

Mythical 541

Chapter 541: The Final Entrustment

In the Cao Residence of Chenliu, Yanzhou, Xizhi lay on his sickbed. He hadn't stayed in his usual residence, nor did he desire one anymore. Now, he could clearly feel his life slipping away, with less than three months left.

"Cough, cough, cough." Xizhi struggled to sit up, coughing a few times. Cao Cao, who had been anxiously waiting, quickly entered upon hearing the sound.

"Zhizhi, are you feeling any better?" Cao Cao looked at Xizhi, whose face was pale and expression despondent, his hand trembling as he held a handkerchief. Cao Cao asked hopefully, wishing for his recovery.

"My lord, please have Zhongde come in. I have something to entrust to him." Xizhi waved his hand. He knew his fate. If not for Hua Tuo's presence back then, he would have already been dead. Perhaps if Hua Tuo could be summoned now, he might live another ten years, but was that possible? Hua Tuo never left Taishan, and he was always under protection. After the prescription to cure typhoid fever was widely spread in Qingzhou, Hua Tuo had been enshrined.

"Zhizhi!" Cao Cao was frustrated that Xizhi was still trying to handle military matters. Xun Yu and Xizhi had been the strategists who joined him during his most difficult times, and their help had been immense.

"My lord, there are things that must be done. You should enter Guanzhong now. This is our last chance. Wen Ruo and Yuan Chang have laid the groundwork; the rest depends on you. We've already delayed too long due to my illness. If Yuan and Liu manage to eliminate Lu Bu, we'll have no more opportunities." Xizhi said between labored breaths. Breathing had become increasingly difficult for him, with each breath feeling like a heavy burden.

Cao Cao's eyes reddened, but he held back his tears. "I'll leave you to rest. Take care of yourself."

After helping Xizhi lie back down and covering him with a blanket, Cao Cao silently left the room. As he closed the door, he had a foreboding feeling that this might be the last time he would see Xizhi.

Shortly after, Cheng Yu entered. Xizhi opened his eyes but didn't sit up. "Zhongde, how are the preparations?"

"I've arranged everything as you instructed, and we'll act when the time is right," Cheng Yu said, a cold glint flashing in his eyes.

"Can Gongtai be persuaded?" Xizhi asked.

"Ziyuan's message indicates that Gongtai hasn't given any clear response. We overstepped our bounds during the Xuzhou campaign. While Gongtai admires the lord's boldness and valor, Ziyuan's intelligence suggests that Gongtai might be inclined to join Liu Xuande." Cheng Yu sighed. Chen Gong had once been a key minister under Cao Cao, but their differences had ultimately led them to part ways.

"Tell Chen Gongtai that Li Wenru is actually Li Ru, and Jia Wenhe was Dong Zhuo's chancellor! Lu Bu is doomed if he stays!" Xizhi said calmly.

"What? How is that possible?" Cheng Yu was shocked, but then his face lit up with joy. "Hahaha, Liu Bei, a Han loyalist, has taken in someone like Li Ru, who caused the death of the Young Emperor. If we spread this news, it could have significant effects."

"Forget it. There's no proof, and whether or not Li Wenru killed the Young Emperor is still debatable. More importantly, Li Wenru's current identity as a close friend of Cai Bojie and the uncle of Cai Zhaoji protects him. Only Cai Zhaoji could expose him, but no one else can. We can only provide this information to Gongtai and let him decide." Xizhi closed his eyes as he spoke.

"What a pity." Cheng Yu understood that attacking Li You directly would be difficult. After all, Li You had dual identities: one as a friend of Chen Xi and another as Cai Bojie's close friend and Cai Zhaoji's uncle. These connections shielded him from many potential troubles.

"I don't have much time left. The lord's ambitions will depend on all of you from now on. Before I go, I will pave the way as best I can." Xizhi's pale face showed his determination. "Currently, both Liu Xuande and Yuan Benchu are formidable leaders. Controlling key agricultural regions and horse-breeding lands in northern China gives them significant advantages over us."

"Even if we manage to secure Sili, Yongliang, Hanzhong, and Yizhou, we'll only be able to hold our ground defensively. Hopefully, Liu Jingzhou or Sun Bofu can rise to power in the southeast, leveraging the Yangtze River's natural defenses while we rely on our mountainous terrain to contend for supremacy." Xizhi smiled bitterly. He was fully aware that regions like Jizhou, Qingzhou, Yanzhou, and Xuzhou held the majority of the population in central China.

Cheng Yu lowered his head, feeling the immense pressure. Unknowingly, Liu Bei had grown into a massive force.

"Bring Wenruo, Gongda, and Xiubo here," Xizhi said, noticing Cheng Yu's overwhelmed expression.

Cheng Yu nodded and soon returned with Xun Yu, Xun You, and Fan Qin. The four exchanged glances but remained silent until Xizhi finally spoke.

"Wenruo, Gongda, Xiubo—among the lord's advisors, you three are the ones I find hardest to read. You've all been holding back, and while I don't know your reasons, I hope that after my death, you'll fully support the lord rather than continuing as you have. Gongda, regarding the matter in Xuzhou, I apologize on the lord's behalf." Xizhi struggled to sit up, bowing deeply to Xun You, who hastily nodded, promising to give his full effort in the future.

"Xiubo, to be honest, I've always doubted whether the Fan family truly has control over you. They lack the endless stream of geniuses that the Xun family has, and they don't have the terrifying depth of the older generation. So how do they command you?" Xizhi's gaze was cold as he questioned Fan Qin.

"No one commands me. I came on my own. As for your suspicions, I can only say sorry." Fan Qin replied nonchalantly.

"Very well," Xizhi nodded. "After I'm gone, I ask that you all do your best."

"Gongda, Xiubo, you may leave now. Wenruo likely has something to discuss with me," Xizhi said, having gained the answers he sought. He dismissed Xun You and Fan Qin, leaving only Xun Yu in the room with him.

After they left, Xizhi looked at Xun Yu. "Wenruo, we've known each other for twenty years now."

"Yes, over twenty years," Xun Yu nodded.

"Who should take over my position after I'm gone?" Xizhi asked. "And Wenruo, it's time for you to give it your all."

"Gongda will take your place as chief strategist. It's a shame about Fengxiao—he would have been the best candidate to succeed you," Xun Yu sighed, thinking of how his plans had been disrupted by unforeseen events.

"After I'm gone, I will use a mental ability. After that, it will be up to you. If I'm not mistaken, your mental abilities should be sufficient, right?" Xizhi asked. He had never fully understood Xun Yu's capabilities, and only recently did he realize he couldn't completely grasp Xun Yu's full potential.

Chapter 542: Xizhi's Final Resting Place

"Whatever Chen Zichuan can do, I can do as well. However, unlike his effortless approach, my strategies not only strengthen the civil and military officials but also draw upon their collective mental power. I can even change the heavens," Xun Yu nodded, explaining his ability.

"But it must cost you your lifespan, right? Unlike Chen Zichuan's seemingly effortless methods, yours likely require sacrificing your life," Xizhi said with a bitter smile.

"In the short term, it doesn't affect me much, but if I were to employ such methods on a scale like Chen Zichuan's, it would severely impact the officials. The mental drain would eventually lead to disorder within the administration. After all, mental fatigue causes drowsiness, and excessive depletion can lead to unconsciousness. Not everyone has Chen Zichuan's recovery speed," Xun Yu sighed. Although the mental energy of officials far exceeds that of the common people, they still greatly outnumber them.

"After I'm gone, everything will depend on you, Wenruo. I know you still have cards up your sleeve. You've planted a spy within Yuan Benchu's ranks—if I'm not mistaken, Dong Gongren must be your doing, right?" Xizhi's breathing became more labored as he spoke.

After a long silence, Xun Yu finally responded, "Yes, Dong Gongren within Yuan Benchu's ranks is my agent. Once Yuan Benchu is defeated, we can use him to absorb Yuan's strength. His intelligence is on par with Zhongde."

"But you know he's a double, or even a triple agent, right?" Xizhi lay back down, closing his eyes as he tried to find some comfort.

"Yes, I'm aware that he's also working as Yuan Shao's spy. He has no clear sense of loyalty, only aligning himself with the strongest power. However, I've found no evidence that he's working for Liu Xuande," Xun Yu replied.

"I don't know who else he might be working for either, but I'm certain he has another backer. It's up to you to find out who that is," Xizhi said, opening his eyes slightly. The certainty in his gaze made Xun Yu pause, but he ultimately chose to believe Xizhi and nodded silently.

"Very well, I'll take it from here," Xun Yu agreed. "I'll make sure to uncover who's behind Dong Gongren."

"Alright, let me do one last thing," Xizhi said quietly. He slowly extended his hand from beneath the blanket, gazing wistfully at the ceiling. Cao Mengde's ambitions were just beginning, yet he had to depart.

"Zhizhi..." Xun Yu's voice carried a trace of sorrow. Among the few people who could be called his friends, Xizhi was one of the rare ones who had truly reached his heart. Though they often disagreed due to their differing thought processes, Xun Yu counted him among his closest allies.

"Why show such sentimental feelings? Everyone faces death eventually. I just want to see what I'm truly capable of at my full potential," Xizhi laughed heartily, though the defiant smile couldn't hide the underlying melancholy.

"Attendants!" Xun Yu shouted, and the waiting attendants outside hurried in to help Xizhi sit up.

Soon after, the door to Xizhi's room was pushed open, and Cao Cao, Cheng Yu, and others entered.

"Zhizhi," Cao Cao said, seeing Xizhi propped up by the attendants. He didn't know what to say. The thin frame and pale face made it clear—his most trusted strategist didn't have long to live.

"My lord," Xizhi addressed Cao Cao after being helped outside. He gazed at the high heavens and the white clouds, enjoying the crisp autumn air. Suddenly, he seemed to remember something and gently pushed away the attendant supporting him. Turning to Cao Cao, he bowed deeply. "My lord, I don't have much time left. May I ask one last favor of you?"

"Zhizhi..." Cao Cao could no longer hold back his tears, which flowed freely. "Don't just ask for one favor—whatever you wish, I'll grant it."

"My lord, please remember what Chen Gongtai said about the Nine Virtues of a ruler. The incident in Xuzhou must never be repeated. I can only assist you this far. Wenruo has the talent to govern the world. If you ever find yourself at a loss, consult Wenruo. There aren't many things in this world that can stump him," Xizhi said with a pained smile.

The defeat in Xuzhou had been disastrous, far more so than anyone could have imagined. Nearly ten thousand veteran soldiers, along with the foundation painstakingly built in Nanyang, had been lost in that muddled defeat.

"..." Cao Cao fell silent. If there was one thing he considered taboo, it was the incident in Xuzhou. Now, in front of everyone, Xizhi had brought it up without reservation.

"I swear by my name, Cao Mengde, that I will abide by the Nine Virtues of a ruler as laid out by Chen Gongtai. Never again shall I order the massacre of a city in the Central Plains!" The oppressive silence of the courtyard was finally broken by Cao Mengde's vow.

"With that, I can rest easy," Xizhi said, a hint of color returning to his face. He seemed more energized. "This is the best news I've heard since the beginning of the year. My lord, Zhizhi is ready to depart."

With a low shout, Xizhi's words seemed to affect the heavens themselves. Everyone present felt a sudden oppressive force, and in an instant, the wind picked up, and the sky darkened with swirling clouds. Thunder rolled, and the sky became turbulent and violent.

"Trace back to the source!" Xizhi roared, his eyes wide with fury. Blood began to seep from his tightly clenched teeth as his vast mental energy surged, forcing Cao Cao and the others to take several steps back.

"How could it fail at this point?" Xun Yu's eyes gleamed coldly. For the first time, Cao Cao felt a heavy pressure emanating from the normally gentle and refined Xun Yu. Powerful mental energy radiated from him, inflating his robes as if filled with wind.

As a result, all of Cao Cao's civil and military officials began to feel their mental energy being drained uncontrollably.

"Sigh..." Xun Yu sighed and activated his own mental abilities to envelop Xizhi. A subtle force penetrated Chen Xi's protective mental barrier before his external mental energy could react.

"Cough..." Xizhi spat out a mouthful of dark red blood, but his eyes shone with an intense light. For a brief moment, it was as if he had returned to his peak condition.

"It worked..." As the sky cleared, Xizhi collapsed forward with a contented smile. Seeing his expression, Cheng Yu and the other officials who understood the truth were filled with joy.

Despite his disheveled state, Xun Yu rushed to catch Xizhi as he fell.

"I've done my part. The rest is up to you..." Xizhi gently patted Xun Yu's hand before it slipped from his grasp, never to rise again.

Chapter 543: Cao Mengde's Ambition

In the autumn of this year, during the leap month of August, Xizhi passed away. Cao Cao personally arranged the funeral and then issued proclamations throughout the land, admitting to all the actions he had taken in Xuzhou. The world responded with widespread condemnation, voices of criticism rising like a tidal wave. However, the other warlords found it difficult to seize this opportunity to attack Cao Cao.

Sima Yi and Hu Zhao, braving the frost and snow, traversed the various Xianbei tribes beyond the Great Wall. As they returned to the Central Plains, seeking a worthy ruler to serve, the proclamation from Cao Cao reached their hands.

"This Cao Mengde is indeed a hero," Sima Yi sneered. "Teacher, won't you accompany me to see for yourself?"

"I'm going to observe Liu Xuande. Perhaps I'll gain new insights," Hu Zhao shook his head. He was interested in Liu Bei's governance and, more importantly, surprised that Liu Bei's education reforms hadn't led to the collapse he had anticipated.

"Then, teacher, we part ways here," Sima Yi bowed deeply to Hu Zhao. He knew he couldn't integrate into Liu Bei's camp, and he wouldn't waste time trying. In Sima Yi's eyes, Cao Cao, who dared to take responsibility and wasn't overly rigid, seemed a perfect match.

Chen Gong looked at the two pieces of intelligence in his hands, silently burning the one regarding Li You being Li Ru. However, he had already formed an estimation in his heart. Just as Xizhi had predicted before his death, Chen Gong, whose mind was no weaker than that of a top strategist, came to his own conclusions the moment he received the information. He confirmed the suspicion.

As a result, Chen Gong could no longer consider joining Liu Bei. To him, Lu Bu was irreplaceable. Although Lu Bu's methods were somewhat foolish, they were endearing in their simplicity.

"The Nine Virtues of a Warlord, huh?" Chen Gong muttered as he put away the proclamation. If admitting to his actions in Xuzhou had plunged Cao Cao into a sea of condemnation, the subsequent declaration of the Nine Virtues of a Warlord forced the scholars and officials of the land to reconsider.

The Han people were always forgiving. Killing those Xuzhou civilians couldn't bring them back to life. If Cao Cao could truly adhere to the virtues he promised, it might not be a bad thing. The Nine Virtues represented the highest moral standards for a warlord. If Cao Cao could achieve them, it would be beneficial to the realm. Amid the collapse of the Han Dynasty, the emergence of such a capable leader was a blessing.

Cao Cao surveyed the stacks of letters and intelligence reports on his desk. They all pointed to the same conclusion: the scholars of the land were willing to let the past go. They would now focus on whether Cao Cao kept his promises. Since he had publicly admitted his mistakes, they would give him a chance to prove himself.

"Master," Xun Yu, dressed in white, bowed deeply to Cao Cao.

"Wenruo, what did you and Xizhi do on the day he passed?" Cao Cao asked.

"Xizhi replicated Chen Zichuan's spiritual talent. Although incomplete, he still used it," Xun Yu replied concisely.

"Was it worth it?" Cao Cao seemed to ask Xun Yu, yet at the same time, he seemed to be questioning himself. Xizhi had left this world.

"Chen Zichuan's talent greatly enhances celestial phenomena. Although my spiritual talent can also alter the heavens, it comes at a significant cost. So, before he died, Xizhi took a gamble. Fortunately, it succeeded," Xun Yu sighed.

Xizhi had taken a risk. Even if he could replicate Chen Xi's incomplete talent, activating it would inevitably lead to his death. There was a high chance that the spiritual talent would dissipate before Xun Yu could inherit it.

Despite the many uncertainties, Xizhi had gambled. Fortunately, just as he had predicted, Chen Xi's spiritual talent, protected by external mental energy, remained intact.

Xun Yu did not mention that, due to the incomplete replication, the talent would require a substantial investment of spiritual energy to sustain until enough external mental energy could stabilize it. Nonetheless, it was worth it. In time, the talent would become fully stable, making it much easier for Xun Yu to manipulate large-scale weather changes.

Xun Yu sighed again.

"Xizhi..." Cao Cao murmured to himself.

"Master, please stay strong. I'm sure Xizhi wouldn't want to see you like this," Xun Yu bowed his head, trying to console him. Xizhi's death had hit him hard as well, but unlike Cao Cao, Xun Yu rarely let others sway his emotions.

"Wenruo, prepare for the march into Guanzhong," Cao Cao said, taking a deep breath and pushing aside his grief. His eyes filled with resolve as he looked at Xun Yu. The dead were gone, but the living still had to move forward.

When Cao Cao rose, Xun Yu immediately sensed a change in him. The transformation was so subtle that Xun Yu couldn't fully grasp it, but he was pleased to see Cao Cao's determination to move westward.

"Wenruo, this time, you will stay and oversee Chenliu. I will personally lead the troops into Guanzhong!" Cao Cao had made up his mind. In adversity, he had tapped into a remarkable charisma that greatly satisfied Xun Yu.

"Understood." Xun Yu nodded. He had already laid out all the necessary plans; now, it was up to those heading into Guanzhong to execute them. Although Xun Yu had doubted Cao Cao's military prowess after the defeat in Xuzhou, seeing his resolve now, he decided to take another gamble.

A few days later, on the same day that Gao Shun clashed with the Xian Deng, Cao Cao, accompanied by only a small number of infantry and with Xun You as his chief strategist, set out for Chang'an. Many saw this as a suicidal mission, but to Cao Cao, Xizhi had continued to plan for him until his last breath. How could he give up now?

"Guanzhong, here I come!" Cao Cao shouted, filled with boundless ambition as he gazed toward Chang'an, clutching the reins of his horse.

Xun You, Cheng Yu, and the others felt the same surge of anticipation in their hearts. The fate of the Cao clan would be decided in this campaign—victory or death!

Standing atop his horse, Cao Cao glanced back at the east from the west gate of Chenliu.

"Forward!" Cao Cao roared, charging ahead toward Chang'an!

Chapter 544: Cutting Through Like Vegetables

As Cao Cao set out on his campaign, the battle between Hao Meng and Yan Liang had already begun. Unlike Hou Cheng and Wei Xu, who were considered weak among Lu Bu's Eight Tiger Generals, Hao Meng was a true fierce warrior under Lu Bu's command. Especially when fighting with his life on the line, Hao Meng, with the support of his personal guards and the manipulation of the battle's momentum, managed to temporarily hold back Yan Liang's onslaught.

"Charge!" Hao Meng threw away his spear, gripping a war blade tightly as he fiercely slashed towards Yan Liang, roaring wildly. Unlike Hou Cheng and Wei Xu, who were intimidated by Yan Liang's overwhelming power, Hao Meng knew that if Yan Liang destroyed his banner, he would surely die. Fighting back with all his might, however, gave him a slim chance of survival.

Yan Liang's spear skillfully deflected Hao Meng's guards, and the force of his attack tore through Hao Meng's armor, leaving bloodstains on Hao Meng's chest.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" Hao Meng, now seemingly crazed, swung his broken weapon towards Yan Liang, his eyes bloodshot. Without a desperate fight, death was certain, but with it, there was still a glimmer of hope.

"Surrender!" Yan Liang, after breaking Hao Meng's war blade in half and killing his horse with a single strike, urged him to yield. Hao Meng was thrown to the ground, but in a desperate move, he dragged one of Yan Liang's guards off his horse and managed to climb onto another steed.

"Surrender, Hao Meng. I will recommend you to my lord, Yuan Gong, for your bravery," Yan Liang offered. Though Hao Meng's strength was insignificant to him, Yan Liang admired Hao Meng's resolve in the face of death.

Hao Meng's eyes flickered with hesitation. A good death was better than a bad life, and he had never considered himself a hero who would rather die than submit. Surviving had always been his priority, and now seemed like the perfect opportunity. But just as he was about to speak, he caught sight of a large banner from the corner of his eye.

"We men of Bingzhou would rather die standing than live kneeling!" Hao Meng roared, charging towards Yan Liang with his broken blade. His defiant cry ignited the spirits of the demoralized Bingzhou wolf cavalry.

"Seeking death!" Yan Liang, angered by Hao Meng's defiance after offering him a way out, thrust his spear at him.

With a resounding crash, Yan Liang's horse staggered backward. Yan Liang looked up in shock at the figure before him—a warrior clad in simple armor, yet exuding a pressure no less intense than Lu Bu's.

"Break through to the west! The Trap Formation will pierce through Ju Yi's defense within a tea's time. Lead the troops out and eliminate those scattered forces," Gao Shun, standing in the air, calmly ordered Hao Meng.

"Understood!" Hao Meng responded with a shiver of fear. If he had surrendered earlier, his head would have already rolled by now. At that moment, Hao Meng's humility matched that of Cao Xing.

"Yan Liang of Hebei!" Yan Liang, filled with fighting spirit, declared.

"Nothing but brute strength!" Gao Shun sneered after ensuring Hao Meng's safety. With that, he flew away, leaving Yan Liang stunned.

As the wind blew past, Yan Liang realized the opponent had already left. The warrior who could fly with the aid of the battlefield's energy had mocked him and then simply flown away.

"Scoundrel!" Yan Liang, his mind finally catching up, roared in anger, his eyes burning with fury.

Gao Shun, expressionless, flew out of the battlefield, thankful that the battlefield's energy was thin enough for him to escape. Otherwise, even with the army's spirit protecting him, he wouldn't have made it.

"All troops, charge! Break through the enemy!" Gao Shun shouted, and the 800 Trap Formation soldiers split into two groups. One charged towards Ju Yi's position, while the other tore through the opposing army.

A series of explosions echoed as the Trap Formation tore a path through Yan Liang's forces, cutting through like a knife through butter, leaving a trail of blood in their wake.

On the other side, the Trap Formation clashed head-on with the Xian Deng, both sides leading with powerful crossbows. After a fierce exchange, the Trap Formation soldiers emerged unscathed, stepping over the bodies of the Xian Deng and calmly cutting down their enemies.

"Attack!" The Xian Deng soldiers who remained turned to countercharge, only to be met by the Trap Formation soldiers' coordinated strikes. A few silver flashes later, the enemy's front ranks were cleared, and the Trap Formation pressed forward, boosting the morale of the wolf cavalry trapped in the middle.

While Gao Shun's troops were cutting through their opponents with ease, the other half of the Trap Formation encountered a real challenge—Ju Yi himself, leading the Xian Deng in direct combat. However, even against Ju Yi's seasoned forces, the Trap Formation showed no signs of struggle.

"Whose troops are these?" Ju Yi, eyes cold, led his men into battle. For a moment, he had no time to coordinate with the rest of Yuan Shao's forces.

If Ju Yi hadn't glanced over at the right moment, he might have missed the sight of his elite Xian Deng being mercilessly slaughtered. The scene was like adults bullying children.

The Xian Deng's attacks were effortlessly deflected by the Trap Formation's shields before they were cut down. The Trap Formation soldiers took arrows head-on, shrugged them off, and then retaliated with deadly accuracy.

Ju Yi's eyes nearly popped out of his head at the sight. His elite troops were being humiliated, and his fury reached a boiling point. Activating the Xian Deng's battle spirit, he led his personal guards into the fray.

"Battle spirit." Gao Shun's deputy, Li Ren, remarked with a hint of excitement. Since the destruction of the Feixiong Army, they hadn't faced a unit with a battle spirit. To grow stronger, the Trap Formation needed to crush formidable foes.

"Kill!" Ju Yi's Xian Deng soldiers, now shrouded in blood-red energy, charged forward. Their accumulated killing intent, bloodlust, and ferocity were unleashed in full force.

Without waiting for orders, the front line of the Trap Formation simultaneously drew their blades, slashing into the blood-red mist surrounding the Xian Deng. A flash of silver light pierced through, dispersing a small portion of the blood mist, though this time, no casualties resulted.

"Fools!" Ju Yi sneered as the killing intent in the air coalesced into blood arrows. The weapons of the Xian Deng soldiers glowed with a faint red hue.

"Not bad. They're no weaker than the Feixiong Army we destroyed before," Li Ren sneered. But that was as far as their strength went. The Feixiong had been annihilated, and now, years later, the Trap Formation had only grown stronger.

Chapter 545: No Life Without Death

The blood arrows from the Xian Deng shot towards the Trap Formation like a tidal wave, yet the Trap Formation soldiers remained calm, their expressions mirroring Gao Shun's indifference.

"The will of the Xian Deng: No life without death!" Li Ren shouted as he swung his blade towards the Xian Deng, and the other Trap Formation soldiers followed suit, their low growls echoing as they slashed forward. A wave of silver light surged ahead, piercing through Ju Yi's prideful blood arrows.

"Charge and wipe them out!" Li Ren roared, seizing the moment when the Xian Deng were thrown into disarray by the overwhelming momentum. He led the charge, holding up a large shield and pressing forward against the Xian Deng's powerful crossbow fire. The other Trap Formation soldiers followed, swinging their internal energy-infused blades like a fierce tiger among sheep.

"Archers, stagger your fire!" Ju Yi, though shocked by the Trap Formation's combat prowess, retained his composure. His battle-hardened mind quickly directed his troops to regroup, hoping to repel the enemy and defeat them using the Xian Deng's most effective tactic.

The Trap Formation soldiers deflected the arrows with their tilted shields and quickly rolled and leaped into the Xian Deng's formation, cutting down the enemies who hadn't switched to melee weapons in time.

"This is bad!" Ju Yi noticed how the Trap Formation soldiers required little to no command, relying solely on experience to make optimal decisions in battle. They could wield any weapon—crossbows, spears,

arrows, shields, arm guards, and more—with lethal precision, as if they were born to fight with these tools. This realization filled Ju Yi with dread.

"Abandon the crossbows! Group into squads of five and engage!" Ju Yi ordered. Seeing that his troops were being steadily cut down, he understood that his soldiers couldn't match the Trap Formation in raw skill. Moreover, their crossbow fire had little impact on the enemy, who could even catch their arrows and fire them back with deadly accuracy. Ju Yi couldn't help but wonder if the Trap Formation was composed entirely of high-ranking officers.

Ju Yi's command quickly took effect. With disciplined teamwork, the Xian Deng squads managed to stabilize their lines. However, Ju Yi noticed that his soldiers struggled to land fatal blows on the Trap Formation, while the enemy's attacks inflicted severe damage with alarming ease.

"What is going on?" Ju Yi muttered, his eyes bloodshot as he stared at the Trap Formation. He could understand being overpowered by an army bolstered by cloud energy, but this situation shattered his understanding of elite troops. The Xian Deng's attacks were almost useless unless they struck a vital spot.

Ju Yi's gaze fixated on one of his soldiers who had slashed deeply into a Trap Formation soldier's neck, only to see that the wound barely penetrated. Though such an injury should have been fatal, the Trap Formation soldier continued to fight ferociously, killing Ju Yi's man before yanking the blade out and charging again.

"This is impossible!" Ju Yi exclaimed in disbelief.

It wasn't just Ju Yi who was stunned. The Xian Deng soldiers were on the verge of panic. The Trap Formation's relentless bravery defied human understanding. Even squads of five struggled to contain the enemy, who fought with reckless abandon, taking arrows without flinching and cutting down comrades left and right. The Xian Deng began to feel an icy dread—the enemy didn't seem human.

Suppressing his shock, Ju Yi grabbed his blade and charged at Li Ren. It was one of the few times since the Battle of Jieqiao that Ju Yi led from the front.

"Clang!" Li Ren parried Ju Yi's sudden strike, and the Xian Deng soldiers furiously attacked him from all sides.

"Slash!" Two massive wounds appeared across Li Ren's chest, with his internal organs visible through the gashes. Yet, as if in a frenzy, Li Ren ignored the injuries and grabbed Ju Yi's blade, slashing at Ju Yi's chest and abdomen with his own weapon.

"Thud!" Ju Yi kicked Li Ren away and leaped into the air, bringing his blade down on Li Ren's neck, decapitating him.

"Trap Formation! Trap Formation!" Upon Li Ren's death, all the Trap Formation soldiers seemed to sense it, turning to gaze at Ju Yi. In response, the nearby soldiers charged at him without hesitation, swinging their blades in fury, ignoring the Xian Deng soldiers attacking them from behind.

"Clang!" Ju Yi blocked the first Trap Formation soldier's attack, ready to counter, but two more soldiers joined the assault, forcing him onto the defensive. Their fearless attacks, bolstered by cloud energy, actually began to push Ju Yi back, despite his considerable skill.

Seeing his Xian Deng soldiers falling back under the Trap Formation's sudden surge after their deputy's death, Ju Yi angrily shouted, "How dare you try to stop me! Out of my way!"

His blade cut through a Trap Formation soldier's neck, blood spraying everywhere. He followed up with a strike that sent another soldier flying, then spun and drove his blade into the chest of the last soldier, covering himself in blood.

"This... is exhausting," Ju Yi muttered, wiping sweat from his brow. The Trap Formation's resilience was beyond belief, and just as he caught his breath, he saw two of the three soldiers he had just killed slowly stand back up.

"This can't be..." Ju Yi gasped. But then he realized—his blade began to glow with the power of the army's will. He slashed again, cutting down one of the soldiers for good this time, confirming his suspicion.

"The army's will... as long as their will remains strong, even deadly wounds can't stop them!" Ju Yi bitterly muttered as more Trap Formation soldiers charged at him. He finally understood why they were so difficult to kill.

It wasn't that they couldn't die, but their willpower delayed the inevitable. On the battlefield, only overwhelming damage could bring them down. With their fierce determination, even critical injuries wouldn't stop them. Ju Yi also realized that off the battlefield, when their will to survive faded, even losing a limb could mean death.

Chapter 546: The Oriole Behind

Ju Yi dodged the attacks from the Trap Formation soldiers. He had figured out how to kill them, but he couldn't help but ask himself, "Is it worth it?"

Using his army's soul to counteract the opponent's, Ju Yi realized that it wouldn't necessarily guarantee victory. The previous clash made him aware that when he used this method to kill the enemy, the soul's will didn't dissipate but was directly canceled out.

Without the army's soul, the Xian Deng would only be an ordinary elite unit. If the Xian Deng were to suffer a crushing defeat, as long as the soul's will remained with him, he could quickly train another unit. However, if the soul's will was completely lost, his prized Xian Deng would be gone forever. Even if he managed to train another unit, it would no longer be the same Xian Deng, and the possibility of successfully rebuilding them was uncertain.

Ju Yi's eyes were fixed on the Xian Deng and the Trap Formation soldiers. He was hesitating. Should he destroy what he was most proud of and rebuild it later, or should he preserve the soul at the cost of his soldiers, who might never recover from this defeat?

"To hell with it! I trust in my Xian Deng! I trust in myself!" Ju Yi roared, releasing the army's soul that had been gathering around him. In an instant, the entire Xian Deng felt a shattering of belief. When they looked back, they saw the faith they had once invested in Ju Yi now pouring back into them.

"Unbeatable Xian Deng! You are my elite troops—show them our greatest glory!" Ju Yi laughed wildly. As the army's soul dispersed, the Xian Deng were no longer a cohesive whole. However, at that moment, an unseen connection bound the surviving Xian Deng together.

The process of the army's soul dispersing was irreversible. With Ju Yi's roar, the soul's accumulated willpower surged out of his body like a flood, enveloping all the Xian Deng. A bitter smile appeared on Ju Yi's face as he felt an emptiness inside.

"Unbeatable! Unbeatable! Unbeatable!" The Xian Deng, after being infused with the soul's dissipating power, understood Ju Yi's hesitation. They knew his choice, and with a roar, they charged at the Trap Formation soldiers with all the pain and anger in their hearts.

For the first time, the Xian Deng repelled the Trap Formation's attack. From that moment, their power continued to rise, and the Xian Deng's most brilliant era was about to unfold. However, it would also be their most heartbreaking moment.

The battlefield became a meat grinder, with both sides relentlessly attacking each other, driven by near-superhuman strength, unyielding belief in victory, and an iron will that refused to let them fall, even when gravely wounded.

"Whose troops are these? They're terrifying, and the Xian Deng are impressive too," Liu Ye murmured as he lay in the grass, watching the battle unfold.

"Master Liu, aren't we too close to the action?" Yu Jin asked, his voice tinged with concern. The power displayed by both the Trap Formation and the Xian Deng was chilling.

"What are you afraid of? They're too busy to notice us, and we're far enough away. Once they wear each other down, we can charge in and wipe them out. What do you think?" Liu Ye chuckled.

"It won't be easy. If my entire force were here, it might be possible. Both sides seem to have a death-defying resilience, so cloud energy attacks would be the most effective way to deal with them in this situation," Yu Jin replied calmly.

"Cloud energy isn't the only way," Liu Ye laughed. "Do you know why I rushed here with you so early? It's no coincidence that both the Bingzhou Wolf Riders and the Hebei army arrived right where we were hiding. I've been hurrying here for a reason. Apart from entering Guanzhong, I owe it to Zijian to get some payback for him."

"Master Liu, do you have a plan?" Yu Jin looked at Liu Ye in surprise. Although he had suspected Liu Ye had something up his sleeve when the Hebei and Bingzhou armies clashed, he hadn't expected anything specific.

"Ha! Let's go. This crisp autumn weather is perfect for setting fires and burning down these wild grasses and small trees. They're so confident they didn't even bring a strategist who can control the weather," Liu Ye said with a mischievous grin as he got up.

The day Liu Ye received the news about Ju Yi's camp from Zhang Fei, he had guessed that the battle between the Hebei army and Hua Xiong had been a fluke. Liu Ye quickly analyzed the situation and identified the most likely outcomes, focusing on a particular spot on the map. With his plan in mind, he led Yu Jin and their few hundred men to dig trenches and hide, waiting for the perfect moment.

Not long after they finished their preparations, the Bingzhou Wolf Riders and the Hebei army clashed right at their location. Yu Jin and his men spent the morning watching the battle from their hiding spot.

"Yu Jin, you take a group to start a fire at the windward side. I'll do the same on the leeward side. Once I manipulate the weather to make the winds converge on the battlefield, we'll set everything ablaze. It might not kill those top generals, but it'll be enough!" Liu Ye's eyes glinted coldly.

Liu Ye had no qualms about killing. As a member of the imperial family, he saw the opposing forces as rebels threatening the Han Dynasty. In his eyes, they deserved to be wiped out, no matter how.

"Thud!" Ju Yi decapitated another Trap Formation soldier.

At this point, Ju Yi noticed something different. The army's soul hadn't simply vanished; each of these men had become the army's soul. Even if Ju Yi had been oblivious before, he now realized that, through a stroke of fate, he had taken a crucial step forward.

But the cost was immense. His once-proud Xian Deng had been decimated, and the Trap Formation soldiers, now reunited with Gao Shun, once again held the upper hand. Ju Yi understood that this was no longer a matter of turning the tables—it was about preserving the Xian Deng's legacy!

Ju Yi knew that his Xian Deng's army soul was now complete, but so too was the Trap Formation's. While the Xian Deng had reached this level and could now fight back, their foundation was too weak.

"Damn it!" Ju Yi cursed as he hacked at a Trap Formation soldier. Anxiety gnawed at him—if he couldn't shake off Gao Shun, the Xian Deng would be wiped out today!

"What is that?" Gao Shun slashed down another Xian Deng soldier, his gaze catching a flicker of red. Then, a gust of wind blew towards him. "Wildfire?" As he turned his head, he saw another flicker of red from a different direction, followed by another gust of wind. Gao Shun froze, then his eyes widened in alarm.

Chapter 547: Working for Others

Several dozen miles away, Liu Ye stood on a hill after regrouping with Yu Jin. He marveled at the towering fire tornado that had formed on the battlefield due to the converging winds from all directions.

"Sometimes, studying natural philosophy from Zichuan really pays off. Just look at that fire! Though, if this were a forest, the flames would have burned even hotter," Liu Ye remarked, gazing wistfully at the massive fire tornado. "The fire and smoke should take care of most of the enemies. Let's move on and prepare to enter Guanzhong. The rest can be left to Fengxiao."

Gao Shun, leading over five hundred of his remaining Trap Formation soldiers, carried the bodies of their fallen comrades and the survivors of the Bingzhou Wolf Riders. The infantry, however, had all perished in the fire. When the fire tornado appeared, nearly all the soldiers who hadn't escaped in time were consumed by the flames.

As Gao Shun marched toward Puyang, one of his Trap Formation soldiers suddenly collapsed and did not rise again. Gao Shun's eyes filled with sorrow for a moment, but he quickly regained his composure. He ordered the fallen soldier's body to be carried and continued toward Puyang. This had been the most devastating defeat he had ever experienced.

On the other side, Ju Yi, leading fewer than a thousand Xian Deng soldiers, faced a similar situation. Every time a soldier fell, his expression grew more twisted with rage. This was the worst defeat Ju Yi had ever suffered—the Xian Deng had been utterly defeated by the Trap Formation.

"Zhengli, don't be like this," said Yan Liang, his face blackened by burns, trying to console Ju Yi.

"Sorry, it was because I had your troops buy time for my Xian Deng that we barely escaped danger," Ju Yi, rarely apologetic, said sincerely.

"..." Yan Liang was momentarily stunned, then smiled. "The Xian Deng are the pride of Hebei! How could they fall in a place like this?" His smile carried a hint of sadness—those who had died were Yan Liang's veteran soldiers who had sacrificed themselves to protect the Xian Deng.

"The pride of Hebei, huh?" Ju Yi muttered to himself, realizing for the first time his significance in the Hebei army. The Xian Deng was a banner that everyone rallied around.

"I will not fail again," Ju Yi vowed, looking up at Yan Liang on his horse with determination.

Meanwhile, Lu Bu, leading three thousand Bingzhou Wolf Riders, had already overrun the Hebei camp defended by Zhang He. This battle wasn't about strategy anymore; it was about raw combat power, and under Lu Bu's command, the Bingzhou Wolf Riders were among the fiercest fighters.

In Mount Tai, at Fenggao, Lu Su frowned as he looked at Chen Xi, who seemed unusually agitated. "Zichuan, what's wrong with you? You seem quite irritable lately."

"I feel like something's been added to me," Chen Xi said as he stood up and paced around, frustration evident in his movements.

"You don't look any different. Are you trying to avoid work again?" Lu Su eyed him suspiciously.

"I'm not that kind of person," Chen Xi retorted, clearly annoyed.

"When you do this, you're no longer human," Li You chimed in, taking over the conversation. "Stop pretending and get back to work."

"You guys are driving me crazy!" Chen Xi slammed the table in anger. "I'm done with this!"

With that, Chen Xi stormed out, leaving Lu Su, Zhuge Liang, and the others dumbfounded. What just happened? Why the sudden outburst?

"You handle the paperwork. I'll go check on him," Jia Xu said as he stood up, curious to understand what was going on with Chen Xi.

When Jia Xu caught up with him, Chen Xi was standing in the courtyard, looking confused. He himself felt strange—why had he suddenly become like this, lashing out at others for no reason?

"Zichuan, are you okay?" Jia Xu asked as he approached.

"Sorry about earlier," Chen Xi said apologetically, trying to calm himself down, but the tension on his face made it clear he was still troubled.

"Can you tell me what's bothering you?" Jia Xu asked with a wry smile. He could see that Chen Xi wasn't joking or trying to shirk his duties; he was genuinely upset. As he spoke, Jia Xu subtly activated his mental talent, hoping to analyze the situation.

"I don't know. It started a few days ago—I felt like something was added to me, and the sense of discord is making me very irritable," Chen Xi said, almost pulling his hair out in frustration.

"Maybe you should take a break," Jia Xu suggested with a sigh.

"The past few nights, I've been having nightmares. I used to occasionally dream of myself as a jade disc, but lately, I've been dreaming that there's a smaller jade disc next to me. I keep trying to grab it, but something always stops me. It's driving me mad!" Chen Xi said, almost frantic.

"That sounds more like a good dream than a nightmare," Jia Xu muttered, scratching his head. From a dream interpretation perspective, this didn't seem like a bad omen at all.

"But the problem is, I've been having this dream constantly over the past few days!" Chen Xi said, exasperated.

"There's nothing I can do about that," Jia Xu replied, somewhat annoyed. Then, almost as if on impulse, he asked, "Why are you trying to grab that jade disc?"

"It feels like it should be mine. I feel like if I could just touch it, it would become part of me. No, more than that, I feel like it's something that split off from me, and if I could get it back, I'd grow stronger," Chen Xi said, growing increasingly agitated.

Jia Xu wiped the sweat from his brow, realizing that Chen Xi's dream might be a reflection of something happening in reality. "Why did you split it off? Are you dividing your assets?"

"How would I know? Maybe I did it in my sleep. To be honest, I don't even know how to split it off. I asked Zuo Yuanfang about it, and he said that the jade disc represents my mental talent. But now there's this smaller jade disc next to it. I didn't even know my mental talent could split like that."

"Wait..." Jia Xu rubbed his forehead.

"What?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled.

"Are you sure that thing split off from you?" Jia Xu asked.

"It's exactly the same as me, and its essence is the same as mine. Isn't that proof that it came from me?" Chen Xi responded.

"Maybe it's not from you after all. Has your mental talent weakened?" Jia Xu asked cautiously.

"No, it's just like before. The jade disc and the outer layer of light are the same, but the smaller jade disc seems a bit weak. Although, in the past few days, it has started to shine a little..." Chen Xi recalled, thinking back to the vivid details of his dream.

"Uh..." At that moment, Chen Xi looked towards Zhuge Liang, and a look of realization flashed across his face.

Chapter 548: The Great Supplement Pill

Jia Xu also smiled slightly and said, "This is good news, isn't it? Why don't you try using your aura in your dreams to absorb that piece? Once you've confirmed its location, we can retrieve it and merge it with your mental talent. What do you think?"

"I've tried to pull it in for several days, but I still can't manage to grab it. I can vaguely sense where it is, but my mental talent is too vast," Chen Xi said, showing some joy. He had always thought that the smaller piece was something he had split off from himself, but after Jia Xu's suggestion, he realized that it might actually belong to someone like Zhuge Liang.

"Let me think. First, your mental talent is very useful, right? Anyone in the world who knows about it would want it. If it's someone like Kongming, it would make sense for there to be something similar. But Kongming has already said that he can't use your mental talent," Jia Xu said with a chuckle, and Chen Xi nodded rapidly like a pecking chick.

"So, it's likely that copying your mental talent is difficult. That would explain why there's that smaller piece beside you. His mental talent is good at piecing together reality from limited clues and achieving a high degree of accuracy. Of course, after spending time with you and understanding your mental talent, Kongming once mentioned that if he could break through your mental defenses, he might be able to link to your mental talent. With that in mind..." Jia Xu's words quickly cleared up Chen Xi's confusion.

"It must be someone from Cao Cao or Yuan Shao's side. Once we get the latest reports, we can see if any capable advisors from their camps have had any incidents," Chen Xi said with a grin. "Heh, a valuable addition! Although it's small, merging it with my mental talent could increase its effectiveness by at least 20%."

"Report!" A messenger suddenly burst into the room, shouting.

"Speak," Chen Xi said, exchanging a glance with Jia Xu.

"An urgent message from Yanzhou has arrived," the messenger replied loudly.

"Bring it here," Chen Xi said, the previous gloom lifting from his face.

The messenger pulled out a bamboo slip and handed it to Jia Xu, then quietly exited the room. Jia Xu quickly opened the slip and scanned the encoded message before decrypting it.

"Hahaha, Xizhi has passed away," Jia Xu laughed. "The report states that Cao Cao's close advisor, Xi Zhicai, died of illness not long ago. Cao Mengde personally held his funeral. Considering the timeline... hmm, the unrest in Yanzhou has delayed our intelligence network."

"I think I understand now," Chen Xi said, rubbing his temples.

"It was probably Xizhi's doing. The timing is too coincidental. This also explains why your mental talent was exposed to Cao Cao's side. Xizhi's mental talent must have involved copying others'," Jia Xu said thoughtfully after closing the bamboo slip and considering the situation.

"That makes sense. It must be because Xizhi died that the smaller mental talent piece is behaving like this," Chen Xi said, stroking his chin.

"That's not all," a voice suddenly interrupted. Left Ci appeared, taking over the conversation.

"Could you stop sneaking up on me like that?" Chen Xi grumbled. When Nanhua left, he had told Chen Xi, "If you need anything, seek out Zuo Ci; he'll protect you." After that, Nanhua disappeared. Chen Xi didn't mind if these elusive immortals stayed or left; he never noticed their presence anyway.

"If you don't like it, I'll be more careful in the future," Zuo Ci said with a smile. Unlike Nanhua, Zuo Ci had a much more agreeable personality.

"Come on, Left Immortal, explain what's going on. I've been having nightmares, and none of you seem to care. Aren't you supposed to make sure nothing happens to me?" Chen Xi grumbled.

"Didn't you already say it yourself? Absorb that piece," Zuo Ci chuckled. "Xizhi was indeed a brilliant mind, daring to gamble on succeeding with only a few clues."

"Did he succeed? But wait, that small piece feels like it's still mine," Chen Xi asked, confused. Meanwhile, Jia Xu had already pieced together the situation with his mental talent.

"Let me explain. You see, whether it's copying or fully inheriting another's mental talent, it ultimately alters the essence of the mind. If Xizhi passed away after making that change..." Jia Xu explained with a smile.

Chen Xi's face lit up with understanding. If Xizhi hadn't died, he could have reversed the process. But since Xizhi did die, that piece of the mental talent would inevitably merge with the original, becoming a complete entity. The only difference might be a slight resistance due to lingering traces of Xizhi's will, but that would fade within seven days...

"So, how do I go about reclaiming that piece of my mental talent?" Chen Xi asked eagerly, already considering Xizhi's hard-won mental talent as his own.

"That's something you'll have to figure out on your own. I can only answer small questions for you," Zuo Ci replied, sticking to his principles.

"Alright, I'll think about it myself. But can you at least tell me what that layer of light is? I noticed that the smaller piece has started to show it too," Chen Xi asked, tilting his head. "It shouldn't be an issue, right?"

"The layer of light is a protective aura formed by mental energy—it's those free-floating mental energies. The brighter the light, the more mental energy you've accumulated. This aura protects against disasters, and if it dissipates, you might fall into a deep sleep," Zuo Ci explained while stroking his beard.

"..." Chen Xi frowned. Something felt off. The smaller piece of the jade disc had already begun showing that aura. He hadn't noticed it before, but now, in his dreams, he could clearly see it.

"What's wrong?" Jia Xu asked, seeing Chen Xi wave Zuo Ci away. The immortal gave a bow and vanished, leaving Jia Xu to press Chen Xi for answers, noticing the crease of worry between his brows.

"Let's just say it's probably Xizhi. He wouldn't have been able to use my full abilities, nor should he have been able to gather free-floating mental energies. You know how my mental talent works," Chen Xi said, turning his head.

"That does make sense," Jia Xu agreed, activating his mental talent again. "Your talent relies on the people's recognition of you and our lord, and for that smaller piece to work, Cao Mengde's people would need to acknowledge..."

Chapter 549: For the Future...

At this point, Jia Xu himself felt that this whole situation was a bit far-fetched. If Chen Xi and Liu Bei could truly gain the recognition of Cao Cao's subordinates, then what was the point of continuing this war? Just one declaration would be enough to end it. Moreover, Chen Xi mentioned that the smaller jade disc's radiance was increasing quickly. Could it be that Cao Cao's camp recognizes Liu Bei and Chen Xi more than the people of Taishan?

"Perhaps they have another method," Jia Xu said, frowning slightly.

"That's the only explanation. But it still feels strange. If they copied my mental talent, it wouldn't be very useful. It seems stable, wrapped in that radiance, but without my core essence, it can't regulate the weather autonomously," Chen Xi said, puzzled.

"Maybe it was a failure," Jia Xu said uncertainly. "Later, we'll see if we can retrieve that mental talent of yours. Are you sure the smaller piece is trying to merge with you?"

"Yes, it's very obvious. I can clearly feel it trying to stick to me. And last night, although I couldn't pull it over, I did manage to draw its radiance towards me. It scared me half to death. Without that radiance, the smaller jade disc would definitely be done for," Chen Xi said, recalling his actions the previous night with some lingering fear.

Compared to that little bit of mental energy—well, at least it was little in Chen Xi's eyes—it would still be a significant amount for someone like Zhuge Liang. But Chen Xi wasn't too interested in the mental energy itself; he was more focused on the smaller jade disc. Mental energy wasn't something he lacked, but if he could merge that talent with his own, it would be immensely valuable.

"You'd better not mess around with it. I think you should accumulate more mental energy. Once your radiance merges with the smaller disc, you should be able to absorb it," Jia Xu advised. Chen Xi's mental talent was crucial for the rapid development and prosperity of the Han Dynasty in the coming decades.

“Alright, I’ll be careful. If I dream about it again, I’ll focus on getting closer without drawing out its mental energy,” Chen Xi said thoughtfully. He didn’t want to waste such a valuable opportunity.

“Are you sure it won’t dissipate?” Jia Xu asked after a moment. He worried that Chen Xi might end up nurturing it to death, and if that were possible, then they should act quickly.

“It should be fine. Ever since the smaller jade disc started emitting radiance, it’s been much more stable,” Chen Xi said confidently. After all, the smaller disc was essentially a part of him, so his instincts about it were usually correct.

“That’s good. Just make sure that radiance doesn’t disappear. And if you have excess mental energy, share some with the smaller disc. Since the radiance acts as a protective layer, it might help you pull the whole thing over,” Jia Xu suggested. Strengthening Chen Xi’s mental talent was worth the small expenditure, especially considering the vast reserves of mental energy Chen Xi had accumulated.

“Good idea. If I dream about it tonight, I’ll give it a try. I have plenty of mental energy to spare,” Chen Xi nodded in agreement.

“Report!” Just as Jia Xu was about to convince Chen Xi to return to his work, another messenger burst in.

“Give me the report, and you can go,” Jia Xu said calmly. The messenger didn’t respond, simply handing over the bamboo slip before retreating.

“What’s it say?” Chen Xi asked curiously.

“Cao Cao has entered Guanzhong, leaving Xun Yu to guard Chenliu,” Jia Xu replied, his expression calm as he handed the bamboo slip to Chen Xi. However, upon hearing Jia Xu’s words, Chen Xi lost interest and didn’t bother taking the report, failing to notice the flicker of something in Jia Xu’s eyes.

Inside, Jia Xu was cursing silently. He was beginning to suspect that the smaller jade disc was something Cao Cao had intentionally orchestrated to distract them. After all, Chen Xi’s mental talent relied heavily on the protective layer of mental energy provided by the people’s free-floating spiritual power.

While Jia Xu understood the basics of Chen Xi's mental talent, he didn't know all the intricate details. To him, it was entirely possible that someone could alter the people's recognition of Chen Xi and Liu Bei, redirecting it to Cao Cao instead.

This thought made Jia Xu hesitant. He didn't want to act rashly and play into Cao Cao's hands. However, he also didn't want to miss the opportunity to give Cao Cao a hard blow, as doing so might undermine the growth potential of Chen Xi's mental talent if they lost the people's support.

Jia Xu tried to reassure himself that this was all for the greater good. As he considered the situation of the various warlords, he couldn't help but admire Cao Cao's impeccable timing. This only strengthened his belief that the smaller jade disc was a card Xi Zhicai had left behind for Cao Cao as his final move.

Soon after, the various warlords received Cao Cao's proclamation admitting his past mistakes. Even Yuan Shao, who had refrained from attacking Cao Cao at his darkest hour, sent out a letter absolving him of his misdeeds. After all, what else could he do now?

As for Yuan Shu, he didn't even react to Cao Cao's proclamation. His only concern was finding a cure for his son. Cao Cao? Who was that?

Meanwhile, Zhou Yu saw this as an opportunity, but because of the rumors spread by Chen Xi, he had been confined to Shouchun. Even though he could still mobilize troops if necessary, doing so would cause considerable trouble for Sun Ce. Reluctantly, Zhou Yu had to let this chance slip by.

In Jingzhou, Liu Biao had lost the prosperous regions of Xiangyang, Wancheng, and Jiangxia in the north. With only the sparsely populated southern four counties left, he could barely collect enough taxes to maintain his army.

Even though Liu Biao still had the will to fight, and competent ministers like Kuai Yue and Kuai Liang, along with formidable generals like Huang Zhong, the possibility of reclaiming Jingzhou seemed more distant than ever.

Chapter 550: Self-Assured

At this point, Liu Biao couldn't even focus his main efforts on reclaiming Jingzhou. Internally, the Cai family was discontent due to the repeated cuts to the navy caused by financial shortages. Externally, the Wuxi barbarians were occasionally raiding, leaving him unable to launch a counterattack.

As the saying goes, "Even the cleverest housewife cannot cook without rice," or "In poverty, all matters become sorrowful." In short, without money, Liu Biao, despite having capable people under him, could not fully utilize their potential.

In this situation, when Liu Biao received Cao Cao's proclamation, he pretended as if he hadn't seen it. He wasn't foolish enough to offend the only ally he could count on—Cao Cao.

In Yizhou, Liu Zhang had recently taken over. Without his father Liu Yan's capabilities, he watched helplessly as Zhang Lu took Hanzhong. The two sides constantly skirmished, with small battles every three days and large battles every five. Wanting only to maintain his small domain, Liu Zhang completely ignored the proclamation.

Liu Zhang had no idea that while he ignored Cao Cao, several of his own ministers, disappointed with Liu Zhang, were deeply impressed by Cao Cao's proclamation. In this era, it was rare for a ruler to admit their mistakes, especially someone like Cao Cao, who not only admitted his wrongdoings but also vowed to follow the principles of the Nine Virtues of the Lords. This couldn't help but pique the interest of these ministers, who saw Cao Cao as a figure fitting the heroic ideals of the time.

In Yongzhou and Liangzhou, the warlords wanted to protest, but seeing that no other significant lords spoke out, they decided against it. For Ma Teng and the Qiang people, food was more important than anything else. Once they confirmed there was no need to criticize Cao Cao, they continued their efforts to expand the Zhengguo Canal. They had already completed the main canal, and now only the auxiliary channels remained. Ma Teng and Han Sui were pondering how to extract more grain from Li Jue.

As for Li Jue, he forced a twisted smile while dealing with Emperor Liu Xie. He remembered Zhong Yao's advice. Before, when he lacked food, he had no choice but to exploit the emperor and the officials. Now, with a surplus of grain, Li Jue felt he should improve his relationship with the young emperor. As for Cao Cao's proclamation, without anyone to guide him, Li Jue couldn't grasp the complex strategy behind it.

Chen Gong, the first to receive the proclamation, showed a mixed expression—part regret, part admiration for the resurgence of the heroic and powerful image he had once seen in Cao Cao. Unfortunately, after taking that first step away, there was no turning back.

Chen Gong looked at the proclamation's mention of the Nine Virtues of the Lords. He knew this was Cao Cao's way of hinting at their past, but unlike before, such things no longer held any meaning for him. He

knew that Cao Cao, being the man he was, would forgive him and could still accept him. But having already crossed that line, there was no returning.

Some people, known as scholars in this era, valued not just their extraordinary talents but also their integrity. Chen Gong was one of them. Once he had taken that step, he had no intention of going back, even if Cao Cao acknowledged his mistakes, forgave him, and even lived up to the ideal Chen Gong had once envisioned. The pride of a scholar like Chen Gong would not allow him to let go of that one thing he held dear. Perhaps Cao Cao could truly reach the heights Chen Gong had dreamed of, and maybe he wouldn't care about Chen Gong's betrayal, even personally inviting him back. But having missed that opportunity, it was simply not meant to be.

Many things are destined from the first step. No matter how much both sides try to mend the situation, they are often left with only a tragedy.

Chen Gong's expression remained calm as he casually tossed the proclamation onto his desk. He made no move to use the information against Cao Cao, treating the document as though he had never received it.

And so, with the major warlords remaining silent, Cao Mengde faced only some mild criticism, while most people waited to see how he would uphold the Nine Virtues, the highest standards for a lord.

This situation left Xun Yu, who was overseeing affairs in Chenliu, feeling quite perplexed. Somehow, everything had been swept under the rug.

But at that moment, Xun Yu wasn't too concerned with digging deeper into the matter. His primary focus was now on accumulating mental energy.

Xun Yu's mental talent, whether described as the ability to assist kings or as strategic planning, essentially allowed him to provide minor boosts to all his civil and military officials. More importantly, it enabled him to draw on their mental energy to either strengthen them or manipulate the weather.

However, compared to Chen Xi, who regulated the weather by storing and utilizing the free-floating mental energy of the people, Xun Yu's method was more brute force. He directly extracted mental energy from his subordinates to alter the weather. In theory, if someone had enough mental energy, they could do the same.

To be honest, Xun Yu's method of manipulating the weather was akin to Chen Xi using large amounts of mental energy without relying on his mental talent. Both methods were highly consuming, meaning Xun Yu couldn't sustain weather changes across an entire province for long periods.

Similarly, if Chen Xi didn't have his core mental talent, he would only be able to maintain the weather for about one-third of the year—a timeframe ten times longer than Xun Yu could manage.

In reality, if Xun Yu could draw on as much mental energy from his subordinates as Chen Xi did from the people of Taishan, the mental energy he obtained per unit of time would be about the same. After all, Chen Xi's mental energy came from the people's naturally dispersed energy, while Xun Yu's was forcibly extracted.

However, Chen Xi could regulate the weather for much longer because he could store the excess mental energy around his mental talent, both to protect it and to use when needed. Xun Yu's talent didn't have this capability.

Xun Yu and Xi Zhicai never expected to successfully replicate Chen Xi's mental talent. The one opportunity to do so had passed, and now, even if someone managed to break through Chen Xi's mental defenses, they wouldn't be able to replicate or negate his ability to regulate the weather. Any copy would lack the essential core.

In general, the requirements for this were extremely demanding. First, they would need to break through Chen Xi's mental defenses. That alone would be enough to leave everyone speechless. Chen Xi's defenses were made entirely of mental energy, so breaking through them would require an immense amount of mental energy.

Under normal circumstances, even if Xun Yu gathered most of Cao Cao's subordinates' mental energy for an attack, they would be detected and intercepted. The sheer volume of mental energy involved would be hard to miss, and in the end, it would turn into a battle of attrition that Xun Yu would surely lose. So, theoretically, it was impossible to break through Chen Xi's mental defenses...