

Mythical 551

Chapter 551: Discussing the Real Situation

Unfortunately, Xun You's mental talent allowed Xun Yu to execute an unexpected move, directly piercing through the impenetrable mental defense layer. This enabled Xi Zhicai to attach his mental talent to Chen Xi's, but instead of triggering a replication like others thought, something different happened.

When it comes to understanding mental talents, no one was more knowledgeable than Xi Zhicai. He knew that Chen Xi's mental talent wasn't something that could be replicated. So, Xi Zhicai's approach was actually to transform his pure mental essence into Chen Xi's mental essence. However, because Chen Xi couldn't handle the overwhelming amount, he ended up expelling a small part of it.

Alright, that analogy might not be entirely accurate. A more accurate explanation would be that Chen Xi ingested an exceptionally potent ginseng root, unknowingly, and due to being unable to handle it, he ended up with a nosebleed.

But because of the uniqueness of mental talents, this "nosebleed" resulted in the expulsion of a small portion of his mental talent. This small portion is what Xun Yu considered a "fragmented" mental talent or what Jia Xu referred to as a "manufactured" smaller mental talent. They both misunderstood, though, as they had no proper references and based their conclusions on their own judgments.

Naturally, with his mental essence depleted, Xi Zhicai met his end. Meanwhile, Chen Xi, having expelled a small portion due to the overload, now had a piece that shared the same aura, essence, and functionality as his original mental talent. This was why Chen Xi insisted that the small piece of jade was something he had split off himself. His intuition wasn't wrong.

In a way, Xi Zhicai succeeded, but the reality was that this fragmented piece couldn't serve Cao Cao as intended. Since it was essentially the same as the larger piece, this smaller portion was still Chen Xi's mental talent, just expelled. Whatever its previous capabilities were, they remained the same now.

So, if viewed from this angle, Xi Zhicai was actually a good person, delivering a valuable experience to Chen Xi from afar. A "deliverer of experience" indeed, though his scheme ultimately failed.

What makes things interesting now is that the small piece of Chen Xi's mental talent has become enveloped in Xun Yu's vast mental energy.

Chen Xi's mental talent naturally absorbs free-floating mental energy. Compared to collecting energy himself, Xun Yu's method of providing it was more efficient. So naturally, Xun Yu's mental energy was used to create a protective layer around the small mental talent.

In practical terms, Xun Yu was using the mental energy drawn from Cao Cao's civil and military officials to fortify the small mental talent, which was essentially still nestled right beside Chen Xi's main mental talent's protective layer.

With the two layers of protection between them, Chen Xi could still sense the smaller piece, but it had become much more obscure.

Moreover, Chen Xi's own mental talent covered such a large area that it had effectively turned into a "blind spot" for him. He hadn't even considered that if he simply opened a small gap in his mental defense, he could merge the two parts, now that the smaller piece had nearly fully absorbed the mental essence.

That said, even though the two mental talents hadn't fully merged, Chen Xi's mental talent hadn't seen a significant increase in power yet. However, the mechanisms for both the larger and smaller mental talents were still operational...

In other words, the smaller mental talent could still draw on mental energy to regulate the weather in Liu Bei's territories. But it was using up the protective layer around it, which consisted of the mental energy Xun Yu had gathered...

Yet none of this had any real impact on Xun Yu at the moment. He was still in awe of Xi Zhicai's daring plan. After all, it was because of Xi Zhicai's final scheme that Xun Yu was able to overcome the greatest flaw in his mental talent.

Although there was now the issue of Xun Yu's mental talent drawing excessive amounts of mental energy from his subordinates whenever he activated it, the ability to store mental energy for future use more than made up for that. These minor drawbacks were insignificant in comparison. Of course, all this

was based on Xun Yu not knowing the true nature of the mental talent he was now supporting, nor that much of his gathered mental energy was being drained. Otherwise, he would be furious.

For Xun Yu, better days were on the horizon for Cao Cao's forces, and he was filled with enthusiasm. Every day, he diligently extracted mental energy and stored it in the mental talent that Xi Zhicai had supposedly created.

Even though Xun Yu estimated that this mental talent didn't possess Chen Xi's ability to regulate weather, being able to store mental energy was more than enough for him. Changing the weather just meant using more energy!

As long as there was enough mental energy, everything else was trivial for Xun Yu. And with all this stored energy, he wouldn't need to draw on his subordinates' mental energy during times of weather manipulation, sparing them from looking perpetually exhausted. The future looked bright indeed!

Over in Taishan, Chen Xi had taken a break to rest. Given his current state, he wasn't fit for work. Ever since absorbing that large chunk of mental essence, he had entered a hyperactive phase of digestion, leaving him irritable and restless, far from his usual calm demeanor.

"Phew, finally managed to convince him to go back," Jia Xu muttered to himself, wiping the sweat from his brow. He dreaded to think what would happen if Chen Xi found out the truth. He'd probably demand that they utterly destroy Cao Cao.

"Jia Xu, what's really going on with Chen Xi?" Li You asked with some dissatisfaction as he approached Jia Xu in the courtyard for tea. When they were alone, neither of them felt the need to pretend, as they knew each other too well.

Jia Xu smiled and recounted the entire situation to Li You, making it clear that some parts were his own speculations. Li You, listening with growing delight, agreed that keeping this matter hidden was the best course of action.

"Li Ru, are we really going to let Cao Mengde enter the pass?" Jia Xu frowned. "Now that the Zhengguo Canal you proposed has been completed in Guanzhong, if Cao Cao also gains the Xiliang cavalry, he truly will become an unstoppable force. We've all predicted it—Cao Cao is a remarkable talent."

"Let him enter the pass. We are already stretched thin. If we can stop him, we will; if not, then so be it. Wang Yun and the others have done an excellent job. With this, even if Cao Cao enters Guanzhong, he won't be able to eliminate them. This is their safeguard, and our greatest advantage," Li You replied with a smile. "I have faith in them."

"Since that's the case, I won't say more," Jia Xu nodded.

Li You's status carried a natural reverence among the Xiliang cavalry and Li Jue and Guo Si's forces. Given the current situation, Cao Cao would find it difficult to remove Li Jue and the others, who commanded the loyalty of both the Qiang and Han people. Even if they were defeated, Cao Cao couldn't kill them; he'd have no choice but to offer them high-ranking positions and generous rewards. The Xiliang cavalry would still have a reason to hope.

In this way, if Li You chose to persuade the Xiliang cavalry to surrender, it would only take a word. Few could stand in his way. If Li You were willing to reveal his identity, no one could stop him. After all, he was one of the spiritual symbols of the Xiliang cavalry. Since Dong Zhuo's death, if he appeared alive, he would undoubtedly become their only spiritual symbol.

Chapter 552: The First Super Creature Acquired~

Previously, Li You had planned to send a letter to Li Jue and the others during the battle between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei, informing them that he was doing well in Taishan and suggesting they launch an attack on Bingzhou. Additionally, he wanted them to fend off the Hu people and protect the borders.

However, when he saw that they had begun excavating the Zhengguo Canal, he decided to focus on developing Yong and Liang as well as Sili earlier than planned. After all, relying on others to do certain things could be more convenient. For example, he let Yuan Shao develop Jizhou, and similarly, it wouldn't be a bad idea if Cao Cao developed Yong and Liang.

Chen Xi, feeling frustrated, returned home. In an era without psychologists and with limited games for entertainment and stress relief, it seemed best to roll into bed and rest.

As he pushed open the door, "Bang!" Chen Xi was knocked to the ground by a small white dog that leaped out of his house. Despite being less than a foot long, the little white dog had enough force to knock Chen Xi down.

Chen Xi was stunned. He felt as if his intestines had nearly been torn apart. Lying on the ground, he finally realized what had happened when he felt the warmth on the back of his hand. The little dog, showing some human-like concern, nudged Chen Xi's chest and stomach as if trying to help him get up.

"You guys..." Chen Xi struggled to stand and glared at the girls peeking out from behind his door. His face turned dark; he was already annoyed, and now this group was causing more trouble.

"Why has Chen Hou come back?" Mi Zhen asked without a hint of fear. However, the way she twitched her fingers made Chen Xi certain that this small white dog, which had knocked him down, was somehow connected to her.

"This is my house! Am I not allowed to come back? Go play somewhere else." Chen Xi angrily reached out to grab the little white dog that was less than a foot long. If he couldn't argue with the girls, at least he could take out his frustration on the dog that had almost knocked him unconscious.

"Be careful..." Zhen Mi, panicked, tried to warn him. She had found the dog, but afraid to bring it back to her own home, she had taken it to Cai Zhenji. There, the second lady of the Cai family had given it a thorough cleaning, making its pure white fur even more appealing. This had caused Zhen Mi to develop other ideas.

Zhen Mi's thoughts aside, the real change came when the dog, after being washed and fed at Cai Zhenji's house, started sniffing around, eventually digging up and swallowing a stone. After that, the dog became even more adorable, with smoother, glossier fur.

But these were just superficial changes. The biggest transformation was that the dog had just barreled through several walls in a row before showing up at Mi Zhen's house, and later being brought to Chen Xi's place.

"Rip!" Chen Xi looked at the neat tear in his sleeve. He hadn't been too alarmed before, but seeing the tear now sent a chill down his spine.

"Chen Hou, perhaps it's best not to approach. That is no ordinary dog anymore," Zuo Ci said, placing a hand on Chen Xi's shoulder. Then, turning to an empty spot, he added, "You should deal with this creature quickly. How did something like this even slip through?"

"Is this a mythical beast?" Chen Xi frowned. If Zuo Ci hadn't stepped in just now, his arm might have been broken.

"Yes, and quite a powerful one at that. Once it fully absorbs the energy within, it could rival even the weakest of inner energy masters," Zuo Ci replied, frowning. "I can't believe there's something like this nearby."

As he spoke, Han Qiong appeared, holding the little white dog by the scruff of its neck. His expression showed some caution, but he didn't seem inclined to kill the creature.

"Mi Zhen, you'd better explain yourself. What's with this thing?" Chen Xi immediately glared at Mi Zhen. It was obvious that this trouble was her doing.

"Don't hurt it," Mi Zhen hurriedly said as she ran over, relieved to see the dog, which had been struggling in Han Qiong's grasp, quiet down. "I found this little dog in the backyard. Isn't it cute?"

"Get lost. You really have the guts to bring anything into my house," Chen Xi grumbled. "You're going to drive me crazy. This thing is dangerous."

"It's not dangerous, see?" Mi Zhen responded, trying to tease the small white dog with her slender, pale fingers, despite Han Qiong holding it tightly.

"Whap!" Without thinking, Chen Xi swatted Mi Zhen's hand away. "Do you want to lose your hand?"

Mi Zhen clutched her hand, looking at Chen Xi with tear-filled eyes. Meanwhile, the little white dog in Han Qiong's grasp barked furiously at Chen Xi, baring its teeth.

"Chen Hou, it's really well-behaved," Zhen Mi whispered.

"Well-behaved?" Chen Xi showed them his torn sleeve, the large rip clearly visible. "If Zuo Daozhang hadn't acted quickly, my arm would have been broken. This thing should be cooked. It'll make a great meal."

“Woof woof woof!” The little white dog barked furiously at Chen Xi, seemingly understanding his words. But seeing Chen Xi still baring his teeth at it, the dog quickly turned towards Mi Zhen and the others, whimpering pitifully for help.

Chen Xi couldn't help but be intrigued by the dog's behavior. His desire to cook it faded as his curiosity grew—this dog was clearly not normal.

“Husband, don't tease Zhen'er anymore. The dog just sensed your hostility and was trying to defend itself,” Fan Jian said, stepping out to mediate. She, too, liked small animals, especially since there were no children in the house, leaving it feeling a bit empty.

“Daozhang, is it alright to keep this dog as a pet?” Chen Xi asked, his interest piqued. After all, a creature that could eventually grow to the level of an inner energy master was quite fascinating.

“Although it seems to have some intelligence, I still wouldn't recommend keeping it...” Zuo Ci stroked his beard and shook his head, only to feel a wave of strong resentment that stopped him from finishing his sentence.

“If you must keep it, there is a way,” Han Qiong, who had been silent, finally spoke.

“Master Han, do you have a solution?” Chen Xi asked, his face lighting up with hope.

Without a word, Han Qiong's hand suddenly emitted a burst of icy blue light. After a few seconds, the light dissipated, and he casually tossed the little dog away. The dog let out a yelp as it hit the ground and rolled over before being quickly scooped up by a frantic Mi Zhen.

“There, problem solved,” Han Qiong said smugly, completely oblivious to the hostile stares behind him.

“Hmph, you can keep it now, just be careful not to get bitten,” Chen Xi said, knowing that Han Qiong had used his inner energy to suppress the dog's power. This meant the dog would be no more dangerous than an ordinary dog, though still a bit stronger.

"Hmph, who needs your approval? I could have kept it before!" Mi Zhen retorted. "Since you like to 'hmph' so much, I'll call you 'Hmph Hmph' from now on!" The little white dog wagged its tail excitedly as Zhen Mi petted it, almost as if it understood the new name.

Chapter 553: The Fragment of the Divine Stone

"Hmph..." Chen Xi let out a nasal sound, then his face darkened. "Go play somewhere else and stop bothering me. By the way, what's the deal with that dog? If anyone knows, speak up. And Daoist Zuo, I have a few things I want to ask."

Cai Zhenji hesitated for a moment before following him, and Zuo Ci also followed.

Chen Xi sat at his desk in the study, gesturing toward two chairs, and soon, a maid brought in some fruit, snacks, and tea.

"Alright, tell me, what's going on? How did this dog suddenly become so strong? I don't recall there being any particularly powerful dogs in Taishan." As Chen Xi mentioned the word "dog," his eyelid twitched. "Previously, Jia Wenhe had basically rounded up all the capable dogs in Taishan for training. This must be something recent."

Cai Zhenji recounted the events from earlier, and both Chen Xi and Zuo Ci showed signs of understanding.

"That's how it happened. Chen Hou, it seems you already have a theory, so I won't stay any longer." After finishing her explanation, Cai Zhenji stood up and bowed gracefully to Chen Xi.

"Wait a moment. How has your sister been lately?" Chen Xi asked. "If she needs anything, have her find Li Wenru."

"My sister is doing well, but Chen Hou shouldn't worry too much," Cai Zhenji replied, a hint of surprise crossing her face. After a moment's thought, she added a word of caution. Clearly, Cai Zhenji had her own suspicions about why Chen Xi was inquiring about Cai Yan.

"I'm not thinking anything, just asking out of courtesy," Chen Xi responded indifferently. Sometimes, it's best to be straightforward to avoid misunderstandings. He had no particular interest in Cai Yan, so why complicate matters?

"Oh," Cai Zhenji nodded. Although Chen Xi held a high position and was seen as a young prodigy, after spending time with Cai Yan, she knew her sister had no feelings for him. If Chen Xi did take an interest, it would certainly cause complications.

"By the way, can you help keep an eye on things? Among your group, you and your sister are the only ones who can manage them. If this continues, Mi Zhen and the others might become too unruly," Chen Xi added after some thought. He realized that Mi Zhen needed some discipline—unlike the other girls who had been left to their own devices, she was starting to become a problem.

"I'll do my best," Cai Zhenji replied. She could indeed manage Mi Zhen, but most of her attention was focused on educating her husband's younger brother, Yang Dan, and her stepson, Yang Fa.

Speaking of which, Cai Zhenji used to be too busy to go out and play. It was only after returning to Taishan and meeting Cai Yan that she found some free time. Even Yang Dan acknowledged that Cai Yan's teaching abilities far surpassed those of Cai Zhenji, which is why Yang Dan turned a blind eye to his younger brother and son's education being entrusted to Cai Yan.

In reality, after Yang Dan, the Yang family had stopped teaching its own knowledge and had essentially been absorbing the Cai family's learning.

"Just do your best. Also, pass a message to your sister—see if she can take Mi Zhen under her wing," Chen Xi sighed. "Your sister seems to favor Sister Mi because their personalities are quite similar."

"Then forget it. Just deliver the message," Chen Xi sighed again. In this era, finding a female teacher was difficult, and finding one with a spiritual talent was even harder. Beyond Cai Yan, there really weren't any other options.

"I'll do my best," Cai Zhenji replied gracefully, bowing before leaving the room.

"No wonder she's the daughter of Cai Bojie; she's well-mannered," Zuo Ci said with a smile after Cai Zhenji left.

"She's alright. After all, she's a mother now. It's fine for her to act a little wild in private, but she's always composed in public. At least, I've never seen her misbehave," Chen Xi remarked with a smile.

"This woman will surely rise in status through her children. One of her sons is destined to become a marquis and leave a lasting legacy in history," Zuo Ci said with a strange expression.

"Indeed, one of her sons will become a marquis," Chen Xi nodded, confirming what Zuo Ci had said. Cai Zhenji's youngest son was none other than Yang Hu.

Zuo Ci's expression grew even more peculiar. Did Chen Xi already know such things? Was this some kind of fate manipulation?

"Alright, enough of that. Cai Zhenji's son won't be born for many years. Let's talk about that dog—did it eat a fragment of a divine stone? That's probably the only thing that could make a little dog so powerful," Chen Xi said, changing the subject.

"Yes, a fragment of a divine stone, and it seems to have already dissipated a lot of its life force. Based on her description, if the fragment had retained all its energy, even without the dog growing to its full potential, it would have reached the level of an inner energy master by now," Zuo Ci explained helplessly. "Such a rare item, wasted."

"How many of these divine stone fragments are there? If I'm not mistaken, most animals that have achieved inner energy probably consumed these fragments, right?" Chen Xi asked curiously. "Is there any way to locate them? They should work on people too, right?"

"Nobody knows how many fragments there are. Nan Hua might have an estimate, but these things can't be actively sought out—they're a matter of fate. Animals might have an instinctual ability to detect them, but humans have lost that instinct," Zuo Ci sighed, then recounted how Nan Hua had destroyed the second divine stone.

"Thirty years ago..." Chen Xi muttered, realizing why so many powerful figures had emerged around that time. The series of coincidences leading up to it made a lot of sense now.

"Yes, the current state of the world is the result of many factors. Besides the divine stones, there were other causes that accumulated and eventually erupted, leading to the present situation. Overall, the effects of the second divine stone were too strong, and people like us can no longer control the situation. The world we predicted thirty years ago was completely overturned by the divine stone and Zhang Jiao," Zuo Ci said with a bitter smile. "The way of heaven is unpredictable, truly unpredictable..."

Chen Xi listened to Zuo Ci's words without interrupting. He had many interests, but asking about them might not yield answers, as Zuo Ci might not be willing to share everything.

"Fortunately, no general of this era has reached the level of Xiang Yu. That man could truly fight against ten thousand by himself. While Han Xin was the first to summarize the cloud energy system, which made him undefeated in battle, even he almost lost to Xiang Yu alone," Zuo Ci said, his expression twitching. Cloud energy is fundamental but also the most important military attribute, as it weakens everything, including their magic.

"That strong?" Chen Xi was stunned. He had never heard of someone fighting against ten thousand under the pressure of cloud energy, especially when the opponent was a military god like Han Xin, who had perfected the cloud energy system.

Chapter 554: The Mightiest Hero in History - Xiang Yu

"Have you seen Lu Bu?" Zuo Ci asked, and Chen Xi nodded.

"Have you seen Dian Wei?" Zuo Ci continued, and Chen Xi nodded again.

"You must have seen Guan Yu. Xiang Yu was like the internal energy of Lu Bu, the physical strength of Dian Wei, and the aura of Guan Yu, all combined and then elevated even further," Zuo Ci said with a bitter smile. "He was beyond human."

"How is that even possible?" Chen Xi was so shocked that his eyes almost popped out. Lu Bu's internal energy, Dian Wei's body, and Guan Yu's aura, all combined and even stronger? Was that still human?

"The phrase 'lifting mountains and overpowering the world' wasn't just an exaggeration. He literally lifted a mountain and threw it. All the cloud energy and military formations were crushed by that mountain," Zuo Ci said, grimacing.

"If it hadn't been for Xiang Yu's belief being shattered by Zhang Liang, Han Xin, and Chen Ping, leading to his suicide at the Wu River, no one could have killed him. He was a superhuman who had absorbed the core of the first divine stone. Although the power of the first divine stone was far less than that of the second, it was still much stronger than any fragments of the second divine stone," Zuo Ci said, his face full of admiration.

"This is a monster," Chen Xi muttered, unsure of what to say. Then he seemed to think of something. "If I remember correctly, the process of internal energy being absorbed into the body is irreversible. Once it's absorbed, it can't be extracted, and it purely strengthens the body. How could Xiang Yu still have internal energy?"

"In theory, you're right. But because Xiang Yu absorbed the core of the first divine stone, his body continuously generated internal energy. As long as the rate of internal energy production exceeded the rate at which it was absorbed into his body, he still had internal energy," Zuo Ci explained, his expression saying, "You underestimate Xiang Yu."

"Okay, so that's how it was. Did he reach a higher level?" Chen Xi's interest was piqued. A combination of Lu Bu, Dian Wei, and Guan Yu, with their powers multiplied, should have surpassed the limits of internal energy, right?

"No, because back then, there was no path forward. The entire martial system was forged by Xiang Yu himself. He established the three major stages, but he didn't know which direction led to a higher level," Zuo Ci shook his head. "But with Xiang Yu's combat prowess, even I, who can rival an ordinary internal energy expert, would need at least a dozen others to defeat him."

"Heh," Chen Xi chuckled wryly. He had known Xiang Yu was strong, but to this extent? It seemed almost impossible.

"The divine stones are rare, but they are harmless to people. Anyone or any animal who gets a fragment of a divine stone will experience a massive leap in strength. But now, even if the fragments haven't dissipated, they've mostly been consumed by animals," Zuo Ci concluded.

"Oh, so that's how it is. That means the fragment that little white dog ate might be one of the last few remaining," Chen Xi said, a bit disappointed. He had hoped to collect a few fragments himself—who knows, maybe he could even take to the battlefield and fight. After all, a fragment was equivalent to an internal energy master.

"Well, it's not exactly one of the last few. There are actually quite a few fragments. The second divine stone was enormous, and its core was far larger than the first one, which was only the size of a fingertip. It was as big as a human head. If I had known the divine stone was so fascinating, I would have gone with Nan Hua," Zuo Ci sighed.

"A fragment of the core alone would be enough to create an internal energy master, but most of the core was pulverized by heavenly lightning and turned into life essence, which swept across the world," Zuo Ci recalled. The life essence nearly wiped out Nan Hua...

"Did the fragments get carried away by that life essence that swept across the world?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"Yes, but by now, most of them have probably been absorbed. These internal energy masters today likely owe their power not just to talent but also to fortuitous encounters. Otherwise, they shouldn't be this terrifying," Zuo Ci sighed, almost saying outright that every internal energy master had probably been hit by a divine stone fragment.

"So, there's no way to find these things?" Chen Xi sighed. He had been thinking of forming a search team to thoroughly investigate his territory and find a fragment or two.

"If there were a way, I'd have gone searching myself," Zuo Ci glanced at Chen Xi. "Don't push your luck, Chen Hou."

"Since that's the case, I won't disturb Daoist Zuo in your pursuit of the Dao any further," Chen Xi said helplessly. Some things simply couldn't be forced.

Zuo Ci didn't mind Chen Xi's tone. He knew his role clearly: to ensure Chen Xi's safety. The rest of the time, he maintained a detached, otherworldly perspective on the human world.

Once Zuo Ci left, Chen Xi began to feel restless again. He left the study, finding the courtyard empty. As he walked further, he could hear the sounds of Mi Zhen and the others playing.

"Roll over..." Before Chen Xi even reached them, he heard their voices. It seemed they were training.

"Lift your left paw. Lift your right paw. Roll over. Jump! Bow!" The chaotic commands reached Chen Xi's ears.

Chen Xi felt a wave of pressure. He suddenly sympathized with that dog. Being trained by this group, if it still had any internal energy, it would have smashed through the wall and escaped by now.

"Woof, woof, woof..." As soon as Chen Xi stepped out of the courtyard and into the main hall, the little white dog that had been rolling on the ground jumped up and barked loudly at him. But as Chen Xi approached, the dog's barking grew quieter until it finally lowered its front paws and whimpered at Chen Xi, occasionally glancing back at Mi Zhen.

"Hmph, come here. He won't hurt you," Mi Zhen called, waving her hand. The little white dog quickly retreated, leaping into Mi Zhen's arms.

"Is this dog a cat?" Chen Xi muttered, surprised by the dog's agility. Sealing its internal energy was the right choice. Its movements were beyond the norm. "Weren't you training it? Has it learned anything?"

"Hmph, show him," Mi Zhen said proudly, crouching down to put the dog on the ground.

"You can just throw it down; it won't get hurt. Although its internal energy is sealed, it still has a body as tough as refined steel, harder than a rock," Chen Xi commented, glancing at the dog as it circled around Fan Jian's feet, looking pleased. It seemed the dog had quickly learned how to charm people.

Mi Zhen glared at Chen Xi. She wouldn't do such a thing, but arguing with Chen Xi was pointless.

"Hmph, roll over!" The little white dog immediately rolled over on the ground, surprising Chen Xi.

"Hmph, jump!" The dog, still rolling, instantly jumped up.

"Hmph, lift your left paw, lift your right paw, stand up, bow," Mi Zhen ordered proudly, and the dog performed the entire routine, leaving Chen Xi dumbfounded.

"Alright, you can keep the dog, but don't let it bite anyone. As long as it can bark, it's fine," Chen Xi said calmly, as if he didn't care at all.

Chapter 555: Good News~

"Hmph, hmph." Mi Zhen hummed proudly, and as a result, the little white dog, thinking it was being called, once again jumped into her arms.

"Where's Lan'er? I haven't seen her much these past few days," Chen Xi looked around and indeed did not see Chen Lan. According to past habits, Chen Lan would always come to greet him, but today she was nowhere to be seen.

"She's still resting. She hasn't been feeling well recently," Fan Jian stepped forward to explain, causing Chen Xi to pause in surprise. She was ill?

"Has Physician Hua seen her?" Chen Xi asked, "I'll go check on her. By the way, Mi Zhen, I've been seeing you every day lately. Aren't you going to school?"

"Sister Cai caught a cold, so she gave us three days off to rest. That's why we're playing at your house. We can't go anywhere else," Zhen Mi replied.

"Oh," Chen Xi nodded and then turned to head toward the back courtyard.

Chen Xi remembered that today wasn't one of the three rest days they got each month from school. Normally, with just three days of rest, even if Mi Zhen came out to play, it wouldn't cause much trouble. But it turned out that Cai Yan had fallen ill.

"Zhen'er, you all keep playing. I'll be right back," Fan Jian said with a smile to Mi Zhen before following Chen Xi toward the back courtyard.

"Jian'er, has Lan'er really been unwell lately? She seemed fine the day before yesterday," Chen Xi recalled that he had stayed with Chen Lan just the day before.

"Yes, she hasn't taught me embroidery for the past ten days. She seems very tired, much like she was before the wedding," Fan Jian nodded.

"She's probably staying up late again. She's not like you," Chen Xi slowed his pace to walk alongside Fan Jian. "Back then, she was so tired because she was staying up all night sewing her wedding clothes. Both her wedding dress and my marquis robes were stitched by her, all by hand. Although I told her it wasn't necessary, she's probably working on something again. Staying up late isn't good."

Fan Jian pouted but said nothing. When it came to embroidery, none of them, except for Cai Er, could compare to Chen Lan. Even Cai Yan couldn't match her skills.

"Husband, perhaps you should change your clothes first before visiting," Fan Jian suggested, tugging at Chen Xi's sleeve, where there was a large tear.

"I'll change after I check on Lan'er," Chen Xi said calmly, not particularly concerned about the tear in his sleeve.

Fan Jian said no more and followed Chen Xi into the quietest courtyard in the inner residence, where Chen Lan resided.

"Greetings, Master, Madam," the maid guarding the door bowed to Chen Xi and Fan Jian before carefully and silently opening the door without making a sound.

"Is she still resting?" Chen Xi frowned as he saw Chen Lan still asleep. It was clear that she had been staying up late again. "What has she been doing at night?"

"Master, Second Madam has been making clothes," the maid replied, head lowered.

"Isn't it too early for that? She didn't start last year until October," Chen Xi asked, puzzled. He couldn't stop Chen Lan from staying up late to make new clothes for the new year. Women skilled in needlework often had this habit, and it was hard to break.

"Mmm." At that moment, Chen Lan, who had been sleeping uneasily, groggily sat up. "Husband, Sister."

"You're awake?" Chen Xi walked over. Chen Lan seemed to have developed a bit recently, with more pronounced curves.

"Mmm, what happened to your sleeve, Husband?" Chen Lan's face turned red as she spoke, but then she quickly noticed the large tear in Chen Xi's sleeve.

"It got torn," Chen Xi replied with a smile. "I'll change clothes in a bit. It's no big deal." As he spoke, he raised his wrist and shook it, indicating that the tear was just an accidental rip in the sleeve.

Chen Lan quickly pulled out her needle and thread from under her pillow and began threading it. "Would you like me to fix it? It won't take long."

"Sure," Chen Xi casually took off his outer robe, and Chen Lan smoothed out the sleeve and began stitching it up quickly. Soon, a blue thread that was a different color from the white robe appeared at the tear, and before long, the sleeve was tightly sewn, with no sign of the rip. The only difference was a line of blue thread, but it was hardly noticeable.

"All done. Let me put it on," Chen Xi said, preparing to put the outer robe back on. Although there were certain formalities to follow when wearing clothes, given Chen Lan's good intentions, Chen Xi didn't mind forgoing the formalities.

"Not yet," Chen Lan shook her head and continued stitching. Soon, a series of bamboo patterns appeared on the sleeve, completely covering the tear. Then, she flipped the robe and quickly embroidered the same pattern on the other sleeve, making the repair completely unnoticeable.

"Finished," Chen Lan said, a hint of pride in her voice. Embroidery was her specialty.

"Impressive," Chen Xi praised, clicking his tongue in wonder. He hadn't paid much attention to Chen Lan's embroidery before. Although he occasionally wore his marquis robes, seeing her embroidery skills firsthand was still surprising. The speed and quality were astonishing.

"This is the only way I can help you, Husband," Chen Lan said with a smile as she put away the needle and thread.

"Alright, but don't stay up late anymore. If you don't have enough new clothes, I'll take you to the tailor shop when the New Year approaches. If you really want to make clothes, do it during the day. It's not good for your eyes to sew at night," Chen Xi advised with a smile.

"I understand," Chen Lan replied, bowing her head. How much she would actually heed the advice was another matter. Sometimes, habits were hard to break, and Chen Lan had always had the habit of sewing at night.

"Hmm? What's this?" Fan Jian, sharp-eyed, noticed a small piece of clothing and picked it up.

"New clothes, I suppose," Chen Xi glanced at it without much thought and responded casually. Then he seemed to realize something, turning to look at Chen Lan, whose face had turned red. He pressed his fingers to his temples.

"I'm expecting..." Chen Lan said shyly.

"How long? How long?" Chen Xi excitedly grabbed Chen Lan's hands and asked.

"Physician Hua said it's been less than two months," Chen Lan replied, her face softening as she gently touched her flat stomach.

"Let me feel," Chen Xi said, without thinking, reaching out toward Chen Lan's abdomen. Fan Jian blushed and quietly stepped toward the door, preparing to close it.

"There's no change yet..." Chen Lan said, her face flushed, but she didn't stop Chen Xi's actions.

"Jian'er, after this, send Mi Zhen and the others back home. If they cause any trouble, send them all home and have their families keep them under house arrest," Chen Xi ordered Fan Jian. Previously, Chen Xi allowed Mi Zhen and the others to gather and play at his house, partly to keep them entertained and partly to give Fan Jian and Chen Lan some company. But now, he was worried that Mi Zhen might accidentally bump into Chen Lan, which could be dangerous.

Seeing how her husband was reacting, Chen Lan felt both happy and worried. "Husband, what if I give birth to a girl?"

Chapter 556: Congratulations to You Too~

"Whether it's a boy or a girl, it's fine. As long as it's a child, I'll love them all the same," Chen Xi said, his usual calm demeanor returning, though a hint of joy still lingered on his face.

"Really?" Chen Lan asked, slightly excited.

"Really. Boys require more attention, while girls are a bit easier to handle," Chen Xi smiled, reassuring her. Although he spoke casually, Chen Lan could sense that he wasn't just trying to comfort her.

"But I still hope that the child in my belly will be like you," Chen Lan said with a gentle laugh. "So, it would be nice to have a boy."

Chen Xi smiled but didn't say anything. Even if they had a son, raising him to Chen Xi's level was something he wasn't confident about. The times were constantly changing, and while the educational system two thousand years later might be flawed, it did allow those who wanted to learn to gain an immense amount of knowledge. But in this era, that wasn't possible.

"Get some rest and stop doing these things," Chen Xi said, patting Chen Lan to remind her not to overexert herself. She was already pregnant, yet she was still up late making baby clothes, which was worrisome. There were many skilled maids in the Chen household who could handle such tasks.

"Chen Yun, keep an eye on her. If she continues to stay up late sewing, come and tell me," Chen Xi instructed, turning to Chen Yun, who had been standing quietly by the side.

"I understand," Chen Lan replied softly, her face filled with tenderness.

"Alright, now rest well. I'll stay here and watch over you until you fall asleep," Chen Xi said as he tucked her in, gently patting her to help her relax.

Time passed, and while Chen Xi was almost dozing off, Chen Lan seemed to become more and more awake.

"Husband, you should return to your room to rest. With you staring at me like this, I can't sleep," Chen Lan said with a soft laugh, covering her mouth.

"Alright, I won't disturb you anymore," Chen Xi said, realizing that even he was starting to feel sleepy just from being in the room.

As he left the room and closed the door behind him, Chen Xi gazed up at the sky and muttered to himself. Life before having children and life after having children were completely different.

"Jian'er, you're still here?" Chen Xi asked with a smile when he saw Fan Jian waiting outside.

"I'm here to wait for you, husband," Fan Jian replied with a slight bow.

Chen Xi smiled again, noticing the subtle hint of sadness in Fan Jian's eyes.

Chen Xi didn't go out of his way to spread the news of Chen Lan's pregnancy, but soon enough, everyone who needed to know had found out, and gifts started arriving early.

"Congratulations!" Liu Bei said, bringing over a jade cauldron with a pleased expression. "Zichuan, congratulations!"

"Congratulations to you too, Lord Xuande," Chen Xi replied with a smile.

"Congratulations to us both," Liu Bei said with a chuckle, quickly switching his words. Madam Gan was already four or five months along.

Chen Xi accepted the jade cauldron and handed it to the guards behind him. Smiling contentedly, he looked at Liu Bei. Although the recent dreams about the jade disc had made him feel a bit restless, compared to the joy of the news, that restlessness was nothing.

"I've been waiting for this day for a long time," Liu Bei said, walking alongside Chen Xi with a wide grin. "You've finally got a child on the way. I never expected it to happen so soon."

"You've been waiting a long time?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow, pouring tea for Liu Bei and himself before taking a sip. They had long dispensed with the formalities of offering tea and then politely inviting someone to leave; it wasn't necessary between them.

"Of course I've been waiting. I want your daughter to marry my son as his wife," Liu Bei said excitedly.

Chen Xi felt slightly annoyed and sarcastically replied, "I don't even know if it'll be a boy or a girl, but you're already so sure that your firstborn will be a boy."

"And if it's a girl, I'll let her marry your son instead. How about that?" Liu Bei said nonchalantly. "Satisfied now?"

Chen Xi was speechless.

"You're really something," Chen Xi said with a mock salute to Liu Bei. "I give up. We'll see what happens when the time comes..."

Before Chen Xi could finish speaking, Wu Anguo rushed in and bowed to Liu Bei. "My lord, urgent news from Adviser Jia: General Zhang has been defeated by Lu Bu. Generals Xu and Guan have both been injured. Lu Bu is even stronger now than he was at Hulao Pass!"

"What?" Liu Bei exclaimed, immediately standing up. He had been uneasy about letting Zhang Fei duel Lu Bu, but Zhang Fei had insisted, and Liu Bei couldn't restrict him too much. To ensure Zhang Fei's safety, Liu Bei had sent Xu Chu as backup to Yanzhou and later moved Guan Yu from Licheng to press toward Yanzhou. This was not only to allow Zhang Fei to fight without worry but also with the intent to eliminate Lu Bu.

Rewinding to the moment when Lu Bu's cavalry overran Zhang He, we see that under Wei Xu and Hou Cheng's leadership, the Bingzhou wolf riders were struggling against the Xian Deng death warriors. However, when commanded by Lu Bu, they seemed to come to life. With the enhancement of Lu Bu's army talent, the Bingzhou wolf riders possessed almost the same charging power as the Xiliang Iron Cavalry and the archery skills of the White Horse Volunteers.

When Lu Bu's forces encountered Zhang He's, the great halberd in Lu Bu's hand sliced through the elite Xian Deng warriors, splitting their formation in one swift strike. He moved with the grace of a butterfly and the fluidity of water, tearing through the enemy with ease.

Zhang He wasn't slow to react. As soon as his Xian Deng warriors suffered heavy casualties, he reformed his ranks, intending to use their robust bodies to withstand the charge of the Bingzhou wolf riders. He also quickly sent orders to inform Tian Feng and Xun Chen to deploy their crossbowmen for suppressive fire.

There was no flaw in his command, but Zhang He had underestimated the strength of the current number one warrior in the world. With just one arrow, Lu Bu shattered Zhang He's spear and pierced his armor, breaking the command banner in the process.

To be honest, if Lu Bu hadn't run out of arrows after dealing with scouts and had resorted to using a light arrow, that single shot would have been enough to end Zhang He's life. Even so, it was enough to knock Zhang He off his horse.

After that, Zhang He lost the will to face Lu Bu. He realized that they weren't even on the same level; killing people as easily as Lu Bu did was no exaggeration.

Without Zhang He's command, the Xian Deng warriors, though still elite, were soon shattered into pieces by Lu Bu and his Bingzhou wolf riders, forcing them into a retreat.

When Zhou Ang, Shen Rong, and others arrived as reinforcements, the situation was already beyond saving. Before they could even form their ranks to support the Xian Deng warriors, Lu Bu and his Bingzhou wolf riders stormed in like a whirlwind. A rain of arrows fell, and Lu Bu, leading the charge, shattered the Hebei army's formation, driving his spear deep into their ranks.

In an instant, chaos erupted. Within the time it takes to burn an incense stick, the Hebei reinforcements were on the verge of collapse. With all their command flags down and Lu Bu personally leading a small group of guards into the fray, the Hebei army crumbled like a punctured balloon, breaking apart and fleeing in all directions.

Chapter 557: Hua Xiong's Doubts

Lu Bu, leading the remaining wolf cavalry, charged forward without hesitation, cutting down any chance for the Hebei forces to regroup and thoroughly scattering them. If it weren't for Xun Chen and Tian Feng using decoy tactics to delay Lu Bu and setting fire to the camp to hinder his advance, the entire Hebei army would have been annihilated, even if they managed to retreat to the Black Mountain area; there likely wouldn't have been many survivors.

Afterward, Xun Chen and Tian Feng realized how Lu Bu had bypassed their warning system—Lu Bu's mere presence was enough to overwhelm any scouts, leaving none alive to relay information.

Meanwhile, after setting fire to both Xian Deng and the trapping formation, Liu Ye immediately led his troops towards Bingzhou. Yuan Shao's control over the region was relatively weak, and only by taking a detour through Bingzhou could Liu Ye confidently enter Sili. As for how to return, Liu Ye was certain that by then, not only Lu Bu but also Chen Gong would have their own considerations.

Liu Ye's way of thinking allowed him to clearly understand Chen Gong's mindset. Compared to Cao Cao's grand ambitions, Chen Gong's thinking was much simpler—no matter how much Cao Cao did or how well he performed, some things couldn't be undone. The integrity of a scholar is forged with blood; once certain actions are taken, there's no going back.

As for Lu Bu, Liu Ye didn't believe that Chen Gong would give up the greatest asset in his hands. If Chen Gong were to join Liu Bei or Yuan Shao alone, his influence would be significantly diminished. Lu Bu's presence could greatly elevate Chen Gong's status, and the same was true for Lu Bu.

However, like Jia Xu and Li You, Liu Ye was wary of Lu Bu. It's not that they lacked the capacity to accept him, but rather that even people like Xun Yu, Xun You, and the late Xi Zhicai held reservations about Lu Bu.

Compared to Liu Bei's camp, which had options, Cao Cao's side, led by Xun Yu, had fewer choices. Absorbing Lu Bu could greatly enhance their strength, and while they were aware of the potential risks, the gap between them and Liu Bei and Yuan Shao forced them to make such a decision.

Just as in history, when Liu Bei took in Lu Bu in Xuzhou, he likely knew the risks involved. Yet, given the situation at the time, forming an alliance with Lu Bu to resist Cao Cao was the best course of action.

Cao Cao's camp was thinking along the same lines—recruiting Lu Bu might be risky, but it could also be advantageous. However, whether it succeeded or not was another matter, and both Jia Xu and Li You were well aware of this.

While Liu Bei's camp didn't need Lu Bu, that didn't mean they should allow him to fall into the hands of others. Despite the dangers he posed, his immense strength made Jia Xu, Li You, and others determined to keep him from becoming someone else's asset. This meant that, regardless of what others thought, many in Liu Bei's camp were prepared to remove Lu Bu from the equation; they didn't need such a dangerous figure.

Liu Ye shared similar concerns about Lu Bu, but compared to Li You and Jia Xu, his understanding wasn't as deep. This was why he still entertained the idea of recruiting both Chen Gong and Lu Bu together.

After returning to camp, Liu Ye placed Yu Jin in command and appointed himself as the strategist, with Hua Xiong as the vanguard. Leading over eight thousand troops, they set off toward Bingzhou, planning to detour through Sili to show their allegiance to the emperor—though in reality, it was more about making a token gesture of loyalty.

"Zijian, don't be like this. I helped you take revenge; Ju Yi's Xian Deng won't have fared well after that fire," Liu Ye said, trying to console Hua Xiong as they marched. The significant losses suffered by the Xiliang cavalry were a heavy blow to Hua Xiong.

"Thank you, Strategist Liu," Hua Xiong sighed. "But Xian Deng hasn't been wiped out. I believe I'll face them again."

"That's inevitable. The Hebei region has a population of over ten million, similar to that of Lord Xuande's territory. With good leadership, it won't take long for them to recover," Liu Ye replied honestly, not sugarcoating the situation. The population of the northern three provinces was still formidable, and without the ravages of plague, there was reason to be cautious.

"I'm thinking about how to counter Xian Deng. I don't have an army talent or a military soul, not even a hint of one," Hua Xiong said, feeling disheartened.

"But you didn't lose, Zijian. Didn't you say that in your last encounter with them, it was a 60-40 split? That's still impressive," Liu Ye said, amazed. He had witnessed how Xian Deng decimated the Bingzhou wolf riders, so the fact that Hua Xiong managed to hold his ground was astounding.

"That was because of superior numbers, and my troops fought fearlessly, sacrificing their lives to achieve that 60-40 split. I'd rather not have that," Hua Xiong said coldly, recalling the sight of the Xiliang cavalry giving their lives to halt the enemy's advance.

"Then you need to find a way to make your troops stronger, instead of feeling down like this," Liu Ye advised. "Only the weak wallow in self-pity. Losing once isn't a problem, even if you lose a hundred battles. As long as you have the will, we in Taishan can provide you with the troops you need. But if you lose your fighting spirit, your fallen comrades will be waiting for you to avenge them!"

"I will," Hua Xiong said, glancing at Liu Ye. He didn't say much more but touched the thin scar on his chest, a reminder of how close he had come to death against Ju Yi.

Hua Xiong silently reflected, scanning his cavalry, whose morale had visibly dropped.

Hua Xiong pondered quietly.

"Gentlemen, the Qiang cavalry are garbage," Hua Xiong muttered as he recalled the past and how attaching wings to the Qiang cavalry had changed the Xiliang cavalry. He couldn't help but voice his disdain for the Qiang cavalry.

"What did you say?" Liu Ye asked, puzzled.

"I said the Qiang cavalry are rubbish," Hua Xiong repeated bluntly.

"Oh? And how so?" Liu Ye asked, intrigued.

"In Xiliang, our men could take on five of them each. If there were enough of us, we could take on ten of them each," Hua Xiong said confidently.

"..." Liu Ye didn't know how to respond. In his mind, that shouldn't be possible.

"But it feels strange. We can defeat ten times as many Qiang cavalry, but when we face other troops with the same numbers, we struggle. Yet, if we bring ten times the number of Qiang cavalry, the enemy collapses as soon as we engage," Hua Xiong said, perplexed.

"Hahaha..." Liu Ye didn't know how to reply. He realized that Hua Xiong seemed to have strayed onto the wrong path—one that only the most straightforward minds would follow. Could it be that Hua Xiong's intellect was just as limited?

Chapter 558: Deception, Deception~

Liu Ye's mind flashed with inspiration.

"Ahem, Zijian, you don't need to overthink this. You're just troubled by the defeat of the Xiliang Iron Cavalry, aren't you?" Liu Ye's face showed a sly smile. Straightforward people like Hua Xiong were easy to deal with.

"Does the strategist have a solution?" Hua Xiong's eyes lit up with a hint of surprise.

"It's simple. Tell me, what is the Xiliang Iron Cavalry best at?" Liu Ye grinned. He didn't know how to defeat Xian Deng, but he knew how to mess with Hua Xiong's thoughts. As long as Hua Xiong got confused enough, his previous defeat wouldn't matter. As long as he wasn't afraid of losing and had the resolve to fight again, his troops wouldn't fall apart.

"The Xiliang Iron Cavalry excels at charging and breaking through the enemy's formation, preferably with a large group charging at once to crush the enemy into dust," Hua Xiong said, recalling the times when he and Li Jue led tens of thousands of Iron Cavalry, crushing everything in their path.

"Well, there you go. Now, tell me, did you manage to break through Xian Deng's formation?" Liu Ye continued to lead Hua Xiong on with his deceptive logic.

"No, Xian Deng's resistance was extremely strong. I had a hard time breaking through, especially when they activated their military soul. Even with my killing formation, it was nearly impossible to penetrate. The Eight Gates Golden Lock Formation, though extremely intricate, was practically blocked by Xian Deng's sheer power, and then they knocked me flying," Hua Xiong said bitterly. The Iron Cavalry's greatest strength had been crushed.

Liu Ye couldn't help but click his tongue in amazement. He hadn't expected Hua Xiong to know such a top-tier formation. Wasn't Hua Xiong supposed to be a bit slow-witted? How did he manage to learn this?

"Strategist Liu? Strategist Liu?" Hua Xiong called out to the daydreaming Liu Ye.

"Don't worry, General Hua. I was just thinking. The Iron Cavalry is best at charging and breaking formations, but you couldn't utilize that strength, at least not against Xian Deng," Liu Ye said with a mysterious air, though he was really just spouting nonsense. His goal was to deceive Hua Xiong, to pull him out of his despair over the previous defeat.

"That's right. I couldn't bring it into play at all. If it weren't for the killing formation, my defeat would have been even worse," Hua Xiong said, his spirit still low.

"Then why don't you increase your impact power? Make the horses run faster, make the soldiers' attacks stronger, and make your charge unstoppable? Even if they hold up a giant shield, wouldn't your charge shatter it and roll right over them?" Liu Ye continued with his nonsense. "If your attack power is high enough, and your charge is strong enough, no matter how tough they are, you'll smash through them."

Liu Ye's rambling was essentially telling Hua Xiong that if he couldn't defeat the enemy, it was just because his attacks weren't strong enough and his charge wasn't powerful enough. To win, all he had to do was hit harder and charge faster. If he still couldn't win, it was because of the same reason—just make the attacks and the charge stronger.

Hua Xiong paused, his not-so-nimble mind struggling with Liu Ye's seemingly logical words. For someone as straightforward as Hua Xiong, Liu Ye's theory made a lot of sense.

"Yeah, why didn't I think of that? Military formations, killing moves—doesn't it all come down to who can cut down the enemy first? If I hit harder, if my charge is unstoppable, then isn't that it? The reason I couldn't break through Xian Deng is that I couldn't smash them apart!" Hua Xiong slapped his forehead, suddenly feeling enlightened.

"Exactly. I heard that the Xiliang Iron Cavalry had reinforced their defenses, so they could fight without wearing armor. But defense alone isn't enough, right? Even if the Iron Cavalry can withstand one wave of attacks, it doesn't mean they can withstand all of them, right?" Liu Ye eagerly elaborated.

Liu Ye was now fully engaged in brainwashing Hua Xiong. Whether this theory was correct or not, who knew? If it failed, it would be because Hua Xiong's attacks weren't strong enough and his charge wasn't fast enough. If it succeeded, it would prove that Liu Ye's theory was right.

Hua Xiong's eyes grew brighter and brighter. Compared to the previous feeling of helplessness, Liu Ye's advice seemed far more practical. Years of battle experience had taught Hua Xiong that Liu Ye's theory made sense. Now, all that was left was to enhance his attack power and the intensity of his charges.

"Thank you, Strategist Liu," Hua Xiong said with great sincerity. "If I ever manage to destroy Xian Deng, I will throw a grand banquet in your honor."

"Great. I'll be waiting for the day you defeat Xian Deng and the day you invite me to your banquet," Liu Ye thought with glee. Straightforward people were indeed easy to handle.

"Du Yuan, inform the brothers! Tell them we have a way to deal with Xian Deng!" Hua Xiong shouted to Du Yuan, his only remaining lieutenant, who had been assigned to him after the suppression of the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou. Du Yuan was someone Hua Xiong really took a liking to.

"Yes, Boss! I'll inform the brothers right away!" Du Yuan replied loudly. He spurred his horse and rode off to deliver the news to his comrades.

In that previous battle, Hua Xiong had been defeated, and the Xiliang Iron Cavalry had suffered heavy losses. The entire unit was wounded, and morale was low. But that didn't mean they didn't want revenge. On the contrary, they had a deep grudge against Ju Yi. Until one side fell, the conflict would never end.

"Zijian, I didn't expect you to know the advanced form of the Eight Gates Golden Lock Formation. That's impressive," Liu Ye remarked, probing further.

Liu Ye knew some formations, but top-tier ones like this were hard to master without a mentor. Even someone as clever as Liu Ye would struggle to figure it out on his own. Even Jia Xu couldn't grasp it without someone to guide him through the basics.

"Master Li taught me," Hua Xiong said, smiling as he recalled Li You. "But I'm not very smart, so I only know three variations."

"Haha." Liu Ye forced a laugh. He was astonished to learn that Li You not only knew military formations but had mastered them to near perfection. Considering everything Li You had done before, it seemed there was nothing this guy couldn't do.

Liu Ye felt a surge of pressure, realizing that he had overlooked a dangerous figure in their ranks—someone who was capable of excelling at everything without drawing much attention. How could someone like that have such a low profile?

Liu Ye couldn't help but start thinking from Hua Xiong and Li You's perspectives. After all, top-tier military formations were extremely rare and usually kept secret. The fact that Li You had taught Hua Xiong felt suspicious. Thinking back on Hua Xiong's previous actions, it seemed he had a special reverence for Li You!

Chapter 559: Liu Ye's Way of Doing Things

Liu Ye's expression turned a bit gloomy. Although as a member of the Liu royal family, he had little attachment to the imperial household and even less to the emperor, if his suspicions were correct, things could get very interesting.

Liu Ye instinctively pressed his fingers against his brow. Despite being reluctant to fully believe it, he was now seventy percent certain that Li You was indeed Li Ru.

Liu Ye began to mentally defend Li You, trying to justify the situation.

A glint of ruthlessness flashed in Liu Ye's eyes.

Liu Ye quickly reviewed all the details and decisively chose to ignore the fact that Li You might be Li Ru. Liu Ye never considered himself a good person. If it weren't for the emergence of Liu Xuande (Liu Bei), giving him hope for restoring the Han dynasty, he would have gone directly to serve Cao Cao. What did it matter if a few emperors died?

To be frank, Liu Ye was a pragmatist. If the Han dynasty could be revived, he would lend a hand. If not, he would quickly withdraw and seek a brighter future under another lord. And Li You's importance to Liu Bei and the revival of the Han dynasty far outweighed the death of the young emperor. So Liu Ye decisively gave up on causing trouble for Li You—it simply wasn't worth it.

Liu Ye thought with some frustration that, considering Dong Zhuo's power at the time, what Li Ru did wasn't entirely wrong in scaring the court officials and consolidating his power. But in the long run, if he failed, who would be more vilified than him?

Liu Ye felt that Li Ru must have been insane back then. He had so many better strategies, but he chose the worst possible one. Yes, in the short term, it prevented internal chaos, but it also handed a moral high ground to the likes of Yuan Shao.

Reconstructing Li Ru's thought process, Liu Ye was left with one overwhelming impression: Li Ru was gambling, betting everything on being able to destroy the central plains warlords in one stroke. But in the end, he lost the gamble.

Liu Ye felt his thoughts twisting as he tried to understand Li Ru's logic. It was as if Li Ru's ideas didn't belong to a sane person.

From shock to indifference, and then to a bold, wicked resolve, Liu Ye's emotions cycled quickly. As a member of the royal family who lacked any real principles and was abnormally intelligent, his hostility toward the emperor was much stronger than that of regular ministers.

For people like Liu Ye, who followed their own rules and disregarded whether they would end up harming the emperor, loyalty was just an illusion.

Meanwhile, Hua Xiong, oblivious to the vast mental journey Liu Ye had just undertaken, was focused on how to increase the impact and attack power of his forces using cloud energy. Earlier, he had been lost,

confused after his defeat. But now that he had a direction, Hua Xiong was working desperately to improve. Losing to Ju Yi wasn't shameful, but not striving to defeat him after the loss—that would be disgraceful to Hua Xiong.

Just as Hua Xiong couldn't imagine Liu Ye deriving so much from a single sentence, Liu Ye couldn't fathom that Hua Xiong would turn his words into reality. If you couldn't beat the enemy, it meant your attack power wasn't strong enough. If you couldn't break through them, it meant your charge wasn't powerful enough. If those were lacking, then strengthen them!

Hua Xiong didn't grasp how difficult it was to push a unit to near perfection with each small improvement. All he knew was that Liu Ye's words made sense. After losing to Xian Deng, the Xiliang Iron Cavalry's desire for revenge far exceeded Liu Ye's expectations. Their intense training and thirst for vengeance were driving Hua Xiong closer and closer to his goal.

After Liu Ye's group left, the camp was left under the command of Zhang Fei, Chen Chi, and, shortly after, Xu Chu, who arrived with a small contingent of Tiger Guards. Zhang Fei and Xu Chu spent their days staring each other down across the river.

"Zhongkang, let's have a duel today. Winner gets to drink, loser patrols the camp!" Zhang Fei slammed the table and shouted at Xu Chu. For Zhang Fei, Liu Ye's orders were secondary. His brother (Guan Yu) had already instructed him to stay put. In less than ten days, Guan Yu would arrive from Licheng.

Xu Chu eyed Zhang Fei. They were evenly matched; neither could get the upper hand. After some thought, Xu Chu grinned and slammed the table as well. "If we draw, we split the wine, and you do the patrol!"

"Deal!" Zhang Fei roared, his voice so loud it made Xu Chu's ears ring.

Wiping his mouth, Xu Chu stood up, grabbed his elephant-nosed broadsword from the weapon rack, and swung it a few times, producing a fierce slicing sound. He stretched his muscles, did a few warm-up exercises, and then ran out with the blade in hand.

Similarly, Zhang Fei grabbed his serpent spear and ran out as well. Meanwhile, Chen Chi ordered scouts to expand their patrol range; he had no intention of being ambushed. To avoid being caught off guard,

Chen Chi had already started constructing a permanent encampment and even begun digging a moat around the camp.

Zhang Fei didn't know what to make of Chen Chi's overly cautious approach. With such fortifications, any attacker might lose the will to fight just at the sight of the camp. But for Chen Chi, if his soldiers were idle, they might as well be used to strengthen the defenses. After all, he was known for his turtle-shell strategies.

Chapter 560: Cultivation

Zhang Fei had no idea that soon after he arrived, Zhang Liao had already set his sights on him, waiting for the right moment to strike hard. However, due to Chen Chi's "turtle strategy" being so frustratingly effective, Zhang Liao felt like a dog trying to bite a porcupine—no way in. So, he could only observe daily, looking for an opportunity to attack.

As for the results, honestly, Zhang Liao, who currently had little fame but was unquestionably one of the finest talents of the era, had developed a deep sense of disgust for the distant camp. Chen Chi had dug traps right under his nose, then brazenly started digging a moat, expanded the camp, and built an outer wall filled with traps.

Now, Chen Chi was even piling up earth mounds outside the outer wall and stationing archers atop them, fortifying the slopes that didn't face the camp with large logs, essentially making them vertical.

"How's the trebuchet design coming along?" Chen Chi asked the accompanying military craftsmen.

"It's operational, but there's a structural issue—the components wear out too quickly," the craftsman replied.

"Component wear? Don't worry about that. We don't need to actually use it—just set it up to intimidate. Once that's done, take it apart and reassemble it on the earth mound," Chen Chi said nonchalantly. The ultimate goal of his "turtle strategy" was to make the enemy lose the will to attack just by looking at the defenses, without even engaging in battle. Anything that could scare the enemy should be put on display.

From a hill several miles away, Zhang Liao used his internal energy to enhance his vision. Seeing the trebuchets on the earth mound extinguished his desire to raid the camp—his opponents were simply too crafty.

"Forget it, let's retreat and wait to rendezvous with General Lu. Military Advisor Chen must have his own plans. It's a shame we lost this opportunity," Zhang Liao muttered, reluctantly abandoning his plan to raid the camp.

With a dark expression, Zhang Liao led a thousand elite wolf riders away. Had he known things would turn out this way, he would have struck hard on the first day before he figured out his opponent's situation.

On the other side, Guan Yu, leading five thousand infantry and cavalry with Guo Jia as his military advisor, was only a day's journey away from Zhang Fei.

Contrary to Liu Bei's expectations, the new commander of Licheng was not Zang Ba, but instead, Guan Yu had promoted Wei Yan. Neither Guo Jia nor Zang Ba objected to this decision. At only twenty years old, Wei Yan successfully took command of a secondary army and prepared to engage Gao Lan from Ji Province in a tough battle.

"Brother Wei, are you sure about this plan?" Guan Ping asked nervously. He always treated Wei Yan, who resembled his father in many ways, with the respect of an older brother in private.

"Gao Lan is very cautious. Without a risky move, do you think he would fall into our trap?" Wei Yan asked, turning to Guan Ping.

"But if we're discovered, we'll lose Le Ling for sure," Guan Ping said anxiously. His father had just left, and the highest command of Licheng had just passed to Wei Yan. Guan Ping himself had just taken full command of a unit, and Wei Yan immediately proposed a daring plan that made Guan Ping's heart race.

"Losing Le Ling wouldn't affect the overall situation," Wei Yan said, licking his lips, a hint of excitement on his face. He hadn't expected Guan Yu to entrust him with the highest command in Licheng, and he was still a bit stunned when Guan Yu had suggested it.

Because of this, Wei Yan felt a deep sense of gratitude towards Guan Yu. Determined not to disappoint him, he planned to achieve a great merit to prove himself.

"You may be right, but if we lose Le Ling, Brother Wei, you'll surely be demoted. I'll also lose my position as a Sima and probably have to go back to training with my father. Not that I mind learning from him again, it's just..." Guan Ping said, feeling conflicted.

Which general doesn't want to command troops? Especially young officers like Guan Ping, who usually only had a few hundred soldiers under their command. Guan Yu was extremely strict with both of them, treating them no differently than other soldiers. If Wei Yan and Guan Ping hadn't performed exceptionally, they wouldn't have risen as quickly as they had.

"Do you want to go back to leading just a few hundred men when General returns?" Wei Yan asked, his tone full of persuasion that was hard for any general to resist.

"..." Guan Ping hesitated, remembering the days when he only commanded a few hundred men. Now he led nearly two thousand infantry and cavalry. The thought of going back made him shudder. "Alright, let's do it! If things go wrong, I'll take the blame with you. At worst, my father will give me a few lashes!"

"Don't worry so much. If there was no chance of success, I wouldn't attempt it. If we succeed, when the General returns, we'll be promoted to deputy generals," Wei Yan said, patting Guan Ping's shoulder.

"Alright, I'm in! I've been holding a grudge against Gao Lan ever since he injured me last time," Guan Ping muttered, recalling the injury he had suffered at Gao Lan's hands.

Meanwhile, in Yanzhou, Guan Yu and Guo Jia advanced steadily, without any unexpected events.

"Do you think Ping and Wen Chang will be alright?" Guan Yu asked, stroking his long beard. Only in front of Guo Jia did he reveal his true feelings, rather than maintaining his cold, stoic demeanor.

"They'll be fine. Wen Chang may take risks, but he's incredibly brave, and Ping is careful and steady. The two complement each other well, so I don't foresee any issues. Besides, if you want them to grow, you can't keep sheltering them under your wing. Wen Chang has the potential to become a great general,

but if you don't let him go, his achievements will be limited," Guo Jia said, giving high praise to Wei Yan, a man he admired for his boldness and unconventional strategies.

"Thank you for your kind words," Guan Yu sighed. He valued Wei Yan even more than his own son.

"Don't worry, General. With Wen Chang's boldness, unless something unexpected happens, he should achieve great merit before we even return to Licheng," Guo Jia reassured him with a smile.

"Have you set up any backup plans, Military Advisor?" Guan Yu asked curiously. After spending a long time with Guo Jia, Guan Yu had grown accustomed to his ways. Unlike Liu Ye, who prepared many plans and let Guan Yu choose, Guo Jia specialized in always keeping a backup plan, never revealing all his cards.

"I do have a backup plan, but it will depend on whether they notice it. If they can fully utilize it, they'll prove they're capable of commanding an army," Guo Jia replied, smiling. He was also grooming these men, and his methods suited someone like Wei Yan. His intention was to use Gao Lan from Ji Province to temper them.

"Then I can rest easy," Guan Yu nodded. To be honest, he was still a bit uneasy. Before leaving, he had specifically instructed Zang Ba to keep an eye on the north. If Wei Yan and Guan Ping couldn't handle it, Zang Ba could take over command of the northern forces. Guan Yu had even written out a transfer order in advance, just in case.

"We should camp here for the night, rest, and regroup before joining up with Yide (Zhang Fei) tomorrow. We've already advanced deep into Yanzhou, so it's best to stay cautious and avoid giving Chen Gong any opportunity. He's not one to be underestimated," Guo Jia said, glancing at the sky. He had never taken Chen Gong lightly.