

Mythical 531

Chapter 531: Xiliang Cavalry vs. First Ascendant Dead Soldiers

"How could this happen!" Sun Yan tumbled off his horse, staring in disbelief at the scene before him. His force of 1,500 cavalry had fallen into chaos due to an unexpected disruption, their vanguard scattered, and they were now forced into a melee with the First Ascendant infantry.

"Spread out!" Li Hu shouted, but the immense momentum of the Xiliang cavalry made it impossible to rein in their horses within such a short distance of less than ten zhang. The troops behind had no time to react and crashed into the already disordered front lines.

At that moment, the First Ascendant soldiers in the second row, who had moved first, dropped their small round shields and gripped their large blades with both hands. With a powerful leap, they stepped onto the fallen horse corpses and struck down upon the Xiliang cavalry like tigers pouncing on their prey.

In this initial clash, the Xiliang cavalry suffered severe losses. Out of the three vice commanders, one was killed outright, another was severely injured, leaving only Li Hu still mounted. In that brief moment, one-tenth of their force had been wiped out.

Caught in the chaos, the once invincible cavalry, who had never faced serious defeat in the Central Plains, felt their blood boil as they witnessed their comrades fall. The Xiliang cavalry, undefeated in battle, had never lost to any other force.

"Hahaha, interesting! As expected of the elite forged by Li Ru through absolute honor. Not only were they not thrown into disarray, but they even managed to reform into the chaotic yet precise wedge formation they first showed me. Truly worthy of the Xiliang cavalry, who have carved their fighting spirit into their very bones from the northwest to the Central Plains," Ju Yi laughed recklessly. In the past, when he was in Liangzhou, he had been a commander of the Xiliang cavalry himself, though he went by a different name back then.

Ju Yi laughed freely. The Xiliang cavalry were indeed brave, but they were also too stubborn. Brotherhood, the bonds of comradeship, and a pyramid-like structure of honor were the foundations of their combat strength!

Li Ru had instilled in the Xiliang cavalry an unbreakable belief in never being defeated. From Xiliang to Luoyang, from Luoyang to Chang'an, and from Chang'an to the Central Plains, this conviction of invincibility had been ingrained into their very bones!

The Xiliang cavalry under Hua Xiong's command were the same as Li Jue and Guo Si's main forces, with no mixing of Qiang troops. These were the true warriors who had fought and defeated the Qiang, driven by their sense of righteousness.

These were also the seeds that Li Ru had planted to construct the entire structure of the Xiliang cavalry. They had experienced countless battles, each soldier possessing internal energy and astonishing combat experience. Although they had been disoriented in the first wave, they instinctively reorganized into their optimal combat formation without receiving any direct orders.

The greatest advantage of a pyramid-like military structure is that even if the commander falls, a suitable leader will immediately step up to guide the troops.

"Probe their defenses, maneuver around them, and attack from behind!" Simultaneously, two cavalry officers, originally just squad leaders, along with Li Hu, issued orders to their soldiers. The entire unit, as if by reflex, scattered into nearly a hundred attack squads of twelve to fifteen men each.

"Truly impressive. Li Wenyong, though you may lack experience in training soldiers, you've instilled in your core troops the ability to react calmly in any situation. Unfortunately, you're still not skilled enough!" Ju Yi muttered to himself as he watched the Xiliang cavalry scatter and begin circling his forces in waves.

Li Hu, riding his horse, circled around the First Ascendant unit, continually exchanging positions with the other two units. If it weren't for the extensive battle experience of the First Ascendant soldiers and the rigorous training they had undergone under Ju Yi, this dizzying display of maneuvers would have already caused their formation to collapse, leading to their swift defeat at the hands of the Xiliang cavalry.

Ju Yi sighed quietly. No matter how sharp the attacks of infantry may be, they cannot change the fact that two legs can't outrun four.

Soon, after several probing attacks and maneuvers by the three Xiliang cavalry units, the First Ascendant soldiers began to show signs of disarray. Upon seeing this, Li Hu's previously anxious heart surged with joy—they had finally found their opening.

At the same time, the two newly promoted captains noticed the situation as well. Without any need for communication, the three leaders merged their forces during the next maneuver. As they closed in, every soldier grabbed their short spears from their saddles. Though the Xiliang cavalry were not known for their archery, they were formidable in medium-range combat. As their horses leaped, every soldier threw their short spears in unison, all while grasping their horses' manes.

"Hahaha, after all these years, they're still using the same tactics. Don't they realize that while their attacks are incredibly sharp, they're far too close? A scattered formation is good for maneuvering and attacking, but the thin cloud energy won't protect them from the enemy's cloud energy. This is a tactic for slashing through the enemy in a decisive battle!" Ju Yi remarked with a calm yet helpless tone.

After all, the Xiliang cavalry were the unit Ju Yi had studied the most. During his early years in Liangzhou, he had been one of the commanders leading the Xiliang cavalry against the Qiang, though he wasn't well-known at the time.

Back then, Li Ru was still pondering the future of the military system, and the Xiliang cavalry hadn't fully formed yet. But as battles progressed, they gradually adopted the complete combat methods they use today. As a result, Ju Yi not only became familiar with the Qiang's tactics but also became intimately familiar with the Xiliang cavalry's combat style!

Ju Yi waved his command flag, and a nearly hundred-meter-long blood-red blade extended from a gap in the First Ascendant formation, slicing through the disordered ranks of the Xiliang cavalry. The strike alone took out two-tenths of their forces, leaving Li Hu dead with no remains.

Watching as the Xiliang cavalry, stunned by his attack, scrambled to avoid the First Ascendant soldiers now charging at them, Ju Yi felt no pride. He knew the Xiliang cavalry hadn't truly been defeated; they had merely underestimated the First Ascendant and made too many errors in command.

It was similar to the Battle of Jieqiao, where Ju Yi hadn't aimed to crush the White Horse Cavalry but merely to defeat them. Fate had granted him the opportunity to eliminate them all due to their erratic command, making him famous in one battle.

But this didn't mean that the First Ascendant soldiers had no disadvantages when facing cavalry. Infantry still had only two legs, while cavalry had four. If the Xiliang cavalry chose to flee, no infantry unit, not even the First Ascendant, could stop them.

"Let's go. Forget about them. While they may be stunned now, they'll recover soon enough. The most frustrating thing about the Xiliang cavalry is that unless you completely annihilate them or scatter them, they'll regroup and continue fighting," Ju Yi sighed.

If the Xiliang cavalry didn't retreat, the First Ascendant would have no difficulty killing them, though it wouldn't be as easy as cutting through vegetables. But if the cavalry chose to flee, no one had ever heard of infantry successfully chasing down cavalry—not even the First Ascendant.

Chapter 532: Hua Xiong vs. Ju Yi

Ju Yi glanced at the Xiliang cavalry retreating in the distance and signaled his troops to regroup and assist Yan Liang. Seizing the opportunity while those "sticky troublemakers" were leaving, Ju Yi quickly led his forces toward Yan Liang's location.

For infantry to completely annihilate cavalry, aside from an overwhelming difference in combat strength, it is crucial to restrict the cavalry's mobility. Even if the First Ascendants could confidently defeat three times their number in Xiliang cavalry head-on, they wouldn't be able to eliminate more than a third of the enemy if they couldn't confine their movements.

"Advance at full speed and support General Yan!" Ju Yi spurred his horse forward, his soldiers marching swiftly behind him.

[The opponent should be Hua Xiong. There's no other Xiliang cavalry as authentic as this in the Central Plains. Yan Liang is in trouble. I heard Hua Xiong joined Liu Bei with a cavalry corps. With the 10,000 cavalry under his command, Yan Liang's forces wouldn't last two hours against those Xiliang cavalry elites.]

With that thought, Ju Yi quickened his pace. Yan Liang was one of the few comrades he got along with, and Ju Yi did not want to see him come to harm.

[I hope I make it in time and find at least a couple of thousand cavalry still intact. That way, I can stall Hua Xiong's cavalry and then wipe them out!] Ju Yi could already hear the chaotic sounds of battle and

see the remnants of Yan Liang's routed troops. As more and more defeated soldiers appeared, Ju Yi's expression grew increasingly grim.

Compared to Ju Yi's worry, Hua Xiong's expression had turned downright murderous. He couldn't believe that his cavalry had been decimated within a quarter of an hour—this outcome simply defied reason!

"Du Yuan, you command the infantry and keep pressuring Yan Liang. I'll take the cavalry and test Ju Yi's strength." Hua Xiong calmly ordered. The more he understood about infantry, the more he realized how difficult well-trained soldiers could be in defensive battles. If Ju Yi managed to break through and link up with Yan Liang, Hua Xiong feared that his own death might truly be imminent.

"Yes, sir!" Du Yuan, gripping his polearm, saluted and took command under the battle flag. Meanwhile, Hua Xiong spurred his horse, leading the cavalry under Du Yuan's command, as well as his reserve forces, toward Ju Yi's approaching army.

As Hua Xiong charged forward, he soon spotted the cavalry trailing behind Ju Yi. He exhaled a sigh of relief but quickly noticed that Li Hu, Sun Yan, and the three squad leaders he had brought from Xiliang were no longer among his forces.

"Split the forces in half to rally our defeated troops. Bai Hao, Li Ming, Wang Gui—you three take command and prepare for a killing formation!" Hua Xiong commanded, pointing to his three personal guards. The hierarchical structure could be broken if necessary!

Li You's "Eight Gates Heavenly Lock" had taught Hua Xiong three formations, but he had only mastered two of them. The third formation remained elusive. Given the current situation, Hua Xiong realized that he had no other cards left to play. He decided to take a gamble, knowing that if the battle went poorly, he could retreat while his forces held strong. As for the idea of Ju Yi annihilating his troops, that possibility never crossed Hua Xiong's mind.

Quickly regrouping, Hua Xiong's cavalry reformed their ranks. Although their morale was somewhat dampened by their earlier defeat, Hua Xiong's leadership restored their basic fighting strength.

The battlefield constantly echoed with the cries of life and death. These Xiliang cavalry had long grown accustomed to such a life. This time, it was their comrades who had fallen. Next time, it could be themselves. Only by killing the enemy could they ensure a better chance of survival.

With a few brief exchanges, Hua Xiong had already learned from his soldiers the reasons for their earlier defeat. His expression became more solemn as he looked toward Ju Yi's forces. He then led the charge toward the First Ascendants. As the first volley of arrows rained down on him, Hua Xiong abruptly veered off course, dodging the arrows entirely, only to loop back again moments later.

Ju Yi sneered inwardly. [Measuring arrow distance, huh? That was a nice move. But if that's all you have, my crossbows will teach you a lesson.]

Hua Xiong returned without issuing any further orders, but his entire cavalry began following his lead, spinning in a slow but deliberate rotation. Although their speed wasn't particularly fast, their tracks overlapped in strange patterns, leaving trails of afterimages behind.

As these trails continued to intersect, phantom images of Hua Xiong began appearing at each node, gradually solidifying. At the same time, a blood-red mist started rising around the perimeter of the First Ascendants. Even Ju Yi, who didn't fully understand this phenomenon, felt a deep sense of unease. He had already seen that Yan Liang was safe, though his cavalry had been decimated. If he wanted to destroy Hua Xiong's cavalry, Ju Yi knew he would have to take some risks.

The Xiliang cavalry's rotation grew slower, while the phantom images became more defined. When Hua Xiong's soldiers finally positioned themselves at the critical points of these nodes, the rapid spinning that Ju Yi had observed seemed to freeze in time. All of Hua Xiong's fiery images merged into the nodes, and each cavalryman appeared to be clad in a suit of flame.

At that moment, four enormous wedge formations formed, and they charged toward the First Ascendants like a fiery phoenix soaring through the sky. Hua Xiong raised his massive sword, and two gigantic phoenix wings of fiery energy unfurled from his position, extending outward with earth-shattering force.

Before Ju Yi could mount a defense, similar fiery blades erupted from the other three directions, scorching the air with an intense heat. As Hua Xiong closed in, Ju Yi could almost smell the burning scent, the eight immense blades now nearly upon him.

[Which one is real?] Ju Yi felt a slight panic. If any of these eight attacks connected, even the special properties of the First Ascendants' cloud energy wouldn't be able to withstand them. What would follow would be a one-sided massacre.

[Impossible! How could all eight strikes feel identical? That means all eight are real? There's no room for a gamble here. Hua Xiong, you'll be the first to witness the soul of my First Ascendants!] As Ju Yi made his decision, the bows of the First Ascendants suddenly glowed with a layer of blood-red light. Their armor radiated the same eerie glow, transforming the soldiers into more fearsome figures as their momentum surged.

When their power reached its peak, Ju Yi signaled with his command flag and unleashed a devastating strike toward Hua Xiong's direction!

Of the eight fiery blades, only the one facing Hua Xiong directly was unimpeded, crashing into the First Ascendants. At the same time, countless blood-red mist arrows filled the air, covering the battlefield with a deafening cacophony of tearing wind.

"Die!" The blood-red banner's spectral image shattered Hua Xiong's leading blade and continued its relentless assault toward him.

Chapter 533: Defeat

Before the blood-red shadow even reached Hua Xiong, he could already feel the immense pressure. The cloud energy, gathered through the formation and equal to the strength of his entire army, began to shatter at this moment. Some of the soldiers following him were even blown off their horses by the fierce storm.

"Trample the mountains and rivers!" Hua Xiong roared with wide eyes. The undefeated Xiliang cavalry couldn't allow their unbeaten streak to end here. As he gazed at the dark red flag and the overwhelming blood-red arrows, seemingly alive and aimed at his cavalry, Hua Xiong roared in defiance, unleashing the killing move of the Eight Gates Heavenly Lock.

In an instant, countless fiery red horses shot out from all directions of Hua Xiong's army, radiating an intense glow that distorted everything in front of them with searing heat.

The clash between the blood arrows and the fiery horses began. It was a battle of extremes, where the overwhelming numbers from both sides frantically countered each other.

Amid this chaotic assault, the massive blood-red flag remained unfazed, pressing down on Hua Xiong like an unstoppable force.

Meanwhile, the three fiery wings slashed through countless blood arrows, only to destroy fewer than three hundred First Ascendants after their power had been greatly reduced.

Hua Xiong watched helplessly as the killing move of the Eight Gates Heavenly Lock, after nullifying a large number of blood arrows, proved powerless against the massive flag.

"How could I die here? Trample the mountains and rivers!" Hua Xiong roared once again. Blood burst from his eyes under the immense pressure, but it was as if he had broken free from something, charging recklessly toward the flag. His Xiliang cavalry, filled with a death-defying resolve, followed him in the charge against Ju Yi.

The previous "Trample the Mountains and Rivers" that Hua Xiong unleashed, with its suffocating density of attacks, would have shattered any other army except the First Ascendants. Drawing on all his potential, sacrificing half his inner energy, and carrying an indomitable spirit, it was one of the final killing moves of the Eight Gates Heavenly Lock!

Under Ju Yi's command, the First Ascendants managed to counter Hua Xiong's last trump card with their powerful counterattacks. However, Ju Yi could feel that at least half of his army's soul energy had been consumed by the previous strike. Yet, before he could finish off Hua Xiong, his opponent roared "Trample the Mountains and Rivers" once more!

Seeing Hua Xiong charging toward him, Ju Yi felt a wave of tragic determination—knowing he was destined to die, but still fighting to give his comrades a chance to survive.

"Crack!" As Hua Xiong desperately mobilized the energy of all his remaining cavalry, he realized that the inner energy of his soldiers responded to him as if they were extensions of his own limbs. The thin cloud energy seemed to undergo a mysterious transformation, and for the first time, he sensed the inklings of his army's innate talent.

"Boom!" Ju Yi's unstoppable strike finally hit Hua Xiong's entire formation. The massive attack covered a thirty-degree angle across a kilometer in front of Ju Yi, encompassing the majority of Hua Xiong's cavalry, including Hua Xiong himself.

But contrary to Ju Yi's expectations, his strike did not immediately shatter Hua Xiong's cloud energy. Instead, it was blocked for a moment before breaking through, resulting in the deaths of 90% of Hua Xiong's cavalry in that direction. Hua Xiong, targeted by the attack, was also hit hard and sent flying.

The remaining Xiliang cavalry, even those not directly hit, were heavily impacted by the powerful strike. Most of them lost their fighting capacity, and as they saw Hua Xiong being thrown into the air, they hurriedly pursued him.

"Advance! Finish off Hua Xiong!" Ju Yi looked at his hands, puzzled by why Hua Xiong hadn't been torn to pieces and why he seemed only gravely injured.

But there was no time to dwell on it now. Ju Yi immediately led his forces toward the place where Hua Xiong had fallen. The Xiliang cavalry, under Hua Xiong's command, had posed a significant threat to him. If Hua Xiong had led 5,000 cavalry from the start and used that terrifying move, Ju Yi estimated that half of his First Ascendants would have been wiped out.

"Protect the general!" As Ju Yi moved, the remaining Xiliang cavalry launched a desperate charge against the First Ascendants.

This time, it wasn't the hit-and-run tactics from before. Every Xiliang cavalryman charged forward with a death wish, without any formation or defense. With the belief that every enemy they killed increased Hua Xiong's chances of survival, all the Xiliang warriors threw themselves at the First Ascendants in a final, desperate assault!

However, the vast difference in strength meant that the Xiliang cavalry were like moths flying into a flame. They threw themselves at the First Ascendants, using their lives to block the enemy's advance, desperately trying to buy time for Hua Xiong.

The loyalty and brotherhood accumulated over the years, built on the promise of "if I have a bowl of food, you'll never go hungry," erupted in full force when Hua Xiong was critically injured. The Xiliang

cavalry, outnumbered and outmatched, managed to hold back the First Ascendants just a few hundred paces from Hua Xiong, while some of them rushed to save their general.

"Retreat!" Hua Xiong struggled to extend his hand from the ground, looking at the blood-soaked path filled with the corpses of horses and men. He spat out a mouthful of blood and glared at the First Ascendants with bloodshot eyes.

When the Xiliang cavalry saw Hua Xiong stand up, they let out a cheer. The vanguard soldiers glanced back at their comrades and then charged at the First Ascendants. A cavalryman, with a blade lodged in his chest, seemed unaware of his mortal wound as he lunged at the enemy, furiously slashing at the First Ascendants.

"Thunk!" Another soldier was struck down, yet the Xiliang cavalry continued to throw themselves at the enemy. As one of them leaped forward, three arrows pierced his vital points, but he still managed to swing his blade, striking the enemy's shoulder. Unfortunately, the fatigue that overwhelmed his body prevented him from beheading his foe, and he collapsed, unable to rise again.

Ju Yi silently observed the battlefield, watching the First Ascendants and Xiliang cavalry fall. The Xiliang cavalry's final, desperate charge had left a deep impression on him. Over half of the 1,000 casualties among the First Ascendants were caused by that last stand of the Xiliang cavalry.

Yet, Ju Yi knew that the Xiliang cavalry had suffered even greater losses—out of 2,500, fewer than 500 would return intact.

"Gather our dead and the enemy's corpses. Return the bodies of Hua Xiong's soldiers to them," Ju Yi said wearily.

Ju Yi noticed that the infantry that had been fighting Yan Liang ahead was now slowly retreating. Perhaps pursuing them would yield some additional merit, but given the combat strength Hua Xiong had shown earlier, Ju Yi estimated that even if he defeated them, his First Ascendants would lose half their number.

Chapter 534: Implicit Restraints

Ju Yi could only sigh in resignation. While his First Ascendants wielded knives and carried small round shields, they were, in essence, heavily armed crossbowmen, specialized in breaking formations and cutting down enemies with high-powered bolts.

Hua Xiong's Xiliang cavalry, despite their inferior equipment, were naturally elite troops. Just as the White Horse Cavalry were known for their extreme speed, the Xiliang cavalry were renowned for their formidable defense.

In other words, the Xiliang cavalry, even when minimally equipped with just swords, were on par with regular cavalry clad in leather armor. Moreover, Taishan was no longer impoverished, and all Xiliang cavalry were uniformly outfitted with leather armor, with vital areas reinforced by iron plates. In terms of troop specialization, the First Ascendants didn't have a significant advantage.

If it weren't for the First Ascendants being exceptionally powerful and their attacks boosted by the activation of their army's soul, and if the Xiliang cavalry weren't overall less elite than the First Ascendants, Ju Yi might not have won this battle so easily, even if he could have won at all.

"I was careless. Next time, no matter the circumstances, I'll activate the army's soul right away. This loss was too great," Ju Yi thought as he watched Hua Xiong's infantry slowly retreating and then looked back at his own First Ascendants. Hua Xiong's forces were too diverse to be easily countered by a single type of unit.

"Send word to General Yan not to pursue," Ju Yi quickly ordered when he noticed Yan Liang preparing to lead a charge. Even though Hua Xiong's forces still had around four thousand soldiers capable of fighting, and their orderly retreat indicated they hadn't lost their will to fight, Ju Yi knew better than to take unnecessary risks.

By the time Yan Liang received Ju Yi's order, he was already close enough to see the expression on Du Yuan's face. However, respecting Ju Yi's firm command, he pulled back and began gathering the scattered troops.

When Yan Liang returned, Ju Yi was already seated in the command tent, pondering whether to integrate other types of troops into the First Ascendants. After his battle with Hua Xiong, Ju Yi had come to fully understand the words of Li Ru from their days in Xiliang.

Ju Yi quietly reflected on what Li Ru had said back then.

At the time, due to constraints on manpower, resources, and other factors, Li Ru didn't have the luxury of experimenting with complex troop combinations. The more specialized units you had, the harder it was to coordinate them effectively. But when executed well, such combinations significantly enhanced combat effectiveness. Since Li Ru didn't have much time for army training, he chose the most straightforward method.

This led to the current rigid and formulaic attack style of the Xiliang cavalry. When charging, they all formed a wedge; when there were no openings, they all maneuvered to outflank the enemy; and when breaking formations, they all hurled spears and then simply pressed forward, smashing through with brute force.

This was how Li Ru taught them—uniform, standardized tactics. At this level of warfare, considerations like troop specialization or counters became irrelevant. When a fully equipped force of ten thousand Xiliang cavalry faced the pyramid-like formations of the Qiang cavalry, they'd crush them despite any tactical disadvantages. Sometimes, mindless aggression was terrifying in its own right.

"Bang!" Yan Liang slammed his fist on the table, jolting Ju Yi from his thoughts.

"You're back. How did it go?" Ju Yi had been startled and was about to lash out, but upon seeing Yan Liang's dark expression, he sighed, understanding how frustrated his comrade felt.

"We've gathered the scattered troops, but I lost nearly thirty percent of my forces!" Yan Liang said grimly. "Including the wounded and missing, less than half of my original ten thousand infantry and cavalry remain."

"That's not bad, considering. If I had been a little later, you would've encountered the Xiliang cavalry. Unlike the White Horse Cavalry, who rely primarily on archery with melee combat as a secondary tactic, the Xiliang cavalry will completely shatter your expectations." Ju Yi waved his hand dismissively. If he'd arrived just a quarter of an hour later, and 2,500 Xiliang cavalry had entered the battlefield, the outcome would've been clear—Yan Liang wouldn't have withstood their deadly charge.

"It's infuriating! Why didn't you chase down Hua Xiong and finish him off?" Yan Liang asked, displeased. In his mind, Ju Yi should've pursued and dealt with Hua Xiong decisively.

"If I had pursued, even if I won, it would be a pyrrhic victory. Although Hua Xiong's troops don't possess an army soul, their discipline and combat resolve are nearly on par with my First Ascendants. In terms of discipline alone, they're even better than mine," Ju Yi explained with a wave of his hand.

Yan Liang was speechless. Was Ju Yi saying that losing to Hua Xiong was justifiable?

"My First Ascendants also suffered a thirty percent loss. The Xiliang cavalry are a real headache," Ju Yi said with a bitter smile. "Heavy crossbowmen aren't enough to deal with such troops. If we had been fighting the White Horse Cavalry with the tactics we used today, even five or six thousand of them would've been wiped out."

"..." Yan Liang opened his mouth, realizing this was something he'd never considered before.

"Forget it. Explaining it to you won't help," Ju Yi said, waving him off.

"I think we should retreat the front line a bit," Yan Liang suggested cautiously, ignoring Ju Yi's teasing. "With the First Ascendants suffering thirty percent losses, if we encounter the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry, we'll be in serious trouble."

Yan Liang had dared to venture this deep into Yanzhou primarily because he had Ju Yi's First Ascendants backing him up. The legend of their invincibility, the tale of 3,000 defeating the White Horse Cavalry, had emboldened Yan Liang to rampage through Yanzhou. But today, he realized that even Ju Yi's First Ascendants weren't invincible.

"I know what you're thinking," Ju Yi said, waving him off. "This was just an unexpected setback. Elite troops aren't invincible. There's always some implicit counter, even if it's not immediately obvious. However, the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry happens to be countered by my First Ascendants, so you can rest easy."

"What about Hua Xiong?" Yan Liang asked, feeling a bit relieved but still wary of Hua Xiong.

"If we were both at full strength, with all our troops and resources, it would be a fifty-fifty fight. Even if I won, it would be a pyrrhic victory," Ju Yi said seriously. "Hua Xiong's troops may not have an army soul,

but their discipline and resolve are nearly unmatched. In fact, in terms of discipline alone, they might even surpass my First Ascendants."

"How is that possible?" Yan Liang nearly jumped out of his seat.

"Not only is it possible, but it's likely that Hua Xiong's army possesses a latent army soul," Ju Yi replied, his eyes narrowing. "I fought hard, yet in the final moments, Hua Xiong's manipulation of cloud energy felt unusually swift and precise. It's just a suspicion, but if he didn't use his army soul, I wonder why not."

Ju Yi couldn't shake the thought. Something about Hua Xiong's army seemed off. Their overall quality was comparable to the First Ascendants, but they lacked the overwhelming unity and power of a true army soul.

Chapter 535: The Taishan Mission Continues...

Regardless of what was happening on Hua Xiong's side, the officials in Taishan continued with their year-end calculations. In fact, the civil officials of Taishan were confident that nothing could go wrong with Hua Xiong. After all, his army was almost immune to ambushes, and Hua Xiong was always cautious when setting up camp, ensuring that no one could catch him off guard.

As for the possibility of being completely defeated, none of them, including Chen Xi, believed that was likely. Moreover, Yu Jin, Zhang Fei, and Liu Ye were all within a two-day march from Hua Xiong. No one thought anyone could completely wipe out Hua Xiong's forces.

"Finish it quickly," Lu Su said, tossing a stack of documents toward Chen Xi.

"When will this end?" Chen Xi groaned, feeling overwhelmed. However, none of the others at the table paid him any attention; everyone was busy with their own tasks.

"Have some tea," Mi Zhen said, somewhat annoyed, as she walked over and refilled Chen Xi's cup.

"Hey, hey, shouldn't a court lady smile a bit? At least make us feel happy while we work!" Chen Xi joked as he looked at Mi Zhen's stern expression.

"If you don't want it, forget it," Mi Zhen huffed. She grabbed the teapot and even took away Chen Xi's teacup before storming off.

"Hey..." Chen Xi reached out from his chair, trying to stop her, but his hand was promptly slapped away.

"Zhen'er, stop making trouble," Mi Zhu said, glancing up as he saw his sister's antics.

"Why do I have to do this? Am I a servant girl just for pouring tea?" Mi Zhen complained.

"Because you're the only court lady here," Mi Zhu replied helplessly. He couldn't exactly say that it was because Mi Zhen had become overly carefree after spending too much time with Miss Cai, Zhen Mi, and Jia Yun. The well-behaved girl she once was had completely vanished, and Mi Zhu was now considering how to bring her back to her former self.

Mi Zhu recalled how dignified Mi Zhen had looked as a court lady during last year's New Year's celebration. That's why he had asked Liu Bei to appoint her as one again, but things had changed. Now, he could only sigh.

Ever since Mi Zhen had been dragged here by Mi Zhu while she was out shopping with Cai Zhenji, she had maintained a sour expression. While she was still somewhat respectful to Lu Su and the others, she showed no such courtesy to her brother or Chen Xi, whom she knew well.

"Is a court lady supposed to do this kind of work?" Mi Zhen retorted disdainfully. "Sister Zhaoji is a real court lady. What I am doing here feels more like a servant's job!" She turned her back on her brother, clearly displeased.

"And can you transcribe ten thousand volumes like she can?" Chen Xi muttered to himself.

"Hmph!" Mi Zhen glared at Chen Xi, suppressing her urge to pounce on him, mainly because Lu Su, Li You, and the others were present. She silently added another grievance against Chen Xi to her list.

Sun Qian, who was calmly studying maps and working on water management projects, could barely contain his amusement. Since Mi Zhen had arrived, she had been looking for trouble, initially targeting Mi Zhu but eventually settling on Chen Xi. Sun Qian couldn't help but find it hilarious, especially since Chen Xi's youthful appearance made him an easy target for Mi Zhen.

With a long sigh, Chen Xi sprawled out on the table, extending his arms as far as they could go while rubbing his face against the surface. "Mi Zhen, you should just get married already. If not, at least let Miss Cai or Zhen Mi take over as the court lady..."

"Ow..." Chen Xi winced as Mi Zhen pinched him again, deciding it was best to keep quiet. He realized that if this had been at his own home, he would probably be nursing a bruised head by now.

Mi Zhen inspected her thumb before giving Chen Xi another pinch. However, when Chen Xi remained motionless, pretending to be dead, she curiously examined her fingers again, then reached out to pinch him once more.

"Ah!" Chen Xi let out a loud yelp, drawing a sigh from Lu Su, while Zhuge Liang, sipping his tea, silently thanked his lucky stars that he had already arranged a marriage. Otherwise, if Mi Zhu had tried to match him with Mi Zhen, his life would have been a disaster.

"Zhen'er!" Mi Zhu scolded angrily, but then, realizing he might be overreacting, softened his tone and waved his hand dismissively. "Forget it, forget it. You can go play outside."

Delighted, Mi Zhen tossed the teapot toward Chen Xi, hitched up her skirt, and dashed out. It was only after she had left that Mi Zhu suddenly thought, "Did she bring any money?"

"I don't need money! I just need to write a note, and they'll send the items to our house," Mi Zhen called back with a grin as she ran out the door. Then...

"Bang!" Jia Xu, looking somewhat dazed, staggered a bit as he bumped into the doorframe and stood up. He glanced at the worried Mi Zhen, sighed, and waved his hand, signaling that he wasn't going to hold it against her.

"Uncle Jia, are you alright?" Mi Zhen asked cautiously.

"Go on, go shopping. I'm fine," Jia Xu replied wearily before striding into the room.

Mi Zhen lowered her head, feeling a bit troubled. After watching Jia Xu enter the room, she hesitated for a moment before following him inside.

"Brother Wenhe, let me apologize on my sister's behalf," Mi Zhu quickly said as he stood up to greet Jia Xu with a bow, throwing a stern look at Mi Zhen, who glanced back at him nervously.

"It's fine," Jia Xu replied impassively. Mi Zhen had bumped into quite a few people in the past, including Liu Bei, though that time had been far more dramatic. "Zi Chuan, come with me. I've gathered all the dog trainers in Fenggao, and there are quite a few dogs. The horse trainers are also assembled."

"Oh," Chen Xi replied, perking up. He turned to Lu Su and said, "Zi Jing, I've got something to do, so I'll leave the rest to you."

"Can you handle it, Kong Ming?" Lu Su asked without lifting his head, addressing Zhuge Liang.

"No problem," Zhuge Liang responded, still writing furiously.

"..." Chen Xi pulled a face. While Lu Su was a workaholic, Zhuge Liang was in a league of his own, capable of working ten-hour days without breaking a sweat. No wonder Chen Xi had managed to win a bet with Jia Xu and score a jade pendant.

"I'm coming too," Mi Zhen said, apparently unfazed by Jia Xu. The idea of playing with dogs had piqued her interest, and she was back to her usual playful self.

Chen Xi glanced at Jia Xu, who seemed indifferent to Mi Zhen tagging along. For Jia Xu, the main task was simply showing Chen Xi around, letting everyone pick a dog they liked to take home. Everything else was secondary.

"Fine, but don't cause any trouble," Chen Xi agreed, noting that Mi Zhen seemed bored lately. If she wasn't hanging out with Cai Zhenji and the others, she was tagging along after him. Among the handful

of young men she trusted who weren't interested in her family's wealth, Chen Xi seemed to be her safest option.

Chapter 536: Liu Bei Has an Heir

"Remember to wait for me at your house. I'll go find Sister Cai and the others," Mi Zhen said excitedly as she rushed outside, only to crash into Liu Bei. She bounced back, tears welling up in her eyes as she looked at him.

Liu Bei smiled wryly. Why was he so unlucky? He had been bumped into by Mi Zhen again. Even though his body was fortified with internal energy at the level of "Refining Qi into Gang," a mere accidental collision would still leave Mi Zhen feeling the impact.

"Are you alright?" Liu Bei asked with a bitter smile, knowing that Mi Zhen had bumped into him several times before.

"Greetings, Lord Xuande," Mi Zhen said with a resigned expression as she stood up.

"Here, take this. Whoever sees it gets one," Liu Bei said excitedly, handing Mi Zhen a piece of precious jade without a second thought.

Mi Zhen looked at Liu Bei in confusion. She remembered that the previous times she bumped into him, he hadn't given her anything. Why was he giving her a jade pendant now, and one that was almost as valuable as the one she kept in her satchel?

"Come, come, everyone gets one. Everyone gets one. Zhongkang, distribute the items. Whether they are present or not, make sure everyone gets their share," Liu Bei said, his excitement causing him to speak somewhat incoherently.

"What's going on? Wenhe, do you know anything about this?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled as he watched Xu Chu carry in box after box of treasure. "Could it be that we've defeated Yuan Shao?"

"How is that possible?" Jia Xu replied irritably. "You and Lord Xuande both receive the same reports. If that were the case, wouldn't you know? It's probably something else."

"Oh, right. I overlooked that," Chen Xi nodded, then glanced at Li You, who had just entered. Li You shook his head as well, deepening Chen Xi's curiosity. It seemed no one knew what was going on.

"Congratulations!" Chen Xi decided it was best to congratulate Liu Bei first, no matter the occasion, before figuring out the reason.

"Hahaha, come, come," Liu Bei's face was flushed with joy, his laughter hearty and full. He looked ecstatic. "Zichuan, this is for you."

At Liu Bei's signal, Xu Chu carried over a large box filled with gold, jade, and property deeds, brimming to the top.

Chen Xi gasped. Though Liu Bei had always been generous with his subordinates, he rarely handed out rewards of this magnitude. While Chen Xi wasn't particularly attached to wealth, this large box of treasures wasn't a trivial amount.

"Zijing, this one is yours," Liu Bei said, as another box was brought in and placed on the ground. Liu Bei seemed so excited that he was almost delirious.

"My lord, let me think for a moment. Has something joyous happened recently?" Lu Su asked, not even opening the box. He estimated that whatever Chen Xi received, he would likely receive the same. Although Chen Xi was Liu Bei's most trusted adviser, Liu Bei rarely showed favoritism in such matters, especially towards those who had been loyal since the early, impoverished days.

"You go ahead and think. Zhongkang, keep distributing!" Liu Bei laughed, motioning for Xu Chu to continue. Soon, box after box of gold, jade, and treasures were distributed, and it became clear that they would need help carrying everything back.

"Hey, do you think Lord Xuande might have a fever?" Chen Xi asked Jia Xu curiously, noticing that Liu Bei had even prepared rewards for Guan Yu, Guo Jia, Zhang Fei, and Liu Ye, who were not present.

Although Liu Bei was standing at a distance, his hearing was still sharp enough to catch Chen Xi's words. He burst into laughter. "Zichuan, aren't you known for planning ahead and considering every angle?"

Why don't you guess why I'm so happy today? If you guess right, there's a reward. If you guess wrong... well, no punishment for that."

A rare, mischievous glint appeared in Liu Bei's eyes. He had prepared two sets of rewards for Chen Xi, but whether Chen Xi could claim them depended on his own cleverness.

"Zijing, I'll split my reward with you. Do you have any ideas?" Chen Xi yawned and lazily turned to Lu Su for help.

"Kongming, do you have an answer? If you do, whatever Zichuan gives me, I'll give to you," Lu Su, always straightforward, didn't hesitate to offer everything to Zhuge Liang, as he had no idea himself.

Zhuge Liang was still in a bit of a daze. Although his Zhuge family was an ancient and noble lineage, they had fallen on hard times. He wasn't accustomed to such lavish wealth. Seeing such a large box of treasures in front of him made his eyes gleam with excitement.

Previously, when Liu Bei had given him property deeds and land titles, Zhuge Liang hadn't fully grasped their value. The house deeds were for a prime location in Fenggao, offering top-notch security with 24-hour patrols—something Zhuge Liang hadn't fully appreciated. As for the land deeds, he hadn't even checked on the shops, unaware of the income they generated. Thus, he hadn't realized the true value of those deeds.

After composing himself, Zhuge Liang returned to his usual calm demeanor, knowing that it would be difficult for wealth to faze him in the future. Reflecting on Lu Su's question, and recalling the confusion on Chen Xi and the others' faces earlier, Zhuge Liang deduced that the matter must be a private one for Liu Bei. The only event significant enough to make Liu Bei this jubilant was likely one thing.

With the answer in mind, Zhuge Liang calmly said, "Perhaps the lord has an heir. I believe that's the only event that could bring him such joy."

"Hahaha, Zhuge Kongming, well done! Well done! This whole box is yours. Zichuan, you've lost your treasures," Liu Bei laughed heartily, looking at Zhuge Liang with great satisfaction.

Upon hearing this, Jia Xu and the other officials were overjoyed. They all stepped forward to congratulate Liu Bei. This was indeed wonderful news. For a ruler, the matter of an heir was of utmost importance. Though Liu Bei had been young and strong, and his advisors hesitated to broach the topic, it had always been a concern in their hearts. Now, this joyous occasion had finally arrived.

"Congratulations, my lord! Congratulations..." The other officials who had been working in the back of the administrative hall also came forward to offer their congratulations. Liu Bei, in turn, generously rewarded each official with ten thousand coins and a pair of jade pendants.

"Zichuan, you need to get to work!" Liu Bei teased Chen Xi with a roguish grin, patting him on the shoulder. "Hurry up and have a daughter so she can be my son's wife."

Chen Xi twitched his lips but didn't bother responding to the now slightly crazed Liu Bei.

"Tonight, I'm hosting a banquet, and you all must come! Hahaha," Liu Bei laughed exuberantly. "I won't disturb your work any longer. I'm off to the military camp to hand out more rewards. I'm in such a great mood today. I'll make sure every official in every province and county gets an extra month's salary!"

Liu Bei seemed overwhelmed with joy, eager to head to the military camp and continue spreading his good fortune. He came and went quickly, but after this event, everyone's spirits were lifted, and they were filled with new energy. For a lord with no heir, no matter how strong his forces or how capable his advisors and generals, something crucial was always missing. Now, with this good news, the civil and military officials of Taishan could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Chapter 537: Still Called A'dou

"Hey, why are you back?" Chen Xi asked as he prepared to drink some tea before heading out with Jia Xu to see the dogs. He had just taken a couple of sips when he saw Liu Bei, who had left in a hurry earlier, return.

"Can't I come back?" Liu Bei playfully scolded, clearly in high spirits. Today, he was overjoyed, and all his usual decorum had disappeared. His noble demeanor, the mindset of a ruler, and his calm demeanor were all overshadowed by the importance of having a child—or maybe a daughter...

"Alright, alright, you're the boss. Mi Zhen, pour tea for Lord Xuande," Chen Xi quickly agreed, raising both hands in surrender. He then instructed Mi Zhen, who, after seeing Liu Bei, obediently approached

with the teapot. She still felt guilty for bumping into Liu Bei earlier, though if it had been Chen Xi, she wouldn't have cared at all.

"It's like this—I wanted to ask how much surplus grain we have. I want to distribute some to the people so they can share in the joy," Liu Bei said, grinning from ear to ear. Clearly, having a child had him so excited that he was losing track of things.

"Oh, that's simple. We could just reduce some of the taxes," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly. The grain tax wasn't that much, so he didn't mind reducing it. After all, their main reliance now was on accumulating grain through their farming reserves.

"Is that so? That would be even better. Let's waive one dou of grain tax for each citizen under our rule," Liu Bei said excitedly, then hesitated as if remembering something. He made a firm decision, "Let this be a blessing for my son in advance. From now on, this one dou of grain tax will be permanently waived."

Chen Xi sipped his tea, pondering the impact of Liu Bei's decision. Before he could finish his thoughts, Liu Bei continued speaking.

"Yes, one dou of grain—let's not collect it anymore," Liu Bei said happily. "Oh, and when my wife was pregnant, she dreamed of the Big Dipper entering her womb. Since the word 'dou' is involved, and I'm waiving a dou of grain tax, why not name the child A'dou?"

"Pfft!" Chen Xi spat out his tea, leaving Liu Bei stunned. "Zichuan, what's wrong?"

"The Big Dipper entering the womb is a very auspicious sign! The Big Dipper is eternally unmoving, surrounded by all the stars. This is a great omen," Li You said, stroking his beard with a hearty laugh. As soon as Liu Bei mentioned the Big Dipper, Li You immediately knew it must be a son.

"The North Star entering the womb—it signifies immense nobility, immense nobility indeed," Jia Xu chimed in, joining in the flattery. Though his skills in face reading, numerology, and dream interpretation were average, Li You was well-versed in these matters. Naturally, Jia Xu backed him up.

The Big Dipper often symbolized the emperor, and Liu Bei hadn't initially connected this. He was simply overjoyed at having a child, excited to no end. But with Li You and Jia Xu's interpretation, Liu Bei began to grasp the deeper meaning.

Suddenly, Liu Bei's high spirits waned. The North Star, the imperial star, entering the womb—this was a sign of future emperorship! But Liu Bei knew himself well. He had no interest in the throne. Years ago, he had sworn to uphold the Han Dynasty, binding himself to a promise, ensuring he would never covet the imperial seat. Yet now, his son was fated to be born under the imperial star. Did this mean he had secretly changed his ambitions?

His initial exuberance now dampened, Liu Bei waved off Li You and Jia Xu's congratulations. "Forget it, forget it. It might still be a girl."

Li You and Jia Xu exchanged glances, seeing the resignation in each other's eyes. Was Liu Bei really not tempted? Could this be a joke?

"Zichuan, accompany me for a walk," Liu Bei said with a hint of melancholy. His excitement had been completely extinguished by Li You's words, and he didn't bother asking Chen Xi why he had spat out his tea earlier.

"Sure," Chen Xi replied, glancing at Liu Bei. He quickly understood what was going on. Liu Bei seemed to have no desire for the throne at all, instead leaning towards the path of the Duke of Zhou. Chen Xi found this hard to believe.

As they walked in silence, they eventually arrived at Chen Xi's home and sat by the stone table. Liu Bei gazed at the falling leaves from a nearby tree and mused, "Zichuan, why do people change?"

"It would be strange if they didn't," Chen Xi replied, feeling a bit helpless. "Everything changes—some quickly, some slowly. Some have limits, while others have none. As long as people have desires, they'll keep changing."

"When I said I wanted to restore the Han Dynasty, I meant it. It wasn't about the throne," Liu Bei said bitterly. "But now, I doubt anyone would believe me. Even Yun Chang and Yi De have grown more conscious of rank and status as my power has increased."

"Well, Second Brother and Third Brother have their own concerns," Chen Xi replied with a wry smile, remembering how back at Hulao Pass, they had all sat casually while drinking. Now, it seemed that no one, apart from himself and Liu Bei, dared to sit down without formalities—always bowing with clasped hands first.

"You don't need to comfort me. I'm aware of it. Sigh, the higher my rank, the more distant people become. Actually, I really like that girl Mi Zhen," Liu Bei said with a lonely smile, then added something that made Chen Xi laugh so hard he nearly choked.

"Hahaha..." Chen Xi laughed heartily. Liu Bei saying he liked Mi Zhen—that was good news. "You should make your move quickly, Lord Xuande. While you still have the chance, you should claim her. After all, you'll eventually be crowned king. Mi Zhen would make a fine queen—just take her already!"

"Zichuan, you rascal..." Liu Bei muttered disapprovingly. "What I meant is that I like her lively personality. She doesn't have that rigid sense of hierarchy that others do. But if I married her, I'd ruin her. Besides, marrying a niece is just shameful."

"Let me laugh a bit more," Chen Xi said, turning away to chuckle, knowing exactly where this was going.

By now, no one in Taishan dared to treat Liu Bei or Chen Xi without respect. Even figures like Lu Su, Jia Xu, and Li You, though high-ranking officials, instinctively bowed their heads when facing Liu Bei and Chen Xi. While Lu Su might dare to drag Chen Xi to work, if Chen Xi issued an order, none of them would dare to defy it—such was the authority Chen Xi had accumulated over time.

Even women like Cai Zhaoji and Cai Zhenji would bow when they saw Chen Xi or Liu Bei. But Mi Zhen, without such clear notions of hierarchy and feeling somewhat spoiled by favor, remained as lively as ever, though she was also kind at heart. As for her mischief or accidents, Chen Xi would just pretend not to see them—otherwise, burning down the study would have been no laughing matter.

"Go ahead and laugh. When you're done, I think I'll arrange a match for Zizhong," Liu Bei said, casting a glance at Chen Xi, who immediately stopped laughing.

Chapter 538: Liu Ye's Devious Intentions

"Why aren't you laughing anymore?" Liu Bei turned to Chen Xi and asked.

"Let's talk about something else. Congratulations, Lord Xuande," Chen Xi replied, shaking his head and steering the conversation back on track.

"Sigh, though I don't understand dream interpretation, I do know the significance of the North Star entering the womb, as they said. It's as they described it," Liu Bei sighed. "It's a bit frustrating."

"Frustrated that you worked hard your whole life, only to pave a golden road for your son?" Chen Xi chuckled. "There's nothing to be frustrated about."

"I'm frustrated that after spending my whole life supporting the Han Dynasty and preparing to be a wise advisor like Duke Zhou, my son might undo all my efforts," Liu Bei grumbled.

"Every generation has its own blessings. We just need to do our part, ensuring that no one in the world can criticize us. If we can surpass the virtue of three generations and the might of Qin Shi Huang, then let's see what future generations have to say," Chen Xi casually consoled him, feeling more at ease with such matters compared to Liu Bei.

"My conscience isn't clear. I can't say I'm entirely selfless, but I can guarantee that my desire for the throne is minimal—almost nonexistent. Compared to the distant, unattainable goal I once had, my current objective is much more practical: to bring every province to the same level of prosperity as Taishan," Liu Bei said with a shake of his head. He, too, was growing and evolving, though he knew this goal would be difficult to achieve.

"Taishan, huh? If you give me fifty years, reaching that level is possible," Chen Xi replied with a smile. Fifty years of favorable weather, a competent emperor, and diligent ministers, and there'd be no difficulty in achieving that.

"That would be great. In all my life, I've never seen a place more stable than Taishan," Liu Bei sighed. "If I could see the entire realm reach this level in fifty years, I could die without regrets. Even if things go awry in the future, I'd have no shame when meeting the great ancestors in the afterlife."

"Take it easy. It'll come gradually. Who knows, maybe the oath you swore back then will come true," Chen Xi said with a smile, though he thought otherwise in his heart.

Liu Bei chuckled but didn't take Chen Xi's words to heart. He knew how high the goal he set for himself was when he made that vow to restrain his desires. It was simply impossible.

"Zichuan, I'd like you to educate my child when he's born. I hope you can raise him to be a benevolent and virtuous gentleman. And if he could have your talents, that would be even better," Liu Bei said, having calmed down after Chen Xi's words and shifted the topic.

Reflecting on his past goals, Liu Bei realized there was nothing more to say. As Chen Xi suggested, he had strived for his whole life, and whatever his son did in the future would be his son's business, not his own. Now, Liu Bei was content to do his best and leave the rest to fate.

"Sure, as long as you're not afraid of me messing around," Chen Xi replied with a laugh, thinking of the conflicting historical records of Liu Bei's son, A'dou. Was he really pretending to be foolish, or was there something genuinely wrong with him?

"Zichuan, even if you mess around, I'm sure it'll be within reason. By the way, Ziyang says he plans to use this current chaos to establish connections with Chang'an and prepare for rescuing the emperor. After years of hard work, we're finally seeing a glimmer of hope," Liu Bei said, changing the subject again.

"That's good news," Chen Xi nodded approvingly, though inwardly he couldn't help but criticize Liu Ye's true intentions. Despite being a direct descendant of the Han Dynasty, Liu Ye had no reverence for Emperor Xian. Knowing Liu Ye's historical tendencies, Chen Xi was certain that Liu Ye wasn't really planning to rescue the emperor. Instead, he was probably setting a trap to push the emperor into even deeper trouble, ensuring Liu Bei could maintain the moral high ground.

"It seems like you're not too optimistic about Ziyang's plan," Liu Bei asked, noticing Chen Xi's hesitation.

"Ziyang is a bit eager, but it's understandable. As a fellow descendant of the Han Dynasty, he naturally empathizes with the emperor's plight. He wouldn't miss any opportunity, and since he's willing to take action, he must be confident in his plan," Chen Xi responded, adopting a loyal and patriotic stance to align with Liu Ye's supposed motives.

"Ziyang told me that with the chaos in the land and Li Jue and Guo Si heavily exploiting Yongzhou, the other warlords are too preoccupied to intervene. He plans to use light cavalry to launch a surprise rescue across several provinces. It could be a brilliant move," Liu Bei said proudly, clearly impressed by the talents of his advisors.

"Indeed, with the warlords distracted, a covert operation like this could work. Using light cavalry to bypass the enemy and then setting up a camp to receive the emperor—this plan has a decent chance of success," Chen Xi analyzed the situation. If he didn't know Liu Ye's true intentions, he might have been fooled by this clever plan.

After some thought, Chen Xi understood the entire situation. Liu Ye was likely worried that if Liu Bei found out he never intended to rescue the emperor, but rather to push him into deeper trouble for the sake of preserving Liu Bei's moral authority, Liu Bei might hold it against him later.

Liu Ye wasn't foolish. He could sense that Liu Bei wasn't interested in the throne right now. But Liu Ye had no desire to bring Emperor Xian to Taishan, where the current flourishing situation could be ruined. After the disasters of Dong Zhuo and Li Jue, most capable central ministers were dead, leaving only corrupt officials and incompetents.

Moreover, having experienced the central government firsthand, Liu Ye knew how adept those officials were at internal strife. If they arrived, they'd surely cause turmoil, so Liu Ye thought it best to divert this trouble elsewhere—perhaps to someone like Yuan Shao!

"The saying 'Those inside are doomed, while those outside find safety' isn't just a joke. Given Liu Bei's current strength, keeping the emperor away seems like a much better option. Liu Ye knows exactly how to stir up the power-hungry central ministers, pitting Yuan Shao against the emperor and giving Liu Bei the moral high ground," Chen Xi thought to himself.

"I hope His Majesty can escape the tiger's den. The Han Dynasty has faced so many calamities in recent years. Why have there been so many disasters?" Liu Bei sighed, still oblivious to Liu Ye's devious intentions, genuinely believing Liu Ye was trying to save Emperor Xian.

"Without such calamities, neither you nor I would be sitting here today. Times make heroes, and heroes shape the times—it's a symbiotic relationship," Chen Xi replied with a smile.

Chapter 539: The Battle is About to Begin

Upon returning to camp, Hua Xiong burned down the old campsite and retreated over thirty miles, finally setting up a new camp on the opposite side of a river that was dozens of meters wide.

"General, the Hebei army has returned the bodies of our fallen brothers," Du Yuan said, bowing his head as he spoke to Hua Xiong, who hadn't eaten or drunk anything for an entire day.

"Go and receive the bodies," Hua Xiong replied quietly, glancing at Du Yuan. The returned bodies were those of the Xiliang cavalry; the infantry had already brought back their fallen comrades during the retreat.

"General, you should eat something before continuing your work," Du Yuan said with a tearful expression. War always brought death, and though Hua Xiong had experienced many victories, this didn't mean that his luck would never run out—just like now, when his Xiliang cavalry had nearly been wiped out.

"Let me calm down first. You can leave," Hua Xiong said, his voice cold as he looked at Du Yuan. The icy tone sent a shiver down Du Yuan's spine, and he quietly left without saying anything more.

Sitting at the table in his tent, Hua Xiong reflected on the years of battles he'd fought alongside his men, some of whom had followed him since their days in Xiliang. Now, the cavalry that had been with him since the formation of the Xiliang cavalry was reduced to just five hundred, and every one of them was wounded.

He reached for his chest, and the pain from his broken bones brought his mind back into focus. He had come so close to death—half of his ribs were broken, and his internal organs had been pierced by his ribs. If not for his extraordinary strength, these injuries would have been fatal.

"Ju Yi, and your Xian Deng," Hua Xiong muttered, his eyes flashing with anger. He loathed the fact that despite being a top-tier warrior with Inner Qi, he hadn't mastered a legion's special ability. If he had, even with Ju Yi's military soul, Hua Xiong wouldn't have suffered such a crushing defeat.

"It's my fault. I've failed you!" Hua Xiong said bitterly, his eyes red with unshed tears. "I was too foolish. If I were stronger, I wouldn't have needed you to fight to the death."

His fists clenched tightly, veins bulging as he glared northward. Then, he picked up the notes Li You had given him, detailing the three formations of the Eight Gates Golden Lock. He knew he couldn't fully master these formations, but Chen Xi had told him about something called a "conditioned reflex."

Though Hua Xiong didn't fully understand the concept, he grasped the basics—train something into your body until it becomes instinctual. Chen Xi had once used two examples: the Xiliang cavalry, when ambushed, instinctively formed a wedge formation, and Zhao Yun, who instinctively counterattacked with his spear when attacked.

The reason? According to Chen Xi, it was because they had been trained so thoroughly that their reactions were automatic, regardless of the situation. That was what Hua Xiong intended to do now—he would drill the Eight Gates Golden Lock formation into his soldiers until it became second nature. If he could train his men to instinctively form a wedge formation, then perhaps, through relentless training, the Eight Gates Golden Lock wouldn't be out of reach either.

Hua Xiong had no idea how difficult it was to imprint such a complex formation into his soldiers, but he was a man of singular focus. He didn't concern himself with the challenges—he simply knew he had to try.

"I still have time," Hua Xiong muttered as he memorized every key point of the formation. He lacked the talent for changing formations mid-battle and had no aptitude for developing a legion's special abilities. So, for Hua Xiong, there was only one path forward: to etch the entire formation into his bones through sheer effort, so that it became instinctive for him and his men.

In the past, he might not have even considered such an approach, but after suffering this bitter defeat, the anger and frustration of failing to protect his comrades pushed him to become stronger.

As Hua Xiong fortified his camp on the other side of the river, both Yan Liang and Ju Yi found themselves troubled. If it were ordinary troops across the river, they would charge without hesitation, but Hua Xiong's soldiers were as elite as Ju Yi's own. If they attempted a crossing only to be met with an ambush, even the Xian Deng would be annihilated.

After two days of deadlock, Yu Jin, Zhang Fei, and Liu Ye finally arrived at Hua Xiong's camp, bringing with them good news: Zhang Yan's condition had stabilized, and against all odds, he had survived.

Seeing how much Hua Xiong had withered since their last encounter, Zhang Fei didn't know what to say. He had already learned that the Xiliang cavalry, which had followed Hua Xiong for nearly a decade, was now reduced to just five hundred men.

"Zijian, don't let this get you down," Liu Ye said, trying to comfort Hua Xiong in the only way he could.

"There's nothing to be sad about. Soldiers live and die by the sword," Hua Xiong replied with a calmness that seemed foreign to him. But inwardly, he vowed, "Ju Yi, we have a score to settle. Next time we meet, I'll return all this pain to you!"

Liu Ye glanced at Hua Xiong but said nothing more. They had heard about the casualties on both sides, including Ju Yi's Xian Deng and Yan Liang's forces. On the battlefield, fortunes could change in an instant, and no one could predict what would happen next.

"Zijian, focus on recovering. I'll go deal with Yan Liang," Zhang Fei said, not knowing how else to console Hua Xiong.

"Be careful. Yan Liang may be as strong as Yun Chang now," Hua Xiong cautioned with a sigh.

"Don't worry!" Zhang Fei's booming voice rattled Hua Xiong's ears, and before Hua Xiong could warn him further, Zhang Fei had already stormed out, mounting his horse and grabbing his spear, ready to confront Yan Liang and give Hua Xiong a surprise.

But when Zhang Fei shouted across the river, all he saw were birds startled into flight. Zhang Fei paused, realizing he had seen this before. After some thought, he remembered that several military strategies mentioned such a scenario—either a trap or an empty camp.

Quickly returning to camp, Zhang Fei shouted, "Master Liu, Master Liu, come take a look. The enemy camp might be empty!"

Before Liu Ye could respond, Zhang Fei dragged him outside. After settling Liu Ye by the riverbank, Liu Ye looked across at the enemy camp and sighed, "I used to think Ju Yi was all brawn and no brains, but it seems he knows a trick or two. They likely left before we even arrived."

As Liu Ye spoke, the Xian Deng forces had already engaged Wei Xu and Hao Meng's Bingzhou cavalry in battle, signaling the beginning of a new conflict.

Chapter 540: Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry Vs Xian Deng Death Warriors

Gao Shun's Formation Breaker troops advanced at a steady pace, showing no signs of the tension that typically precedes a major battle. Throughout their march, Gao Shun's army soul remained highly active. Unlike Ju Yi, who was reluctant to use up the accumulated willpower of his army soul, Gao Shun had no such concerns. The Formation Breaker's army soul was fully manifested, and maintaining it required little effort. If necessary, he could even use the army soul's willpower to boost the morale of allied forces.

"Caoxing," Gao Shun said quietly as he took the intelligence report sent by Wei Xu and his group from Caoxing's hands. He then looked up at Caoxing.

Although Gao Shun wasn't particularly favored by Lu Bu, his actual position within Lu Bu's ranks was not low. Lu Bu simply didn't dare to fully trust him. As of now, Caoxing, one of the Eight Cavalry Generals, served as Gao Shun's deputy.

"At your command," Caoxing said, keeping his head lowered. He was no fool like Wei Xu. Initially appointed to monitor Gao Shun, Caoxing had since accepted that if Gao Shun ever truly decided to betray them, he wouldn't be able to stop him. Therefore, he faithfully followed Gao Shun's orders.

"Ride swiftly and inform Military Advisor Chen to prepare to ambush the Hebei forces. Wei Xu and his group have already encountered Yan Liang," Gao Shun said calmly. Then, a beam of white light from the military flag enveloped Caoxing, raising his strength from the Qi Refinement stage directly to the pseudo-Inner Qi Detached stage.

"Understood!" Caoxing bowed and withdrew quietly. As Gao Shun's deputy, and a loyal one at that, he could enjoy the benefits of the Formation Breaker's empowerment. While Gao Shun had truly reached that level through hard work, Caoxing was merely a pseudo Inner Qi Detached due to the army soul's influence. Still, whenever he was empowered by the army soul, Caoxing couldn't help but feel like he had become a master.

After Caoxing left, Gao Shun quickened the pace of the march. The issue of the Formation Breaker's cavalry being too slow had never been resolved, or rather, Lu Bu had chosen to ignore it. The Formation Breaker soldiers were originally selected from the best of the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry, trained from among the most elite. How could they be foot soldiers?

"Increase the speed," Gao Shun ordered calmly. From what he understood, Ju Yi's Xian Deng troops were not truly close combat soldiers. Despite their appearance as high-attack axe soldiers, they were actually heavy crossbowmen with a wide attack range. This meant that the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry was particularly well-suited to counter them.

Meanwhile, Wei Xu, Hou Cheng, and Hao Meng were suffering a devastating defeat. Just as they were preparing to showcase their excellent archery skills, a sudden barrage of arrows from the Xian Deng troops knocked many of their wolf cavalry off their horses. When they attempted to demonstrate their melee combat abilities, they quickly realized that Ju Yi's troops were just as ruthless in close combat after discarding their crossbows.

Adding insult to injury, Yan Liang, still fuming from his previous defeat at the hands of Hua Xiong, led his few hundred remaining cavalry in a reckless charge right into the heart of the enemy forces. He killed Hou Cheng in front of everyone and, despite the disparity in their forces' morale, delivered a crushing blow that killed Wei Xu in a single strike. This completely disoriented the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry, turning them into headless chickens.

Yan Liang's heroic display energized the Hebei forces, especially as he grew more ferocious with each battle. With Xian Deng proving equally formidable, the Hebei army fought with unparalleled fervor, as if they had been injected with pure adrenaline.

In the chaotic melee, Xian Deng warriors formed groups of three—crossbowmen, swordsmen, and spearmen with round shields. This combination allowed them to tear through the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry like a fish in water.

Among the three great cavalry forces of the late Han Dynasty, the White Horse Cavalry was known for its speed and unparalleled archery skills, while the Xiliang Cavalry excelled in power and charges. Positioned between Youzhou and Xiliang, the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry was a balanced force that combined speed, archery, power, and charge. They were known as versatile warriors, capable of both offense and defense, charging and shooting.

However, being versatile meant that the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry lacked the extraordinary speed of the White Horse Cavalry and the sheer destructive force of the Xiliang Cavalry. In trying to balance both aspects, they ended up excelling at neither.

Despite this, the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry was still more lethal against regular troops compared to the other two elite cavalry units. However, against the Xian Deng warriors, their archery couldn't match the range of infantry crossbows, their charges couldn't break through, and when surrounded, they couldn't fight their way out. When they tried to escape, Yan Liang blocked their path, leaving them trapped and ultimately wiped out.

The situation for the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry was dire. Unlike the White Horse Cavalry, which could always escape due to its speed, or the Xiliang Cavalry, which could fight its way out through sheer force, the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry was trapped with no way out.

"End the battle quickly. Yan Liang, take out Hao Meng!" Ju Yi ordered his messenger, instructing Yan Liang to finish off Hao Meng. Although the Hebei forces, along with Xian Deng, were fighting with high morale, completely annihilating the enemy wasn't easy.

"This is a real battle!" Yan Liang shouted as he swung his spear, piercing the chests of four Wolf Cavalry captains. Compared to being suppressed by Hua Xiong earlier, this kind of freewheeling slaughter was the type of battle Yan Liang relished.

"General, Ju Yi orders you to kill Hao Meng," a bodyguard squeezed his horse through the chaos and shouted.

"Good! Let me find the command flag!" Yan Liang swung his spear in a sweeping motion, clearing a path. His moves were becoming more fluid, and his attacks more powerful.

"All troops, follow me!" Yan Liang roared as he charged towards the enemy command flag with only a few dozen bodyguards in tow. By this point, the Hebei soldiers, bolstered by their momentum, had no fear, and Yan Liang's relentless charge had made him a symbol of invincibility in their eyes.

"Stop the enemy general!" Hao Meng shouted. Yan Liang had already killed Wei Xu with a single strike and crushed Hou Cheng with one blow, leaving Hao Meng terrified. If he hadn't been lured into this trap

and now found himself unable to escape, Hao Meng would have fled long ago. His only hope now was for Gao Shun to arrive as a savior.

"Prepare to die!" Yan Liang shouted as he skewered several Wolf Cavalry soldiers with his spear. His few dozen bodyguards were unstoppable, and even the previously diminished morale of the Hebei forces suddenly surged as their energy intermingled with Yan Liang's.

As Yan Liang continued to cut down Hao Meng's men, the latter grew increasingly desperate. He knew that if the command flag fell, all would be lost, and his fate would be sealed. Realizing that survival meant taking a risk, Hao Meng thrust his spear at Yan Liang's waist in a desperate bid to turn the tide.