces and troop composition. But if we use our covert agents, we could easily take over half of Jizhou."

"If we act too early, we won't be able to deal a decisive blow. Besides, don't you think our own ranks are starting to get a bit mixed with riffraff as we grow stronger?" Li You said, narrowing his eyes.

"If we launch an attack and get driven back, it would shake the entire country. If Yuan Benchu gains momentum, let me ask you—do you consider Yuan Benchu a true hero?" Chen Xi voiced his concerns. Li You's plan was good, but it carried significant risks.

"Back in Luoyang, he was the only one who dared to draw his sword against Dong Zhuo. And given his current performance in the north, let me put it this way—if not for Xuande and Cao Mengde, I believe he would be the most likely to conquer the world," Li You said seriously.

"Honestly, if it weren't for Cao Mengde's massacre in Xuzhou, I would have considered him the most likely to succeed, followed by Yuan Benchu. But if we're talking about who has the best chance of uniting the land, if not for Xuande, my bet would be on Yuan Benchu," Chen Xi nodded.

Chen Xi couldn't help but wonder if Yuan Shao had somehow consumed some kind of divine elixir. He seemed almost unnaturally heroic, exuding a boundless spirit and daring, with an unshakable confidence in his subordinates, who were utterly loyal to him. It was as if he were a more powerful version of Cao Cao at his peak. Most importantly, Yuan Benchu held a hand of cards that, in terms of overall strength, could stand up to Liu Bei without fear.

"Zichuan, I admit you're a genius, but Xuande's foundations are too shallow. It's remarkable that you've taken him from nothing to where he is now, surpassing everyone's expectations. But you started from scratch, while Yuan Benchu inherited a land that was already rich in resources," Li You said with a bitter smile.

"I know. Ju Gong's governance of Jizhou was indeed impressive," Chen Xi nodded. "I'll give more thought to your strategy."

Chapter 527: The Will of the Formation Breakers

Of course, Chen Xi understood the difference between Liu Bei and Yuan Shao. When Liu Bei first arrived in Mount Tai, his power compared to Yuan Shao when he occupied Jizhou was akin to the difference between post-World War II China and the United States. Moreover, just like Mount Tai, Liu Bei had the support of Xuzhou...

However, Chen Xi's greatest achievement was achieving self-sufficiency before Xuzhou cut off its support and then rapidly expanding to catch up with Yuan Shao. The prosperity of Mount Tai grew by leaps and bounds, rivaling Jizhou quarter by quarter, until it finally surpassed Yuan Shao in overall prosperity. To be honest, this was enough to frighten most people to death.

"It's not just good; it's incredibly strong. But you are even stronger. The reason we don't interfere with the plans you set in place is that you're far better at this than we are," Li You sighed, acknowledging Chen Xi's superiority. He refrained from discussing his previous strategy, as Chen Xi's reasoning was sound—Yuan Shao in his current state could indeed cause a lot of trouble if he gained momentum.

"Let's not dwell on that. Who's the strategist for the Western Army in this campaign?" Chen Xi asked, shifting the topic.

"The strategist for the Western Army is Ziyang, but it's probably just a formality since it's a feint. The main force will still be led by General Guan and Fengxiao. However, I suspect Liu Ziyang had other motives when he volunteered for the role," Li You pointed toward Liu Ye.

"He volunteered as the strategist? I bet he's just trying to escape his administrative duties. The calculation of finances is his responsibility—who's going to do that if he runs off?" Chen Xi said, exasperated.

"You will," interrupted Lu Su, who had been quietly listening but chose this moment to chime in. Chen Xi immediately felt his mood darken at the prospect of the next few months.

"You can handle it, Ziyang has other important tasks," Lu Su said sternly, noticing Chen Xi's dismayed expression.

"What about Zijian? I initially thought he wasn't here because he had some important business, but now that I notice Zhugan sitting beside Yide, there's no empty seat left, meaning Zijian isn't in Mount Tai. What's going on?" Chen Xi asked, realizing he had overlooked something.

"Zijian has already set out. He's the vanguard of the Western Army and also needs to liaise with Zhang Yan. So, he led his entire corps into the campaign," Li You explained calmly.

"I...", Chen Xi was momentarily speechless.

A vanguard? Does a vanguard need an entire corps? That's enough to lead an army of a hundred thousand. Even for a hundred thousand strong, five thousand would suffice as a vanguard. But Hua Xiong has an entire corps—infantry and cavalry, totaling seven thousand troops!

It was well-known that Hua Xiong's corps was one of the most formidable in Mount Tai, with both its cavalry and infantry boasting exceptional combat power.

"Something unexpected happened. Zhang Yan sent an official letter saying he's willing to incorporate the entire Black Mountain Yellow Turbans into Mount Tai. He's even willing to offer his own head if we allow them to live as the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou do," Lu Su said with a wry smile, baffled by the shift in the Yellow Turbans' loyalty.

"A righteous act often comes from unexpected quarters," Chen Xi sighed. "So Xuande sent someone to negotiate? Hmm, were the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans driven to desperation?"

"Ju Yi went. The Xian Deng Dead Soldiers were deliberately ambushed by Zhang Yan but retaliated, killing nearly ten leaders of the Yellow Turbans—all formidable fighters at the Qi Refining stage," Lu Su said with a bitter smile. "About twenty Qi Refining experts led thirty thousand men in an ambush on the Xian Deng Dead Soldiers, but they were defeated within a quarter of an hour."

"Strategy must be adapted to the opponent. Against such elite troops, ordinary ambushes, surprise attacks, or night raids are ineffective. Against them, a simple fire would suffice in this cool autumn weather," Li You remarked, glancing at Lu Su.

Lu Su rolled his eyes at Li You. When this issue was discussed with Jia Xu, Jia Xu also suggested burning down the entire mountain to deal with the Xian Deng Dead Soldiers, noting that Zhang Yan's ambush was doomed from the start.

"Have you ever noticed that the Yellow Turbans have an unusually high number of Qi Refining warriors? Considering their humble origins, how is it that our own soldiers struggle to break through despite facing life-and-death battles?" Chen Xi asked, furrowing his brow.

"Could there be some hidden factor? Logically, the first step to cultivating Qi is just getting enough to eat. But after achieving that, we discovered there's a hidden mental aspect," Lu Su mused, frowning.

"It's probably related to the Yellow Turbans themselves," Jia Xu began to deduce. His mind quickly processed the relevant information, and soon he had a conclusion. "Moreover, instead of questioning why there are so many Qi Refining warriors among the Yellow Turbans, we should consider this: isn't this era unusually brilliant?"

Lu Su was taken aback, while Chen Xi remained unperturbed—this era's brilliance was something he had always taken for granted.

"Ever since the Yellow Turban Rebellion over a decade ago..." Jia Xu narrowed his eyes as he spoke. "What did the Yellow Turbans do? I suspect it's something Zhang Jiao initiated. Wenru's spiritual awakening, as well as mine, occurred during that period. Think of all the other talented individuals—the great minds and warriors of our time emerged after the Yellow Turbans collapsed, and the world became much stranger."

Both Lu Su and Chen Xi paused in thought, but while they lacked specific memories of the Han dynasty over a decade ago, Chen Xi found himself agreeing with Jia Xu's analysis.

"Although we don't know how Zhang Jiao did it, this era, if it conquers the world, will undoubtedly forge a brilliance far surpassing any other," Jia Xu concluded, having pieced together the sequence of events with the help of his spiritual insights.

"Heh..." Chen Xi chuckled. The Three Kingdoms era was indeed brilliant, but it was also marked by constant upheavals and reversals. Anyone who dared underestimate an opponent or grew complacent would find themselves toppled—or even dead.

From Dong Zhuo to Yuan Shao, from Yuan Shao to Cao Cao, from Cao Cao to Sun Quan, from Cao Cao to Liu Bei, from Guan Yu to Lu Meng, from Liu Bei to Lu Xun; the Three Kingdoms era was defined by its ever-changing power dynamics. Just when one side seemed to be winning, the tide would turn. The line between strength and weakness could shift at any moment, up until the very last moment.

This is why Chen Xi never underestimated any warlord of this era. Originally, it took Cao Cao eleven years to conquer Yanzhou, Xuzhou, Sili, and parts of Qingzhou with the help of luminaries such as Xun

Yu, Xun You, Cheng Yu, Guo Jia, Xi Zhicai, Jia Xu, Liu Ye, Zhong Yao, Man Chong, and others. Yet, even then, he could not defeat Yuan Shao head-on!

Setting aside other factors, Chen Xi had to admit that Yuan Shao's followers were, in fact, formidable. Unfortunately, Yuan Shao's decline in his later years prevented him from fully utilizing their potential. Otherwise, it might have been Yuan Shao's historians writing about victories. In this life, even Chen Xi had to admire Yuan Shao's imposing presence.

Given these circumstances, it was only logical for Chen Xi to regard Yuan Shao as the greatest threat in the North. While Yuan Shao had lost several years of accumulation compared to history, he was far more enlightened than the lackluster Yuan Shao of old. Overall, Yuan Shao's current strength was at least fifty percent greater than it was historically!

While Chen Xi and the others contemplated Yuan Shao's power, Hua Xiong had already entered Yanzhou with his entire corps, hidden within the dark mist produced by the first transformation of the Sky Lock Formation, advancing swiftly toward the Black Mountains.

"Zhengli, don't take unnecessary risks in the future," Tian Feng advised as he sat across from the brooding Ju Yi. "The Xian Deng Dead Soldiers are our most powerful unit. We can't afford to lose them in such battles."

"Hmph, but this way, we can force them to ally with Liu Xuande more quickly!" Ju Yi retorted in frustration. "Besides, if the Xian Deng can't participate in this kind of battle, how can they face even more formidable opponents?"

"Zhengli, you've passed the stage where you need to prove yourself through merit, and so has your Xian Deng. I'm counting on you to defeat Lu Bu's cavalry!" Tian Feng urged, though he remained astonished by Ju Yi's recent feat of wiping out nearly ten thousand Yellow Turbans.

"Alright, alright, I won't do it again. I shouldn't have disobeyed orders," Ju Yi waved dismissively.

"Good, just make sure nothing like what happened ten days ago occurs again. You've already upset You Ruo, and it's only because it was you that you weren't executed on the spot. Anyone else would have been beheaded," Tian Feng warned.

A short while ago, Ju Yi had gone against orders to attack but returned victorious, routing the Yellow Turbans. Even so, his actions enraged Xun Shen. If not for Yuan Shao's intervention, Ju Yi's overwhelming merit, and his triumphant return, he would have faced harsher punishment than the thirty lashes he received.

But those thirty lashes still left Ju Yi bedridden for ten days, unable to recover due to his lack of Inner Qi Refinement.

"That guy made a big deal out of nothing! I admitted that I should be punished for disobeying orders, but I also won a great victory. Sure, I got thirty lashes, but making me copy military texts too? Damn it, I haven't held a brush in over ten years!" Ju Yi fumed.

Tian Feng remained calm, accustomed to Ju Yi's temper. He understood that Ju Yi had likely seen Yuan Shao's rule about compensating for faults with merit and acted accordingly. Moreover, Xun Shen had intended to drive the Yellow Turbans away, and Ju Yi's victory had achieved that goal. However, Xun Shen disapproved of Ju Yi's methods, so he punished him accordingly, adding an extra penalty to keep him in line. Though many would eagerly take thirty lashes for a copy of Xun Shen's family teachings, Ju Yi simply couldn't understand Xun Shen's motives.

After reassuring himself that Ju Yi wouldn't act recklessly again, Tian Feng returned to the main tent to handle military affairs. Meanwhile, Ju Yi's irritability flared up once more. Ever since arriving in the Black Mountains, Ju Yi found himself growing increasingly restless, especially as he drew closer to the Xian Deng and Yanzhou.

At the same time, Gao Shun stood stroking the banner of the Formation Breakers, his camp eerily empty, as the Formation Breakers were still with Wei Xu. However, when Gao Shun departed for the front lines, the Formation Breakers would return to his command, reequipped with their weapons and armor, no longer clad in their current leather and wooden shields.

"The Will of the Formation Breakers: victory or death," Gao Shun muttered to himself. "I wonder what the will of the Xian Deng is, Ju Yi—perhaps you still don't understand."

With one hand, Gao Shun pulled the large banner from the ground. His entire body began to emit a soft white glow, while Lu Bu watched from a thousand meters away on the city walls. Lu Bu knew of Gao Shun's loyalty but dared not use him, for Gao Shun alone, with the Formation Breakers, could defeat Lu Bu's entire personal guard.

"So, this is the power of a military soul? Every time I witness this, it terrifies me. That belief in victory or death, fused into a single will, permeates the entire unit—pure and terrifying," Lu Bu murmured to himself. Standing beside him, Chen Gong was at a loss for words.

"Gongtai, go ahead and make the necessary arrangements. When he goes into battle, it won't matter who the opponent is," Lu Bu said, gripping his halberd tightly.

Chen Gong squinted in the direction of the glowing figure, still puzzled by Lu Bu's refusal to deploy Gao Shun in the battle against Cao Cao.

"Why didn't you let him fight earlier? That you have a unit with an actual military soul—if he had been deployed, we could have captured Chenliu!" Chen Gong asked in confusion.

"No reason," Lu Bu replied dismissively, tossing his cloak and descending the city walls.

"To think that such a general has been under my command without my knowing... But now, victory is assured," Chen Gong muttered, staring in Gao Shun's direction.

Gao Shun's eyes remained calm. This was the privilege of elite units reaching their pinnacle—the emergence of a military soul. This manifestation ensured that even after Gao Shun's death, his unit's spirit would persist for hundreds of years, passed down from generation to generation. As the creator of this military soul, Gao Shun himself would also benefit from its power.

Gao Shun was the only one in the world who understood this because his Formation Breakers were the only unit with a true soul. He had learned this through witnessing his unit's repeated growth, understanding the various stages of a military soul.

A legion's talent can be seen as the initial form of a military soul, each with its own unique traits. As the military soul develops, it not only retains the legion's original abilities but also enhances them. For example, the Xian Deng's "the more they fight, the stronger they become" trait allows their strength to increase continuously as long as they don't exhaust their energy. As for a fully formed military soul, it not only amplifies its inherent characteristics but also brings forth many additional effects.

Chapter 528: An Omen

The next day, Gao Shun took over his unit, much to Wei Xu's dismay. He then re-equipped his Formation Breakers with the eight hundred sets of Fish Scale Armor, full-body shields, large sabers, and crossbows that they had captured from the Flying Bear Army.

As Gao Shun watched the eight hundred soldiers with their cold expressions, even Lu Bu was at a loss for words. With a single wave of Gao Shun's hand, the strength of these eight hundred soldiers soared from the Qi Refinement stage to the Qi Condensation stage, without relying on any formations, purely through the power of the Formation Breakers' military soul, which had fully enhanced the entire unit.

"March out," Gao Shun commanded. His soldiers made no sound, simply hefting their shields and sabers, slinging their crossbows over their shoulders, and setting off with cold, emotionless expressions.

Shortly after Gao Shun's departure, Wei Xu, Hou Cheng, and Hao Meng also set off with ten thousand infantry and cavalry.

A few days later, Hua Xiong finally encountered the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans on the border between Jizhou and Yanzhou. By this point, the once-proud Yellow Turbans had been reduced to the state of refugees.

"Brother Feiyan, how did it come to this?" Hua Xiong was not stopped by the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans; instead, he was warmly received by them. However, as he looked at the pale-faced Zhang Yan sitting at the head of the table, Hua Xiong didn't know what to say.

"There's no point in discussing anything else. We, the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans, fully submit to Lord Xuande. You can reorganize us however you see fit. I'll give you my head right now." Zhang Yan spoke without hesitation, and without even furrowing his brow, he picked up a large saber beside him and brought it to his neck.

"Clang!" Startled, Hua Xiong quickly reached out and knocked Zhang Yan's saber away. He was suddenly grateful that he had entered the tent while still carrying his weapon.

"Brother Feiyan, you still need to lead the Black Mountain Army down the road ahead, and you still have a chance to live. When you reach Mount Tai, plead for forgiveness from Lord Xuande," Hua Xiong said. Being one of the few people privy to certain secrets, Hua Xiong knew that Zhang Yan might still have a

chance. After all, he often served as a guard for either Chen Xi or Li You, and neither of them hid much from him.

"..." Zhang Yan looked at his discarded saber and sighed. If he didn't have to die, who would choose death? There was a festering wound on his abdomen, already infected. This was a sign that even his internal energy could no longer suppress the infection. Whether he died now or later, he wouldn't last more than a few days.

Silently, Zhang Yan unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a massive wound across his abdomen and chest. "General Hua, don't mock me. I don't have many days left. I've only managed to hold on this long by sheer willpower for the sake of my brothers. To me, it would be better to sacrifice this ruined body to secure a future for them. So, there's no need for you to stop me."

"..." Hua Xiong was speechless. This was the essence of loyalty.

"Let's try to save you first. There's still hope. I have military doctors with me, and we still need you to lead. I'll stay behind to cover the retreat, so we need you to guide everyone to Mount Tai," Hua Xiong said, saluting Zhang Yan. It wasn't out of respect for Zhang Yan's strength but out of genuine admiration for his loyalty.

Hua Xiong then sent his military doctors to Zhang Yan and his men and distributed his excess supplies to them before leading his own troops to set up camp. He needed to hold the line for ten days to buy Zhang Yan some time to retreat.

"They weren't met by Lu Bu's forces but by Liu Xuande's troops. Judging by the banner, that's definitely Hua Xiong," Yan Liang said, stroking his prickly beard as he observed from a distance. He was confident that his strength now surpassed Hua Xiong's, having achieved the Qi Condensation stage a few days after Hua Xiong.

"Should we challenge them?" The Lu Kuang brothers stood behind Yan Liang and asked, "Hua Zijian is a renowned figure. If we kill him..."

"You two aren't his match. Even Junyi wouldn't be guaranteed a victory. Tomorrow, I'll lead the army to challenge him. You two prepare for a surprise attack," Yan Liang said, his strategic acumen having improved after a year under Tian Feng's tutelage. He now had a simple but effective battle plan.

His plan involved a direct challenge to draw attention, defeating the enemy commander with his martial prowess, then launching a full-scale attack in the ensuing chaos, with hidden wings charging in as well. This straightforward approach was highly effective against most opponents.

"Report!" One of Hua Xiong's scouts soon returned to camp, bringing a messenger from Yan Liang's forces along with a challenge letter.

"Yan Liang, huh? Long time no see," Hua Xiong said as he crushed the bamboo slip containing the challenge. He could barely remember Yan Liang's face from their last encounter at Hulao Pass.

"A hunt tomorrow morning, is it?" Hua Xiong looked at his deputy, Du Sheng. "Send word to Yan Liang that we'll meet him the day after tomorrow. Today, the men and horses are tired, and tomorrow we'll rest."

In reality, Hua Xiong's forces hadn't lost much of their combat power, but his main task wasn't to defeat Yan Liang. It was to stall for time, so he didn't want to waste his troops unnecessarily on Yan Liang.

Yan Liang chuckled when he received Hua Xiong's response. Hua Xiong wanted to delay the fight, but so did Yan Liang. He was waiting for Ju Yi and the Xian Deng Dead Soldiers to arrive and crush Hua Xiong. After all, in terms of bravery and skill, Ju Yi was unmatched. As for the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans, Tian Feng and Xun Shen had already taken everything they could from them; any further plundering would be pointless.

And so, the two sides faced off for three days before Ju Yi's Xian Deng Dead Soldiers were just hours away from Yan Liang's position. Finally, Yan Liang broke camp and marched out.

"So, it's finally time. We'll make our move now. Du Sheng, Sun Yan, Li Hu, and Du Yuan, each of you take five hundred cavalry and prepare. Chen Hao, lead one thousand infantry and set up plenty of fire oil and dry grass to fortify the camp. If things go south, burn the camp during our retreat. I've got a bad feeling about this!" Hua Xiong issued his orders without any hesitation.

Hua Xiong's soldiers had discipline and rigor ingrained in them. Even if they knew they were facing certain death, as long as he didn't retreat, they wouldn't either.

Hua Xiong donned his armor and stepped out of the command tent, just as a gust of autumn wind swept through, snapping the Hua character banner planted at the gate. The banner fell directly at Hua Xiong's feet, as if guided by an unseen force.

Hua Xiong didn't even glance at the broken banner, simply stepping over it and continuing forward. Though he didn't understand divination, even he could sense that this was an ill omen. As he stepped over the fallen banner, a chilling sense of dread crept up his spine, making his scalp tingle.

"General, perhaps we should avoid battle today," Du Sheng suggested, feeling the same sense of impending doom.

"Heh, the last time I felt death so close was at Sishui Pass, yet I survived and broke through to the Qi Condensation stage. Now, I feel that same looming threat again. But when facing death like this, you can't avoid it by taking a step back!" Hua Xiong laughed, the sound light and carefree as he mounted his horse and rode toward the camp gates.

Chapter 529: Hua Xiong vs. Yan Liang

"Let's move out. I want to see who can make my heart race like this. Yan Liang, you're not qualified!" Hua Xiong's body radiated a fiery red glow as excitement surged within him. He was eager to find out who could defeat him while he led an entire army.

As Hua Xiong organized his troops for departure, Du Yuan and the other commanders felt a twinge of fear, but seeing their general's confidence dispelled their concerns.

When Hua Xiong's army advanced, Yan Liang observed their disciplined formation, the silent soldiers, and the smooth progression of the troops without a single sound of disorder. His heart sank at the sight.

"Hua Zijian, it's been years since we parted at Hulao Pass," Yan Liang said, spurring his horse forward and saluting Hua Xiong.

"General Yan, it seems you've made some progress," Hua Xiong replied calmly. Surprisingly, all the feelings of unease and dread that had plagued him earlier vanished as soon as he stepped onto the battlefield.

"All I've got is this bit of skill. I've long wanted to face you in battle, but never had the chance. Now, I have to make good on the promise our lord made back then," Yan Liang said with a smile.

A flash of coldness passed through Hua Xiong's eyes. How could he not know what Yan Liang was referring to? It was none other than that infamous remark: "If only my generals Yan Liang and Wen Chou had been present, they would have slain Hua Xiong."

"It seems you're quite confident," Hua Xiong chuckled, his laughter bold and mocking as the fiery light surrounding him condensed into crimson armor. He swung his large saber a couple of times before resting it on his shoulder.

"I've grown tired of exchanging pleasantries," Yan Liang roared as dark red energy enveloped him, manifesting into a suit of intricately patterned armor. He spurred his horse forward, charging at Hua Xiong with his spear.

"Clang!" Hua Xiong's saber collided with Yan Liang's spear, and the fiery energy around him flared even brighter. The two warriors clashed in a fierce exchange of blows, with their respective armies cheering them on.

"I didn't expect you to have improved this much," Hua Xiong remarked, squinting at Yan Liang.

"You'll be dead here soon enough!" Yan Liang laughed as he lunged at Hua Xiong with his spear.

Hua Xiong swung his saber toward Yan Liang's neck, completely disregarding the spear aimed at his waist.

"Clang!" Yan Liang deftly parried Hua Xiong's strike with his spear but missed the opportunity to land a critical blow.

Hua Xiong smiled coldly as he continued his relentless assault, his saber swinging in a series of brutal strikes. He moved with the fluidity of water, showing no fear of Yan Liang's attempts to counterattack. Ever since he had survived the death trap at Sishui Pass, Hua Xiong had learned that if death was inevitable, the only option was to fight it head-on. Only by not fearing death could one conquer it.

"Clang!" Yan Liang grew increasingly frustrated as the battle wore on. His full strength was hampered by Hua Xiong's complete disregard for danger. Yan Liang could clearly see that Hua Xiong didn't even flinch when his spear came perilously close to piercing his forehead. Hua Xiong's calm, fearless gaze forced Yan Liang to divert his attacks to defense.

"Clang!" The light clash of metal echoed again. As the saying goes, 'a long defense leads to failure,' and Yan Liang finally made a mistake. A twisted red light from Hua Xiong's saber struck Yan Liang squarely, sending shockwaves through the battlefield. However, Yan Liang managed to deflect the blow, but the deflected saber light crashed into his ranks, cutting down nearly a hundred soldiers who had no cloud energy protection.

Hua Xiong's eyes were as calm as still water. He knew he was no longer Yan Liang's equal. His most powerful surprise attack had been neutralized by Yan Liang's sheer strength, revealing the gap between them.

"Advance!" Hua Xiong commanded calmly, raising his saber high. A phantom blade of energy shot out as his soldiers, like unleashed tigers, charged into Yan Liang's forces. A rain of arrows followed, covering Yan Liang's ranks.

"Kill them all!" Hua Xiong led a small unit of dozens of soldiers, armed with spears and shields, as they cut through Yan Liang's personal guard like a scythe through wheat, while Yan Liang's troops fell into chaos.

Yan Liang shattered a shield with a powerful thrust and pierced through a soldier, ready to sweep his spear again. But he suddenly felt his weapon become heavy. The soldier he had skewered, with a surge of desperate strength, clung to the spear, refusing to let go. At the same time, other soldiers, with fierce determination in their eyes, stabbed their spears at Yan Liang's horse.

"Crack!" With a powerful shake, Yan Liang flung the impaled soldier off his spear, knocking down several others. He then spurred his horse to fight elsewhere.

"Hua Xiong, do you dare to face me in single combat!" Yan Liang roared in fury as he saw his troops being pushed back.

Hua Xiong glanced at Yan Liang, who had retreated to his personal guard, his gaze icy. Despite the intense battle, the sense of impending doom only grew stronger, erasing any excitement he might have felt about defeating Yan Liang.

"We should strike now, while Yan Liang's formation is in disarray. We could take him down," Du Sheng suggested to his fellow commanders, who had been observing the battle from a distance.

"Let's not. The general hasn't ordered us to engage yet. Besides, don't you all feel that...?" Sun Yan said, his face grim.

"I feel it too. I'm sure General Hua senses it as well," Du Yuan added, frowning. "We should follow his orders."

"Report! A force of about three thousand infantry is advancing toward us from the north, roughly ten miles away," a scout reported, rushing in.

"..." Upon hearing the news, Li Hu suddenly felt a weight lift from his shoulders. When he looked at Du Yuan and the others, he saw they shared the same expression of relief.

"Hahaha! So, the source of all this pressure was just three thousand infantry? Send word to the general; we'll go wipe them out!" Du Sheng laughed. Upon receiving the report, they all felt a sudden lightness, as if they had been preparing to fight a tiger, only to discover it was a kitten instead.

"What's wrong, Du Yuan?" Sun Yan asked, noticing the strange expression on Du Yuan's face.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Du Yuan replied, frowning.

"Hahaha! What's there to worry about? We're the Xiliang Cavalry, and they're just infantry. I've never heard of infantry defeating cavalry. Have you?" Sun Yan laughed heartily.

"I'm not so sure..." Du Yuan hesitated. "How about you go ahead, and I'll report to the general?"

"Fine, go make your report. We'll handle things here," Du Sheng said, reining in his horse and preparing to charge.

Chapter 530: Ju Yi Approaches

When Hua Xiong received Du Yuan's report, he had already beaten Yan Liang's forces into disarray. Despite having only half the manpower of his opponent, Hua Xiong's relentless attacks and strategic maneuvers left Yan Liang reeling.

Making a swift decision, Hua Xiong ordered a change in formation to intensify the assault on Yan Liang. Upon learning that his opponent was the renowned "First Ascendant" (先登, Xian Deng) unit, Hua Xiong surprisingly felt more at ease.

After slaying more than a dozen retreating soldiers, Yan Liang finally managed to stabilize the situation. However, the elite infantry under Hua Xiong's command, who operated in teams of three to five, continued to disrupt the defensive line that Yan Liang had painstakingly established.

"Flank them with the cavalry!" Yan Liang roared. Even with his stubborn nature, he had to admit by this point that he and Hua Xiong were not on the same level.

Yan Liang could only watch helplessly as his two thousand cavalry, intended for a flanking maneuver, were instead cut down by Hua Xiong's fearless infantry who suddenly leapt up from the ground to strike them down. This unyielding courage sent a chill through Yan Liang's heart.

Hua Xiong's army, disciplined and silent, systematically tore through Yan Liang's forces. The thousand-strong cavalry surrounding them would seize opportunities to cut down portions of Yan Liang's infantry, only for Hua Xiong's soldiers to close in and finish the job with ease.

This clean and orderly method of attack, akin to a relentless saw blade, gradually ground down Yan Liang's army. No matter how fiercely Yan Liang fought back, every counterattack felt like crashing waves against a solid cliff.

"Hold the line!" Yan Liang gritted his teeth, leading the charge as he desperately cut down Hua Xiong's soldiers. However, the cloud energy suppressing him made it difficult to fend off the long spears of Hua Xiong's troops.

"Reform the formation," Hua Xiong commanded with a gesture. The command flags waved, and his soldiers rapidly repositioned. The speed and precision of their movements left Yan Liang, already worn down, feeling dizzy.

Soon, Hua Xiong's troops formed a hollow circle, and the remaining thousands of Yan Liang's men were fragmented by the protruding edges of the circle. Within just an hour of battle, Yan Liang's original force of ten thousand men had lost a fifth of its strength, with another twenty percent scattered and missing.

Hua Xiong quickly adjusted the cloud energy over his army. A smooth, ruby-red ring of light appeared above his forces, significantly boosting the strength of his troops. This terrifying transformation sent a shiver down Yan Liang's spine; for the first time, he realized Hua Xiong possessed such a powerful ability.

As Hua Xiong watched the cloud energy that closely matched the color of his internal energy, he felt a strange sensation. If the cloud energy could fully synchronize with his internal energy, it might lead to a new kind of power.

"Kill!" Hua Xiong roared. The outer arc of his formation suddenly scattered, and the soldiers formed small triangular units that charged into Yan Liang's fragmented forces. Like liquid mercury spilling across the battlefield, Yan Liang's already shattered army disintegrated further.

"Close ranks and defend!" Yan Liang bellowed. The remaining soldiers who could still follow orders desperately regrouped, knowing they were now fighting for their lives.

"Du Yuan, go check on Sun Yan and the others. If we can hold out for just a little longer, I can kill Yan Liang!" Hua Xiong ordered, glancing back at Du Yuan. His soldiers, as he had predicted, were gaining momentum, and their attacks on Yan Liang's forces were growing fiercer by the minute.

Before Du Yuan could mount his horse, Hua Xiong noticed a black line moving toward them from the distance. His heart skipped a beat, and at the same moment, Yan Liang's sharp eyes spotted the banner of Ju Yi approaching. With renewed energy, Yan Liang roared, "Full counterattack! Reinforcements have arrived!"

Rewind to the moment when Sun Yan and his comrades charged at Ju Yi. Leading 1,500 Xiliang cavalry, Sun Yan and his men thundered toward Ju Yi's position.

Initially unaware that they were facing the First Ascendant unit, Sun Yan and his men soon recognized the infamous banner after closing the distance by a thousand meters.

However, by that point, the Xiliang cavalry were already at full speed. Despite knowing they faced Ju Yi's elite troops, the Xiliang cavalry, famed as the top-tier cavalry in the land, felt no fear. Instead, they were eager to crush this legendary unit.

"Full speed ahead! Frontline axemen, spread out! Archers, ready! After two volleys, charge in and wipe them out!" Ju Yi ordered coldly. Once in battle mode, Ju Yi was never swayed by anger or arrogance; his mind remained clear and focused on the strategy.

"Hahaha! Let's show these kids how it's done!" Sun Yan roared, exhilarated. He saw what he believed to be the First Ascendant troops breaking ranks in fear and even spotted Ju Yi beneath the banner. "So, this is the First Ascendant? What a joke!"

The Xiliang cavalry surged forward like a storm. As Ju Yi's archers nocked their arrows, the Xiliang cavalymen instinctively crouched behind their horses' necks to shield themselves from the incoming volleys. Despite taking an arrow, Sun Yan knew only a few dozen of his 1,500 men had been unhorsed. Now, all that remained was to pierce through the enemy line and show them the unstoppable power of the Xiliang cavalry!

"Every time I see this kind of battle formation, it excites me. I've witnessed the Xiliang cavalry in action back in Liangzhou, but this is where it ends," Ju Yi remarked coldly. After two volleys, the First Ascendant warriors dropped their bows, drew their swords, and charged at the oncoming cavalry.

"Die!" Du Sheng, leading the charge, suddenly felt the ground give way beneath him, and he was sent flying. As he tumbled to the ground, he looked back to see a significant portion of his cavalry crashing down. Before he could utter a word of disbelief, Ju Yi's blood-soaked soldiers were upon him.

"Finish them off!" Ju Yi commanded, his tone icy. The Xiliang cavalry were indeed a force to be reckoned with, their charge capable of smashing through anything, including themselves.

The First Ascendant warriors, fearless and unyielding, showed no fear as the Xiliang cavalry thundered toward them. They curled up, waiting for the charge to pass, before springing up to sever the legs of the cavalry horses. The fallen riders, whether dead or not, would struggle to stand again.

The chaos caused by the collapsed front line spread through the Xiliang cavalry, who were unable to halt their momentum.

Having anticipated this, Ju Yi's First Ascendant soldiers, abandoning their bows, brandished their swords and surged over the fallen horse corpses to finish off the disoriented and dismounted Xiliang cavalry.