

Mythical 571

Chapter 571: Total Defeat

Lu Bu's Sky Piercer halberd clashed with Xu Chu's blade, and in that instant, a crimson brilliance burst forth from both Lu Bu's weapon and his arm. Red Hare, sensing the moment, lunged at Xu Chu's horse, trying to bite it.

Both Lu Bu and Xu Chu quickly disengaged after the exchange. Sitting on Red Hare, Lu Bu swayed slightly, smirking. "I underestimated you. In terms of strength, you are second only to Dian Wei among the generals I've faced."

Xu Chu looked at Lu Bu with a serious expression. The previous strike had been his all-out attack, aiming to catch Lu Bu off guard. However, Lu Bu only swayed on Red Hare, showing no significant harm.

Lu Bu narrowed his eyes as he looked at Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Xu Chu. "Today, I will send all of you to your deaths!" he roared, swinging his Sky Piercer in a sweeping arc that enveloped all three in its deadly range.

"Kill!" Xu Chu shouted, ignoring all the illusions and slashing directly at Lu Bu. Guan Yu's Green Dragon Crescent Blade, glowing with a ghostly light, also slashed toward Lu Bu, while Zhang Fei's Serpent Spear curved around, aiming for Lu Bu's back.

"This is getting interesting!" Lu Bu laughed. He no longer cared about the insults and provocations. What did it matter if they called him a "treacherous cur"? His strength, which dominated the world, would not change because of mere words!

Lu Bu first deflected the greatest threat, Guan Yu's blade, with a single strike of his halberd. Then, with a twist of his Sky Piercer's shaft, he redirected Zhang Fei's spear with a soft, spiraling force, causing it to clash with Xu Chu's sword instead.

"Is this all you've got? Then you can all die now!" After blocking their attacks, Red Hare reared up, kicking out at Guan Yu's mount, Yellow Dragon, while Lu Bu leaped into the air, swinging his Sky Piercer toward Zhang Fei's chest.

Guan Yu's Yellow Dragon horse instinctively dodged backward, but this left Guan Yu unable to block Lu Bu's next move.

On the other side, Xu Chu swung his blade at Lu Bu's head, but Lu Bu didn't even bother to turn around. He thrust his Sky Piercer straight at Zhang Fei's chest.

Zhang Fei watched as Lu Bu's weapon hurtled toward him. In that moment, time seemed to slow, and all his movements became sluggish. His spear intercepted the Sky Piercer at an impossible angle, but the sheer force behind Lu Bu's strike bent Zhang Fei's spear into a curve, pushing through his defense and striking him off his horse.

"Thud!" Zhang Fei was sent flying several meters away, heavily injured from Lu Bu's ruthless blow.

"Hmph!" At that moment, Xu Chu's fatal strike reached the back of Lu Bu's head, and Xu Chu's face lit up with a hint of triumph.

"Clang!" A clear sound rang out, and Xu Chu felt his hands go numb. His seemingly deadly strike was deflected effortlessly. Before he could react, Lu Bu's halberd was already slicing toward him. Xu Chu quickly blocked the attack, but the impact forced him to retreat several steps until he regrouped with Guan Yu.

Lu Bu's earlier attack had been too fast for Xu Chu to understand, but Guan Yu, with his sharp eyes, had seen it clearly. Lu Bu's halberd had shifted positions in an instant, seemingly without any movement, from the left side to Xu Chu's direction as soon as Xu Chu's blade neared.

"Kill!" Guan Yu shouted, charging at Lu Bu to protect Zhang Fei.

In the distance, Zhang Liao, leading Lu Bu's second wave of cavalry, saw Zhang Fei fall and immediately ordered his troops to mount up. His mission was to defeat Guan Yu.

"Mount up, charge!" Zhang Liao shouted. This was the perfect opportunity. Lu Bu's soldiers were at the peak of their morale after seeing Zhang Fei fall, while the Taishan troops' spirits had plummeted.

Zhang Fei is still alive... Zhang Liao glanced at Lu Bu, reassured. As long as Zhang Fei lived, everything would be fine. If Zhang Fei had died, as Chen Gong had warned, it would all be over.

Guan Yu's strikes grew heavier with each swing, aiming to kill. Unfortunately, none of his attacks could land a fatal blow on Lu Bu. Meanwhile, Lu Bu's halberd danced gracefully, leaving more and more wounds on Guan Yu. Yet, Guan Yu, far from being defeated, only became more determined, his blade shining brighter as he fought back fiercely.

Compared to Guan Yu's increasing momentum, Lu Bu was growing more distracted. After knocking down Zhang Fei, his battle spirit had waned. This was the only reason Guan Yu and Xu Chu had managed to hold him off. If Lu Bu had continued with the same ferocity as before, Guan Yu and Xu Chu would have been far more severely injured by now.

Even before Zhang Fei's defeat, Pei Yuanshao had sensed that the situation was turning grim. He could feel the morale of their troops declining as they failed to overwhelm Lu Bu despite outnumbering him three to one. Meanwhile, Lu Bu's forces were growing more confident by the second. As a seasoned veteran who had survived the Yellow Turban Rebellion, Pei Yuanshao knew that this battle was not going in their favor.

"Old Pei, things are looking bad. Lu Bu is too strong, and his leadership is crushing our morale," Jiang Gong, another Yellow Turban veteran, approached Pei Yuanshao, his face grim.

"You feel it too?" Pei Yuanshao asked, his face darkening.

"We've fought and lost enough times to know when the tide is turning against us," Jiang Gong replied, equally grim.

"I agree. If Lu Bu charges now, General Guan's formations might not hold. The morale gap is too wide," Pei Yuanshao said, his expression bleak. "And with General Guan tied up, if Lu Bu's forces strike head-on, we'll be forced to fight separately, and that..."

"Hei Zi, come here!" Jiang Gong called out to Zhou Cang, who was standing at the front lines. Zhou Cang hesitated but eventually came over.

"Brother Zhou, we need you to rush to Master Guo. You know as well as I do that this situation is dire!" Pei Yuanshao urged. The surviving Yellow Turban leaders had learned to recognize the signs of an impending defeat. If they didn't act, they wouldn't survive.

"Hei Zi, don't hesitate. Can't you see our morale is already faltering? Go quickly. If things go wrong, I'll lead the saber soldiers to hold the line!" Jiang Gong said firmly. Seeing Zhou Cang still hesitating, Jiang Gong made the decision for him.

"Alright, I'll go now," Zhou Cang finally agreed, understanding the severity of the situation. He wasn't foolish—he could see that the Taishan army had lost its momentum. If they were defeated here, Lu Bu's troops, with their soaring morale, would easily crush them.

After Zhou Cang left, Jiang Gong took his place at the front of the saber soldiers. Before he could even get to know the other squad leaders, Zhang Fei was struck down by Lu Bu, and Jiang Gong rushed to rescue him.

Fortunately, Guan Yu and Xu Chu managed to hold off Lu Bu long enough for Jiang Gong to pull Zhang Fei to safety. Otherwise, with his level of skill, Jiang Gong would have been nothing more than a nuisance to Lu Bu.

After rescuing Zhang Fei, Jiang Gong immediately ordered him to be taken to the rear. When he met Pei Yuanshao's eyes, they both saw the unease in each other's gaze. Zhang Fei's defeat had severely damaged the Taishan army's morale.

"I'll go to the rear," Pei Yuanshao said to Jiang Gong, his face grim. "Have your brother Jiang Yan take command of my unit."

"Where are you going? The situation is too precarious. If the commanders start abandoning their posts, we'll collapse for sure!" Jiang Gong said, thinking Pei Yuanshao was planning to flee.

"I'm going to wake up General Zhang. Can't you see that we don't have a commanding officer in the center? General Guan is tied up, and I bet he didn't anticipate this situation. We need someone to take command. As long as someone is leading, we can still hold off Lu Bu's forces," Pei Yuanshao explained, his tone serious. Unlike most Yellow Turbans, he was one of the few who had a strategic mind.

"Alright, go. I'll have my brother take over your unit," Jiang Gong agreed, quickly realizing the logic in Pei Yuanshao's plan. Normally, General Guan would be in command, but now that Lu Bu had tied him down, he couldn't spare a moment for anything else.

"Not good!" Jiang Gong, still on horseback, looked behind him and saw clouds of dust rising from Lu Bu's cavalry. Shocked, he turned back to see that there were no officers directing their forces, and dread filled his heart.

"I don't care! You, you, and you—go to the left, right, and center. Warn them about the enemy's flanking cavalry!" Jiang Gong shouted orders. "All saber soldiers, prepare for the charge. Crossbows, get ready!"

In fact, the front-line commanders had already noticed Zhang Liao's charging cavalry and had issued orders. They had tried to relay the message to the rear and flanks as well, but the army had already started to descend into chaos.

The first to notice this disarray was none other than Lu Bu. He quickly turned his horse and saw the dust clouds trailing his own army's flanking cavalry. One glance at the banners confirmed that it was Zhang Liao leading them.

Deflecting both Guan Yu and Xu Chu's attacks with a single sweep, Lu Bu unleashed a surge of power that pushed both of them back. At that moment, the unstoppable force that was Lu Bu returned to the battlefield.

"You're strong, but this is the end. Among all the opponents I've faced, you rank in the top five. But that's not enough—you can't hurt me!" Lu Bu laughed wildly, his Sky Piercer sweeping through the air with unstoppable force. Within just a few exchanges, Guan Yu's body had already accumulated several shallow wounds.

After forcing back Guan Yu and Xu Chu, Lu Bu raised his Sky Piercer and pointed it at Guan Yu. "All troops, charge!" He then lunged at Guan Yu and Xu Chu, preventing them from regrouping with the main army.

As Lu Bu pushed back Guan Yu and Xu Chu, the former Yellow Turban leaders in Guan Yu's army realized this was their last chance to turn the tide. For them, survival was everything, and they had no qualms

about breaking the rules. Sima Ju, Qu Gong, Jiang Gong, and Jiang Yan all charged forward, ordering their troops to unleash a hail of arrows at Lu Bu.

Before Lu Bu could land his next strike on Guan Yu or Xu Chu, a rain of arrows poured down on him. The thin veil of protective energy around him started to waver under the relentless barrage of arrows.

"General, retreat! Lu Bu's reinforcements are closing in!" Jiang Gong shouted. "Pei Yuanshao has already sent for help!"

At first, Guan Yu felt embarrassed that his troops had resorted to such tactics, but hearing Jiang Gong's words and seeing the enemy cavalry charging from both sides, he knew it was true.

"Retreat!" Guan Yu nodded to Jiang Gong, then shouted to Xu Chu.

"Order the flanks to counterattack and have the center form a defensive line. Hold on until reinforcements arrive!" Guan Yu ordered as he withdrew from the front lines.

But as soon as he turned back, he saw his left and right flanks being smashed apart by the enemy's cavalry. The sudden collapse was shocking, and the enemy riders drove deep into their formations, breaking through to the center.

"How is this possible?" Guan Yu was stunned by the sight of the cavalry breaking through his flanks.

"Saber soldiers, prepare to block the left flank!" Guan Yu shouted urgently.

"Yes!" Jiang Gong roared, leading five hundred saber soldiers to intercept the left flank.

"Xu Chu, stop Zhang Liao!" Guan Yu ordered, pointing to the right flank.

"Tiger Guard Battalion, follow me!" Xu Chu shouted, leading his Tiger Guards toward Zhang Liao.

Soon, Jiang Gong's saber soldiers clashed with Hao Meng's troops. Although Hao Meng had the upper hand, it wasn't easy to take down Jiang Gong amidst the swirling energy of their clashing forces. Hao Meng's two hundred "Trap" soldiers, dispatched by Gao Shun, were also held back by the saber soldiers and other infantry. Although they held a significant advantage in combat power, the saber soldiers' steady retreat managed to stall the Trap troops' unstoppable advance.

"Clang!" Xu Chu swung his blade at Zhang Liao, who parried it effortlessly, slipping away like water. Zhang Liao's few remaining "Trap" soldiers clashed with Xu Chu's Tiger Guards.

After exchanging dozens of blows with Xu Chu, Zhang Liao finally relaxed as he saw his "Trap" soldiers beginning to overpower the Tiger Guards. The greatest advantage of specialized troops was their ability to break through enemy lines, creating opportunities for the regular soldiers to exploit and expand upon.

"Damn it!" Xu Chu cursed as he struggled against Zhang Liao, observing the situation around him. The enemy soldiers were incredibly strong—his Tiger Guards needed two or three men to take down just one of them! Could these really be ordinary soldiers?

Guan Yu, leading his troops in a defensive formation, was fighting desperately to hold off Lu Bu. However, several points in their defenses were already beginning to falter. No one could withstand Lu Bu's relentless charges, especially with the vast disparity in morale between the two sides.

Chapter 572: Even the Wisest Can Make a Mistake

While Zhou Cang was racing back to the main camp to request reinforcements from Guo Jia, Guo Jia and Chen Chi were casually enjoying their breakfast, consisting of spring water and wild vegetables.

"I wonder how the situation is going now," Guo Jia murmured, smacking his lips as if trying to extract a hint of wine from the spring water. However, it was clear that this was nothing more than wishful thinking.

"It shouldn't be a big problem. Even if General Zhang can't defeat Lu Bu, the gap shouldn't be too large. After all, both are at the level of internal energy manifestation," Chen Chi speculated, not overly concerned since he knew Guo Jia wasn't one to stand on ceremony.

"Let's hope so," Guo Jia said with a frown, a hint of unease creeping into his mind.

"Does the strategist not have confidence in General Guan and the others?" Chen Chi asked as he took a sip of the spring water, only to grimace and find it difficult to swallow.

"If it's just about commanding troops, General Guan may not be Lu Bu's equal, but he wouldn't suffer a crushing defeat. However, I've been feeling uneasy lately. Thinking back, perhaps it was reckless of me not to accompany General Guan to the battlefield," Guo Jia hesitated, expressing his concerns. For some time now, he had been plagued by a sense of foreboding, with his right eyelid twitching—a bad omen, indeed.

"Strategist Guo, you shouldn't worry. Even if you went, it wouldn't change much. You're not adept at leading troops, and your health isn't the best. Staying in the rear to devise strategies is the right course. On the battlefield, General Guan might even need to protect you," Chen Chi reassured him.

"That may be true, but I can't shake this feeling of unease," Guo Jia replied, his brows furrowed. "From what we know, Lu Bu is not weaker than our forces, and Chen Gong is no pushover. Our biggest advantage lies in having a competent commander, two formidable generals, and two elite units."

"Strategist Guo is overthinking. We still have two other advantages. Our numbers are slightly greater than Lu Bu's, and your strategies are as brilliant as a heavenly steed soaring across the skies," Chen Chi offered a bit of flattery, though it wasn't without basis.

After all, from his perspective, their advantages were significant. Whether it was Guan Yu's saber soldiers or Xu Chu's Tiger Guards, both were top-tier elites. Additionally, Guan Yu's army talent was one of the best in the world, capable of influencing nearly ten thousand soldiers. With such a powerful commander, losing seemed unlikely.

"That's true. General Guan's army talent can affect up to ten thousand soldiers and suppress the enemy's combat effectiveness. Compared to most generals who can only influence five hundred to a thousand men, the difference is enormous," Guo Jia nodded, trying to reassure himself.

While others might not know the full extent of Guan Yu's army talent, Guo Jia, having served as his strategist for so long, understood it well. He knew why Guan Yu's army talent could cover so many soldiers and why it was so powerful.

Normally, army talents could only affect five hundred to a thousand men. That's why when Zhou Yu used his talent to cover all of Sun Ce's troops, even Chen Xi had been stunned. The more soldiers an army talent covered, the greater the overall boost in combat effectiveness. Zhou Yu's talent, for example, boosted morale, which in turn increased combat power by about thirty percent.

There's a huge difference between boosting five hundred soldiers by thirty percent and boosting fifty thousand. This disparity highlighted just how terrifying Zhou Yu's skill was during his moments of musical inspiration.

Guan Yu's army talent, in reality, only covered five hundred men—his five hundred saber soldiers. However, Guan Yu's talent had a hidden condition: as Guan Yu fought and won duels and battles, his aura would grow stronger, extending his talent to more soldiers under his command.

When Guan Yu fought Gao Lan in Ji Province and remained undefeated, his momentum continued to build, eventually allowing him to expand his army talent to cover nearly ten thousand soldiers. While the core remained his five hundred saber soldiers, the rest of his troops were also influenced by his powerful aura, exhibiting effects similar to an army talent.

In other words, the combat effectiveness of Guan Yu's troops would increase as he won more battles. If Guan Yu achieved a miraculous victory, his troops' combat effectiveness would soar in response to his growing confidence and reputation.

However, all of this hinged on one crucial factor: Guan Yu's confidence. If Guan Yu ever doubted himself, even his core saber soldiers might struggle to perform, let alone the rest of his forces. Conversely, if Guan Yu was supremely confident or even overconfident, his army could reach a level where they could sweep aside all opposition, achieving the so-called "god-like" state.

But there was a problem that only those close to Guan Yu, like Guo Jia, understood—deep down, Guan Yu harbored insecurities. His aloof demeanor and silence in social situations were born out of a lack of confidence in his ability to communicate.

Although this insecurity had gradually diminished as Guan Yu's power grew and he took on more responsibilities, he still carried a lingering sense of inadequacy tied to his humble origins. This was why he showed kindness to his soldiers but looked down on scholars—some things are hard to let go of.

Because Guo Jia understood these nuances, he knew that Guan Yu's abilities, including his army talent, were all rooted in his personal strength. If Guan Yu ever doubted his own martial prowess, everything he had built could crumble, and his progress would stall.

Guo Jia's greatest fear now was that if Guan Yu were to be defeated by Lu Bu, he might start doubting himself. If that happened, Guo Jia might even be driven to despair.

As Guo Jia pondered this, he realized he had been subtly guiding Guan Yu toward balancing martial prowess with strategic thinking. This was to prevent a future collapse if Guan Yu were ever defeated. Although Guo Jia believed Guan Yu was already a formidable force, he always prepared for the worst-case scenario.

"Chen Chi, have the troops prepare. My unease is growing stronger and more distinct," Guo Jia said, suddenly raising his head while holding his teacup. Since he anticipated the possibility of things going south, he saw no harm in being prepared in advance.

"Have the troops prepare?" Chen Chi chuckled wryly. "Our main generals and their deputies have all gone to battle. The highest-ranking officer left here is Deputy Sima Fu Lan, and his main task is to protect us. As for leading the troops... well, I don't mean to belittle anyone, but none of these officers can even command two thousand men without causing chaos, let alone an entire army."

Guo Jia froze, his face turning pale. He suddenly realized that if Guan Yu encountered trouble, the entire Taishan army would be doomed. Guo Jia might possess great strategic talent, but that didn't mean he could command an army. He was purely a civil official, and none of the officers left behind had the ability to command even a thousand troops effectively!

Chapter 573: Heaven Leaves a Way Out

Guo Jia began to reverse-engineer all the calculations, starting with Zhang Fei's personality, Guan Yu's attitude towards Zhang Fei, Guan Yu's temperament, the confidence built from consecutive victories, and the situation after the arrival of the third internal energy master, Xu Chu.

"So, this is how it is..." Guo Jia suddenly knocked over the water bowl. Chen Chi's words had completely clarified the current situation. Guo Jia trusted Guan Yu's judgment, and since Guo Jia didn't interfere with military command, it made sense that Guan Yu would take all the commanding generals with him to ensure victory.

As long as they won, everything would be fine. Guo Jia and Guan Yu's first judgment was naturally victory. This created a blind spot—Guan Yu would leave Guo Jia in the rear as usual, with someone protecting him for safety. Everything seemed fine on the surface, but there was a huge hidden danger: there was no one left who could rescue Guan Yu.

"So ruthless!" Guo Jia's face darkened. Given this deduction, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Xu Chu couldn't possibly defeat Lu Bu. Only by forcing him to send reinforcements could Chen Gong's plan succeed. Although this deduction seemed unbelievable, after eliminating all other possibilities, this became the only one left!

"Strategist Guo, what's wrong?" Chen Chi asked, puzzled as he watched Guo Jia's face turn pale after just one statement. He immediately sensed that something was very wrong.

"Bring me the map," Guo Jia ordered, taking a deep breath. The ability to remain calm under pressure is a fundamental quality of a strategist. Even if Chen Gong's schemes had been revealed, or if he knew nothing and faced the possibility of Guan Yu's defeat, a strategist should always maintain composure.

Chen Chi, though confused, didn't hesitate. He quickly brought the map. Guo Jia examined it and immediately identified a spot that wasn't ideal for an ambush but was the only feasible one.

Guo Jia's face twitched slightly. The only possible ambush point for Chen Gong would be that stretch of floodplain resembling a reed field.

"Fortunately, luck is still on our side," Guo Jia laughed. Though he couldn't command troops, he knew how to start a fire. Burning down a reed field was something he could manage!

But Guo Jia's expression turned troubled. No matter how brilliant his strategies were, one fact remained unchanged—he couldn't lead troops.

"Strategist Guo, though I may not fully understand what you're contemplating, your troubled expression tells me that the situation is tricky. If that's the case, why not speak your thoughts aloud? Although I may not be able to assist you directly, perhaps I can provide some insight," Chen Chi offered, noticing Guo Jia's distress.

Guo Jia glanced at Chen Chi, sighed, and then explained the entire situation, including his analysis.

"Strategist Guo, are you concerned about the lack of someone capable of commanding the troops?" Chen Chi asked with a frown.

"Exactly. Chen Gong's only possible ambush point is here." Guo Jia pointed to the reed field on the map. "If General Guan begins to falter, he will undoubtedly send someone to request reinforcements. In that scenario, even if there's no capable commander, I'll have no choice but to deploy troops."

Guo Jia didn't finish his thought, but Chen Chi understood. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei's statuses were too important. Even knowing it was a trap, Guo Jia would have to jump in.

"If Strategist Guo needs a commander, I could recommend someone. They may not be able to lead tens of thousands, but they can manage a whole army," Chen Chi suggested after some thought.

"Is there really such a person in our ranks? Speak quickly!" Guo Jia exclaimed with joy. With just one capable commander, he was confident he could turn the tables on Chen Gong and win this battle.

"The person you seek is closer than you think," Chen Chi said confidently.

Guo Jia paused, picking up the bowl that had held spring water. After some careful thought, he asked, "Chen Chi, how confident are you?"

"Though I haven't commanded troops before, based on the military formations General Guan demonstrated recently, I may not be as skilled, but I'm not far behind," Chen Chi said proudly.

Guo Jia's headache worsened, but at that moment, a messenger urgently called from outside. Guo Jia sighed deeply. "Chen Chi, you will command the troops. We are marching out."

"Report, Strategist Guo..." Zhou Cang shouted as he rushed in.

"I know, I know. No need to say it. General Guan, General Zhang, and General Xu have all been defeated, right? We'll move out immediately," Guo Jia interrupted, waving his hand with a gloomy expression.

"Strategist, you've hit the nail on the head..." Zhou Cang was dumbfounded by Guo Jia's prediction.

"Lead five hundred elite guards to protect Chen Chi and me. Also, on the way, tell me exactly how ferocious Lu Bu is," Guo Jia ordered helplessly, then turned to Chen Chi, who took a deep breath and composed himself.

Soon, Chen Chi gathered all the remaining soldiers in the camp and quickly organized them. After a few adjustments, Chen Chi felt confident. Leading troops seemed quite simple...

Although Guo Jia wasn't skilled in commanding troops, he watched as Chen Chi familiarized himself with Guan Yu's military signals, made a few adjustments to the formations, and raised the soldiers' morale with copper coins. After observing Chen Chi change the formations again, Guo Jia was completely reassured—Chen Chi was indeed capable.

Determined, Guo Jia thought, "I've been in this game for years, and this is the first time someone has outmaneuvered me on the battlefield. If it weren't for the good fortune of having Chen Chi to lead the troops, I'd be in serious trouble!"

"That's everything," Zhou Cang grumbled, recounting what he had witnessed to Guo Jia.

"Understood," Guo Jia nodded. Now he knew exactly what kind of monster he was dealing with.

"Chen Chi, do you know battle formations?" Guo Jia suddenly asked.

"I do, the Grip Formation from Xuanxiang's tactics," Chen Chi replied.

"My luck just keeps getting better!" Guo Jia laughed heartily. If Chen Chi had known any other formation, Guo Jia wouldn't have been so elated. But the Grip Formation was the precursor to the Eight Gates Golden Lock Formation and even the Eight Arrays Diagram!

"You don't need to make any complex changes. Just focus on maximizing the cloud energy. Forget about boosting our troops' combat effectiveness; just increase the volume of cloud energy!" Guo Jia laughed. "Lu Bu may be strong, but let's see how many he can kill with his internal energy sealed by an overwhelming cloud of energy!"

Chapter 574: The Situation Is Dire

Chen Gong led two thousand soldiers hiding in the tall grass. If it weren't for the large expanse of reeds, Chen Gong wouldn't have chosen this place for an ambush.

"General Cao, you have sharp eyes. If you see any sign of fire, inform me immediately," Chen Gong said to Cao Xing, who was crouching beside him. The biggest fear when hiding in a reed field is being set on fire. But with no time to dig trenches, this was the only place suitable for an ambush, so Chen Gong had no choice but to hide his troops here.

"Burn, burn, burn! Set the whole place ablaze! Even if Chen Gongtai is cautious, this time I'll make sure to disgust him!" Guo Jia excitedly waved a torch in broad daylight. For strategists, setting fires had become a common tactic.

A large number of torches were thrown into the reeds, and suddenly, a strong wind arose. Guo Jia grinned; as long as his opponent wasn't someone like Chen Xi or Xun Yu, there was no pressure.

"The wind is picking up?" Chen Gong's face showed a strange expression as he crouched in the reeds. Suddenly, he realized the danger and immediately tried to reverse the wind direction with his mental energy. He had already spotted the flames.

"Retreat! Break out and prepare to attack!" Chen Gong shouted. But his western wind couldn't overpower the eastern wind. Guo Jia had prepared in advance, and even if Chen Gong wanted to change the weather, it would be extremely difficult to do so in a short time.

By the time Chen Gong emerged from the smoke and flames, Chen Chi had already led the army forward. Unlike Guan Yu or Zhang Fei, who personally led their troops with swift and aggressive moves, Chen Chi's army advanced steadily, not with speed but with an unstoppable force.

"Archers, prepare to fire!" Chen Chi signaled. The advancing army halted, and the archers in the center drew their bows, aiming at the enemy.

"Shield-bearers, tilt! Spears down!" Chen Chi continued to command. The army transformed into a bristling formation, with rows of swords, spears, and long pikes forming a dense wall, advancing in unison.

A barrage of arrows rained down on Chen Gong and Cao Xing, who were already wounded and struggling after the smoke and fire. They had hoped to ambush Guo Jia but found themselves on the receiving end instead.

"How do you like my spear formation, Chen Gongtai?" Guo Jia laughed loudly.

Chen Gong's face darkened. Being taunted by Guo Jia while in such a dire situation made him furious. "Guo Fengxiao, aren't you afraid that by advancing so slowly, Guan Yun and Zhang Yide might already be dead by the time you arrive?"

"I don't know if they'll be dead, but I do know that if you don't run, you'll be a dead man soon!" Guo Jia replied with a smug grin, snapping his wooden fan shut.

"Fire!" Chen Chi shouted. The archers behind the spear formation rose and fired a volley at Chen Gong's position.

Fortunately, Cao Xing, an expert archer, was able to deflect most of the incoming arrows with his spear, but both he and Chen Gong were still struck by several arrows.

"Zhou Cang, lead your troops and capture Chen Gong and Cao Xing!" Chen Chi ordered the only general at his disposal, Zhou Cang.

"Yes, sir!" Zhou Cang hefted his massive blade and charged with five hundred soldiers toward Cao Xing, while other units moved in from both sides to encircle Chen Gong and Cao Xing.

"Retreat! There's no point in staying here if the enemy is this well-prepared," Chen Gong said, glancing in Guo Jia's direction before turning his horse around. The situation was far from what he had anticipated. Originally, he had hoped to capture the enemy, but that was now impossible.

Cao Xing nodded, drew his bow, and fired an arrow at Zhou Cang. Though Zhou Cang dodged as best he could, the arrow still grazed him, inflicting only a minor wound.

"All units, halt! Move westward at full speed!" Chen Chi ordered, abandoning the pursuit. His goal was to rescue his comrades, not to chase down Chen Gong. Besides, given Chen Gong's command skills, there was always the possibility of hidden traps.

Meanwhile, Guan Yu's central forces were holding off Lu Bu's relentless assault. Thankfully, Guo Jia's worst fears hadn't come to pass. It seemed that Guan Yu had never truly considered Lu Bu as a formidable opponent, as no sane person would willingly engage such a monster in combat.

Thanks to his army-wide morale boost and the suppression of internal energy by the cloud energy, Guan Yu was barely managing to hold the center against Lu Bu's wolf cavalry. Even though Lu Bu couldn't use his internal energy, Guan Yu still hadn't gained any real advantage. At best, he had managed to avoid injury in a few exchanges.

The suppression of internal energy had diminished Lu Bu's power by nine-tenths. What was once a thousand points of combat strength was now just a hundred. Similarly, Guan Yu's own seven or eight hundred points of strength were reduced to seventy or eighty. Under these circumstances, both sides were limited by their physical capabilities, though Lu Bu still held a slight advantage. Even so, it would take him a hundred moves to defeat Guan Yu.

Because of this, Guan Yu had the ability to counterattack and push back against Lu Bu's charge. Otherwise, if no one could stop Lu Bu, his repeated charges would soon cause the entire army to collapse.

However, despite holding off Lu Bu, the situation was still dire for Guan Yu's army. When Lu Bu had first charged in before the cloud energy was fully activated, he had shattered the central defense line, and it was only thanks to Guan Yu's desperate efforts and the gradual activation of the cloud energy that they managed to stabilize the situation. Otherwise, Lu Bu would have led his wolf cavalry to break through the center entirely.

If it were only Lu Bu, it wouldn't be as bad. But the real threat to Guan Yu's army came from Zhang Liao and Hao Meng, who led two wolf cavalry units. The left and right flanks had been pierced by the

fearsome assault of the trapped camp, and even with Xu Chu and Jiang Gong leading their elite troops to hold the line, they could only barely stabilize the defensive perimeter.

Just moments earlier, Zhang Liao had realized that Xu Chu and his Tiger Guards were a tough nut to crack. He decisively used the speed of the wolf cavalry and the ferocity of the trapped camp to make quick, unpredictable maneuvers, causing the left and right flanks to waver. Xu Chu and Jiang Gong were left scrambling, trying to keep up with Zhang Liao and Hao Meng's relentless attacks.

Guan Yu cleaved down a wolf cavalry soldier, his once-pristine cloak now soaked in blood. He knew all too well that if either flank crumbled, the entire army might soon follow.

Chapter 575: The Liu-Lu Battle Concludes

"Are we really just going to charge in like this?" Chen Chi turned to Guo Jia and asked.

"If our forces haven't collapsed, we'll charge straight in. If they have, then we'll form a defensive line!" Guo Jia replied almost instantly, without a second thought.

"Alright!" Chen Chi nodded. "In a moment, have the whole army shout in unison and beat the war drums loudly!"

Chen Chi ordered the messengers to quickly pass this command to the various commanders. Soon, the message spread from the commanders to the centurions, from the centurions to the squad leaders, and from the squad leaders to the team leaders. In no time, the entire army was ready.

Once again, Guan Yu led his troops to block Lu Bu. However, this time he didn't come out unscathed as before. After fiercely cutting down dozens of wolf riders, he clashed head-on with Lu Bu. This was no longer the hit-and-run tactic from earlier; this time, Lu Bu directly withstood Guan Yu's aura, determined to take him down.

Each of Lu Bu's strikes grew heavier and heavier, making it increasingly difficult for Guan Yu to defend. However, his red face gave no indication that he was already nearing his limit.

"Die!" After over twenty rapid strikes failed to bring down Guan Yu, Lu Bu saw that Guan Yu's soldiers were once again closing in. Without hesitation, he unleashed his inner energy, regaining seven or eight-

tenths of his peak strength. However, this caused a massive surge of cloud energy to rush toward him, frantically trying to neutralize his inner energy.

"Kill!" Guan Yu's eyes widened in anger, his icy killing intent permeating the air around him.

Guan Yu knew exactly what this meant. Lu Bu was recklessly unleashing his inner energy. As long as the energy flowed faster than the cloud energy could neutralize it, a warrior could indeed use their inner energy within the cloud!

Even for someone like Lu Bu, such an outburst of inner energy couldn't last for more than a few seconds. However, for Lu Bu, a few seconds was enough to cut down countless enemies with ease. Unfortunately for Guan Yu, in Lu Bu's eyes, he was just another target to be cut down...

At that moment, Guan Yu's energy, spirit, and essence surged to an unimaginable level. The barrier that had previously held him back shattered as he broke through to a higher realm, revitalizing his nearly exhausted strength.

"Boom!" Both Guan Yu and Lu Bu retreated three steps. This time, Guan Yu's body radiated a faint glow, and his Green Dragon Crescent Blade emitted an eerie light. His phoenix eyes were fixed on Lu Bu.

Guan Yu tilted his head slightly as inner energy continuously flowed through his body, nourishing his nearly depleted form. His wounds began to heal at a visible rate.

"Come again!" Lu Bu laughed wildly, unleashing his inner energy without restraint. Guan Yu, too, spared no effort in squeezing every ounce of potential from his body. The clash of blade and halberd resumed, with Lu Bu's golden aura colliding violently with Guan Yu's radiant energy.

"Splurt!" After just a few seconds, they separated again. Guan Yu spat out blood, while a massive gash appeared on Lu Bu's chest armor. Both had nearly exhausted their inner energy in that brief exchange, but the outcome was clear: Lu Bu remained the undisputed top warrior in the land.

"Looks like you're not invincible after all, Lu Bu," Guan Yu sneered, wiping the blood from his mouth. In those few seconds, they had fought like a whirlwind, each cutting down hundreds of soldiers. While

Guan Yu was pained by the loss of his men, he also knew that killing so many wolf riders had greatly reduced the pressure on his forces.

"You've lost," Lu Bu said, slightly out of breath. He hadn't expected Guan Yu to become so formidable after achieving the unity of energy, spirit, and essence. Though the cloud energy played a role, Lu Bu knew that Guan Yu had surpassed Zhang Fei and was now on par with the Huang Zhong he had encountered in Jingzhou.

"Lost?" Guan Yu's eyes glinted coldly as he swung his Green Dragon Crescent Blade, exuding a powerful aura. "I didn't fear you when I had my inner energy, and I don't fear you now. There's more to being a warrior than just martial prowess!"

Guan Yu charged at Lu Bu without hesitation. He knew he couldn't defeat Lu Bu in a direct fight, but with both of their inner energy exhausted, Lu Bu would struggle to take him down. As long as he held Lu Bu back and prevented the central army from collapsing, reinforcements would eventually arrive.

The battle between Guan Yu and Lu Bu resumed, even though neither had any inner energy left. Despite this, their clash remained fearsome, with each strike carrying a powerful momentum. Lu Bu's invincible aura clashed with Guan Yu's newfound confidence and determination.

"Boom!" Guan Yu staggered back several steps, while Lu Bu stood firm. Compared to Lu Bu's inhuman recovery speed, Guan Yu couldn't match up.

"Looks like this will be your death day next year," Lu Bu boasted arrogantly.

"I've already gotten what I wanted," Guan Yu said coldly, his gaze fixed on Lu Bu. He had spotted a banner in the distance—Guo Jia's banner!

Guo Jia's timely arrival, along with the disciplined advance of his troops, did not go unnoticed by both Zhang Liao and Lu Bu. They realized that a competent commander was leading the reinforcements.

"Xu Zhongkang, we'll continue this another day," Zhang Liao said calmly to the bloodied Xu Chu. The appearance of reinforcements meant that something had gone wrong on Chen Gong's end. However,

Zhang Liao had never intended to fight Guan Yu's army to the death. As Chen Gong had said, he only needed to prove his worth.

"Next time, I won't hold back!" Xu Chu growled. Though he didn't fully understand the reason for their earlier restraint, he knew that Zhang Liao hadn't fought with his full strength. After the earlier battle against Lu Bu, Xu Chu had been exhausted, and Zhang Liao could have easily overpowered him if he had tried.

"If there is a next time, we'll see. Xu Zhongkang, why do you think the civil war between the Han Chinese is happening? I was once a border guard at Jiuyuan, resisting the barbarians and defending our lands. But ever since I came to the Central Plains, I've been caught up in this endless conflict among warlords. Is the blood of Han generals meant to be spilled on this land? Is our valor and passion only to be wasted here? Shouldn't it be used to expand our territories and achieve everlasting glory?" Zhang Liao's words seemed directed at Xu Chu, but also at himself.

On the other side, Hao Meng glared at the blood-soaked Jiang Gong. "You're a madman!"

"A madman is better than a dead man!" Jiang Gong replied fearlessly, meeting Hao Meng's gaze. Unlike Zhang Liao, who had shown mercy, Hao Meng and Jiang Gong had fought a bloody battle, each trying to kill the other.

"Tell Zhang Fei that next time, if there is a next time, I won't hold back!" Lu Bu said, glaring at Guan Yu. His strength had recovered to seventy percent, and at this range, if Guan Yu let his guard down, Lu Bu could easily kill him with a surprise attack. Yet, Lu Bu didn't strike.

"Hmph." Guan Yu snorted coldly. Despite his anger, he had to admit that if it weren't for Lu Bu's occasional restraint, at least one of the three of them—if not all—would have been killed today.

Chapter 576: A Long-Term Strategy

Lu Bu and Zhang Liao personally covered the retreat, leading the Bingzhou Wolf Riders as they slowly withdrew. After both forces had engaged, Lu Bu realized that there was little point in continuing the battle under these circumstances, given the effects of Guan Yu's army's morale-boosting abilities.

"Lu Bu isn't in much of a hurry, is he?" Guo Jia sighed as he watched Lu Bu's forces retreat. It was clear that his thick cloud formation was meant to overwhelm Lu Bu with sheer numbers.

"All forces, regroup and withdraw," Guan Yu ordered, as his army began to sound the retreat with the clanging of gongs, while he took charge of the central forces to cover their retreat.

After returning to camp and assessing the casualties, Guan Yu was devastated. Not only had Zhang Fei been severely injured, but the losses among the regular soldiers, as well as the elite Dao-wielding soldiers and Xu Chu's Tiger Guards, left him heartbroken.

"Double the compensation for the families of the fallen soldiers. Since this was due to my poor decision-making, I will personally cover half of the compensation," Guan Yu declared, deeply pained by the heavy casualties. While Lu Bu had shown some mercy to the three of them, he had spared no quarter for their troops. Both the Bingzhou Wolf Riders and the following infantry had inflicted significant losses on Guan Yu's forces.

"I also made mistakes this time," Guo Jia said calmly, still reflecting on how Lu Bu had managed to dominate Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Xu Chu all at once. Could such a person even be human?

"Let's focus on stabilizing the camp first. We completely underestimated Lu Bu's strength. At this point, he's probably as formidable as Xiang Yu. As long as he wants to fight, his nearly ten thousand Wolf Riders can unleash the combat power of a hundred thousand elite soldiers in battle," Guan Yu sighed. When it came to morale, Lu Bu was practically a monster. This was the terrifying aspect of the warrior ethos: the ability to raise morale to unparalleled heights, leading fearless soldiers who could break through enemy lines and crush any opposition.

"Stabilizing the camp won't be too difficult," Guo Jia sighed, now fully aware of the challenge Lu Bu posed. The warrior ethos was all about boosting morale, charging forward with unmatched bravery, breaking enemy formations, and killing enemies. The general was invincible, and the soldiers were fearless, routing the enemy head-on.

Historically, the warrior ethos had been largely relegated to the dustbin of history after the Spring and Autumn period, as the strategist ethos became dominant. However, Xiang Yu had emerged like a bolt of lightning, proving that no matter how well a strategist planned, no matter how carefully armies were surrounded and outmaneuvered, Xiang Yu could break through with sheer force, teaching the strategists a harsh lesson.

Cut off his supply lines? Xiang Yu would simply defeat you and take your supplies. Block his retreat? He would confront you head-on and crush you. Surround him on all sides? He would break through your encirclement with devastating force.

Twenty-eight cavalrymen charging through the famous "Ten Traps and Ambushes" formation, defying all odds—if not for Xiang Yu's own pride leading to his downfall, it remains uncertain whether Han Xin, the pinnacle of the strategist ethos, would have outmaneuvered Xiang Yu, the pinnacle of the warrior ethos, or if the reverse would have occurred.

In the aftermath, the warrior ethos was revived from the ashes of history. Xiang Yu's incredible strength demonstrated that the warrior ethos was not without merit. In particular, when a general was extraordinarily powerful, the warrior ethos could outperform the strategist ethos.

In the current situation, Lu Bu had Chen Gong as his strategist, who could neutralize many of the tactics that would otherwise undermine the warrior ethos, allowing Lu Bu to fully unleash his martial prowess. This was why Cao Cao, Yuan Shao, and Liu Bei had all suffered embarrassing defeats at Lu Bu's hands.

In a direct confrontation, the strategist ethos would be overrun by the warrior ethos. However, if a battle dragged on, the warrior ethos could not withstand the schemes of top strategists. But in this case, Chen Gong's schemes were neutralizing those of the strategists, forcing everyone to face Lu Bu head-on. In such a scenario, it was a headache for anyone.

"I'll write the battle report. I'll describe what happened here without adding personal bias, and let our lord make his own judgment," Guo Jia sighed, having recognized that defeating Lu Bu would require either driving a wedge between him and Chen Gong or finding a way to pin down Lu Bu. Otherwise, they would have to overwhelm him with sheer numbers.

"You write it. No need to cover for me—just tell it like it is. This wasn't entirely your fault; I simply underestimated Lu Bu," Guan Yu sighed deeply. "Yide!"

"Second Brother," Zhang Fei sighed, "I understand, but I'm still not satisfied with him!"

"Show some restraint. Everyone has their struggles," Xu Chu said, forcing a grin. From now on, if anyone suggested dueling Lu Bu, Xu Chu would be furious—that man was truly a monster.

Guan Yu and Zhang Fei both nodded. No matter their personal feelings, when someone reached a certain level of strength, even as an enemy, they had to acknowledge it. Regardless of Lu Bu's flawed character, his unparalleled martial skills were something all three of them had to respect after experiencing them firsthand.

"I suggest we summon Zilong and Shuzhi from Xuzhou," Guan Yu said, turning to Guo Jia. He wasn't willing to accept such a defeat; after all, they had gained nothing from this campaign, and returning empty-handed wasn't something Guan Yu could accept. Besides, Taishan's supplies were sufficient to support a prolonged campaign.

"That sounds reasonable," Guo Jia nodded, glancing at Zhang Fei. He agreed with Guan Yu's suggestion—Zhang Fei still needed tempering, not in terms of martial prowess, but in terms of maturity.

Guo Jia drafted a request to transfer Zhao Yun and Chen Dao from Xuzhou, explaining that Xuzhou would be vulnerable, and with Zhang Fei severely injured, he would need time to recover.

After reading the letter, Liu Bei handed it to Chen Xi. After skimming through it, Chen Xi didn't know how to react. Zhang Fei had gone to duel Lu Bu, and while he knew from the start that Zhang Fei wouldn't win, the gap in strength was far too great. Three against one, and they still lost—had Lu Bu consumed some divine elixir?

Chen Xi shook his head in frustration. He had always known Lu Bu would be difficult to deal with, but he hadn't expected it to be this tough.

Now, Chen Xi finally understood why, despite Cao Cao's vast number of ministers and generals, he had been forced to stay holed up in his cities against Lu Bu. Cao Cao didn't have many soldiers, but Lu Bu only had around ten thousand men!

"What do you think, Zichuan?" Liu Bei asked, seeking Chen Xi's opinion.

"We need to take a long-term view," Chen Xi replied, sighing.

If Zhao Yun and Chen Dao were transferred to Yanzhou, they would need a new commander. It would either have to be Liu Bei himself or Chen Xi. After all, Zhao Yun was the highest-ranking commander in

Xuzhou's defense zone, on par with Guan Yu. Even if Zhao Yun didn't mind taking orders from Guan Yu, for the sake of the other officers, they would need someone of higher rank to command.

In all of Taishan, the only people on par with Guan Yu were Zhao Yun and Gan Ning. Among the civil officials, only Lu Su was equal to Guan Yu in rank, while Chen Xi outranked him slightly. If they truly transferred the commanders from both the northern and southern defense zones to deal with Lu Bu, the odds were high that Chen Xi would be the one to take command as the figurehead.

Chapter 577: Xu Zi's Monthly Commentary

Chen Xi was equally helpless. Lu Bu's overwhelming strength had caught him off guard, just as it likely troubled Yuan Shao's side now. However, compared to Yuan Shao's reported heavy losses, Chen Xi couldn't help but inwardly chuckle a bit, despite trying to maintain his usual calm demeanor. Liu Bei's forces had suffered over two thousand casualties, but Yuan Shao's situation seemed even more dire.

"Manru, do you have any accurate information on the Formation Breaker?" Chen Xi turned to Li You and asked.

"Even if I did, it wouldn't matter. The growth rate of Gao Shun's Formation Breaker Camp is terrifying," Li You replied, shaking his head. "That's why I suggested long ago that we shouldn't engage Lu Bu in open field battles. We need to use strategy. If the Formation Breaker Camp charges through, it'll be hard for us to stop them."

"I think instead of worrying about Lu Bu's Formation Breaker Camp, we should discuss whether or not to send Zilong to Yanzhou," Jia Xu interjected. "The White Horse Volunteers have been fully trained."

"The White Horse Volunteers can handle the Wolf Riders, as long as they don't act recklessly," Lu Su added. "I also agree that we should send Zilong to Yanzhou, leaving Xuzhou unguarded."

"Now we only have one internal threat left. Once it's dealt with, we can focus on Yuan Benchu," Chen Xi nodded, and everyone turned their attention to Li You.

"The timing isn't right. Yuan Shao is currently stretched too thin. Even if he gets help from Yuan Shu, Yuan Shu isn't in the right mindset to seize Xuzhou now," Jia Xu sighed, answering before Li You could speak.

"How about we try talking to Lu Bu?" Li You unexpectedly suggested, surprising Chen Xi.

"Talking?" Zhuge Liang looked up at Li You. "Although I'm not fond of Lu Bu's ways, Guo Jia's letter revealed several issues."

"We could try talking to Zhang Liao, Chen Gong, and Gao Shun," Lu Su said. "Lu Bu is powerful, but he isn't someone who can be easily subordinated."

"Offer him a price, then?" Li You rarely showed such a sinister smile. "If that's the case, why not offer a high price?"

"That's not a bad idea," Jia Xu, who had worked alongside Li You for many years, quickly grasped his meaning and coldly nodded in agreement.

"This plan could work. We could negotiate with Lu Bu and his key generals, like Zhang Liao, Chen Gong, and Gao Shun. If that doesn't work, we can approach others like Cheng Lian, Hao Meng, or Cao Xing. They may be second-tier generals, but they're all highly skilled in their own ways," Chen Xi suggested with a smile. He had neither a strong liking nor disliking for Lu Bu, but he knew that Lu Bu could never truly integrate into their group.

"Indeed, Chen Gong is a good choice," Lu Su agreed.

"I don't have much to do lately, so I'll go personally. Chen Gong has a good reputation and won't harm me," Liu Yan said, his face showing a hint of pride. Thanks to his connection with the imperial family and his successful ventures, Liu Yan had recently been granted a noble title. He had become somewhat thick-skinned and complacent with his success.

"That works. Spend more time with Chen Gong. If he joins our side, many of Lu Bu's other men will follow," Chen Xi nodded in agreement.

"Also, you should reach out to Xu Zi and Chen Kongzhang soon," Liu Yan suddenly remembered.

"Why?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"I've persuaded Xu Zi to resume his Monthly Commentary and publish a comprehensive review. Kongzhang is planning to help with some editing, so..." Liu Yan hinted with a knowing expression.

"You can do that?" Zhuge Liang asked, puzzled.

In Zhuge Liang's memory, Xu Shao's Monthly Commentary was a highly prestigious activity, and Xu Shao himself was known for his strong character among the literati. When threatened by Cao Cao to provide an evaluation, Xu Shao had complied reluctantly. He had described Cao Cao as a capable minister in times of peace and a hero in times of chaos. This statement neither flattered nor insulted Cao Cao, who had forced him into giving the evaluation by threatening him with a sword. Xu Shao's integrity remained intact, but the incident had made him more cautious, and he had ceased his Monthly Commentary afterward.

Now, hearing Liu Yan's suggestion to influence Xu Shao's evaluations left Zhuge Liang astonished.

"He's been living off me, so of course, he needs to show some bias. However, I can only suggest it. Xu Zi will only favor you if the two candidates are of similar caliber. Congratulations, Kongming, you've made the list," Liu Yan chuckled, bowing slightly to Zhuge Liang.

Xu Shao wouldn't compromise his integrity, but when evaluating two closely matched individuals, he might be open to a bit of persuasion.

"Huh?" Zhuge Liang was momentarily stunned, then a smile crept onto his face. He quickly suppressed it, returning to a calm demeanor, though the hint of delight in his eyes was unmistakable. When Xu Shao had visited Xuzhou, both he and Pang Tong had sought an evaluation but had received none at the time.

"Will there be many people on the list?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"Many. There will be evaluations of civil and military officials, young talents, weapons, fine horses, and even beauties," Liu Yan said, his expression shifting as he mentioned the last categories.

Seeing the group's puzzled expressions, Liu Yan clarified, "The first three categories will be evaluated by Xu Zi, while I arranged for the evaluations of weapons, horses, and beauties under his name. But rest assured, his reputation won't be tarnished."

"Oh? And how do you determine the rankings for weapons, horses, and beauties?" Chen Xi asked, raising an eyebrow. It seemed like Liu Yan was just trying to pass the time. After all, how could one possibly evaluate all the beauties in the land?

"Hmph! Over the years, I've traveled all across the thirteen provinces of the Han Empire—north to Youzhou, south to Jiaozhou, west to Shu and Yongliang, and east to Qingzhou and Jizhou. You believe me, right?" Liu Yan boasted proudly.

"We believe you," the group nodded in agreement. Liu Yan had indeed been traveling constantly in recent years.

"Hmph! Everywhere I went, prominent figures would gather, and beauties rarely came from poor families. There's a certain air about them that sets them apart, so..." Liu Yan explained confidently, and the group nodded along, completely unaware that they had veered off from discussing how to deal with Lu Bu.

"Who's ranked first?" Jian Yong asked, voicing the curiosity of all the men present.

Chapter 578: Various Rankings

Liu Yan glanced around the room, and even Zhuge Liang showed a hint of interest. It seemed that the saying "A fair lady is what every gentleman desires" held true.

"Diao Chan," Liu Yan said solemnly, raising his thumb.

"Of course," Lu Su, Chen Xi, and the others nodded in agreement. There was a clear political inclination in this ranking, but that was inevitable. Diao Chan's actions aligned with the era's values of loyalty and filial piety, and she was undoubtedly a beauty. Even if her looks were on par with others like Cai Yan and Zhen Mi, her first-place standing was solid.

"So that means Lu Bu has already claimed four first places. Besides the top spot for civil officials, which likely belongs to Zichuan, Lu Bu has secured first place in warriors, weapons, fine horses, and beauties," Li You remarked in a neutral tone.

"It can't be helped. When it comes to martial prowess, there's no arguing against Lu Bu. If anyone disagrees, they can challenge him. As for weapons, the strongest belongs to the strongest warrior. Regarding fine horses, Red Hare is unquestionably first. And as for the title of the most beautiful woman, while there may be some debate, Diao Chan's deeds ensure her top spot, even if others match her in looks," Liu Yan explained with a hint of helplessness. He would have liked to see Xu Zi avoid placing Lu Bu first, but if you don't rank him at the top, who else could take that position? Despite Lu Bu's flaws in character and morals, his unparalleled martial skills leave little room for dispute.

"What about the top civil official?" Zhuge Liang stepped in, helping to steer the conversation away from a sensitive subject. Everyone was interested, but no one wanted to be the first to ask, making Zhuge Liang's question a welcome change.

"That one's still undecided. Xu Zi leans towards Zichuan but hasn't given a definitive answer. He's still deliberating," Liu Yan replied after glancing at Chen Xi, causing the others to nod in understanding.

"Zichuan, why are you frowning?" Jia Xu noticed Chen Xi's expression and asked.

"The civil official ranking won't be released for a while—at least not until we've secured the north," Chen Xi replied with a smile. "Xu Zi isn't confident yet. He's still worried that we might lose."

"If we win, everyone's rankings will rise," Chen Xi continued. "I imagine quite a few strategists on Yuan Shao's side are ranked highly right now, but once we defeat them, the rankings will become clearer."

Everyone laughed at that. "Let's focus on defeating them first! Once we've beaten them, our rankings will definitely improve!"

"As for the young talents ranking, the top spot currently belongs to Kongming. Xu Zi gave him a very high evaluation. Initially, Xu Zi considered putting Fa Xiaozhi at the top, but after some hesitation, he decided that placing Fa Xiaozhi in the young talents category would be unfair to the others," Liu Yan shared with a smile.

"Fa Xiaozhi... putting him in the young talents ranking would indeed be a bit much," Jia Xu commented, and the others nodded in agreement. Fa Zheng's abilities were already fully developed, making him more than capable of standing alongside the older generation. His only shortfall was a lack of experience.

Zhuge Liang's expression clearly showed his dissatisfaction. He resolved to work harder and prove himself, aiming to break into the civil officials ranking. The prestige of that ranking far surpassed that of the young talents list.

"When will the rankings be released?" Zhuge Liang asked, his rare eagerness showing.

"It's hard to say. The warrior rankings, weapons rankings, beauty rankings, and fine horses rankings are already out. The young talents ranking will take a bit longer. As for the civil officials ranking, while it may not be delayed until we conquer Hebei as Zichuan suggested, it will still take some time," Liu Yan replied with a smile.

"That works for me," Zhuge Liang nodded, satisfied. Since there was still time, he planned to find a way to make it onto the civil officials ranking. He'd leave the top spot in the young talents ranking to...

Two figures flashed through Zhuge Liang's mind—one with a dark face and thick eyebrows, and the other with sharp eyes and a predatory gait. As he thought of them, Zhuge Liang couldn't help but smirk. He needed to secure his place in the civil officials ranking before those two realized there was even a ranking. Let them deal with the young talents list...

A subtle smile spread across Zhuge Liang's face.

Out of nowhere, Zhuge Liang found himself driven by the desire to outshine Pang Tong and Sima Yi. Since his birth, these two had been the only peers who consistently made him feel uneasy. While Fa Zheng also bothered him, Zhuge Liang could easily ignore him as long as he wasn't around. But those other two... they always seemed to haunt him.

"Kongming seems excited. Speaking of the young talents ranking..." Chen Xi rubbed his chin thoughtfully and asked, "Does being unmarried qualify someone as a young talent?"

"It seems so..." The group paused, and Liu Yan thought for a moment before replying. After all, Xu Zi's definition of "youth" was somewhat vague. While Chen Xi and Zhou Yu might still fit the category, including Fa Zheng in the young talents list did seem a bit unfair.

"Kongming, I recall you have a fiancée, right?" Li You, who held Zhuge Liang in high regard, asked.

"Teacher, yes, I do have a fiancée. The problem is, she's currently in Jingzhou and only fourteen years old," Zhuge Liang replied with a hint of embarrassment.

"I'll write a betrothal letter for you later. Jingzhou is a place of constant turmoil—it's not a good place to leave her. Which family is she from?" Li You asked, his tone assertive.

Li You, who had no sons and only two daughters, treated Zhuge Liang like a cherished disciple. If Zhuge Liang hadn't already been engaged, Li You would have offered his own daughter in marriage, ensuring that his knowledge and legacy would live on through Zhuge Liang.

"She's the eldest daughter of the Huang family," Zhuge Liang replied with a wry smile. Despite his modesty, he didn't object to the arrangement. He had met Huang Yueying before, and while her appearance wasn't her strongest suit, her intelligence was something even Zhuge Liang couldn't help but admire.

"Congratulations, congratulations," Chen Xi teased Zhuge Liang, playfully offering his best wishes. Most of the men in this group had been engaged early in life, as was the custom of the time.

"I can't help but think of Fa Xiaozhi's unfortunate situation," Jia Xu sighed. Li You had grown attached to Zhuge Liang, just as Jia Xu had with Fa Zheng. It was hard not to appreciate a bright student, and Jia Xu felt a pang of sympathy for Fa Zheng's misfortunes.

Everyone shared a moment of silence, feeling a collective pity for Fa Zheng. Despite his youth, he had already achieved a position of significant authority. In any other context, he'd be considered an ideal son-in-law. Yet, his streak of bad luck seemed unmatched...

Chapter 579: Xu Shao's Contemplations

There was no need to elaborate on Fa Zheng's unfortunate situation; everyone present was well aware. To suggest that Fa Xiaozhi had no feelings for Jiang Ying would be hard to believe. Fa Zheng claimed that he hurriedly took a concubine to ensure his father's peace of mind, but everyone knew the real story. However, Liangzhou was too far away, and even if Liu Bei wanted to intervene, he found himself powerless to do so.

"Getting married is also a sign of adulthood. Kongming, staying on that list is quite unfair to others. When Xiaozhi returns, my apprentice will show you who truly deserves the top spot on the young talents list," Chen Xi steered the conversation back to his disciple. In his view, placing Zhuge Liang on the young talents list was like bullying others—only kids like Lu Xun should be on that list!

"You forgot about Pang Shiyuan and Sima Zhongda," Zhuge Liang sighed helplessly. "There are still those two."

"Tch, you guys really have no shame. You're far too old to be bullying kids. I'll have a word with Xu Zijiang later—people like you shouldn't be considered young talents. The list should only include those under fourteen!" Chen Xi grumbled, clearly displeased. He never considered Zhuge Liang, Pang Tong, and the like to be part of the "youth" category. "If you put Pang Shiyuan on the list, Fa Xiaozhi should be included too. In that case, Zhou Gongjin and I might as well be added."

"If you're added, the civil officials ranking will become a joke," Lu Su retorted, rolling his eyes. The group had already handled most of their pressing matters, leaving them time to chat. Of course, they had reached a consensus regarding the matter of Lu Bu—negotiations were on the table, but they still needed to be prepared for battle.

At this point, whether they liked it or not, even if "Wen Wu has no first place," Xu Zijiang's monthly review of civil officials would have no choice but to place Chen Xi at the top. The reason the civil officials ranking hadn't been released yet was simply because it was difficult to rank the strategists of Yuan Shao and Liu Bei's camps. Both factions were the strongest forces in the land, and it was hard to determine who was superior without a full confrontation.

Or, to put it another way, even if Xu Zijiang was confident in assessing who was stronger, he didn't want to release the rankings just yet. Both sides still had the potential to turn the tables, and if the rankings were published prematurely, it could spoil the outcome. After all, in history, the winners are always hailed as heroes, while the losers are vilified, regardless of who was truly more capable.

Chen Xi, however, was an exception. Through certain channels, Xu Zijiang had already learned some secrets. Just as Fan Liang once said, "Kings may come and go, but Chen Xi will always remain at the top." It was almost like destiny. So, Xu Zijiang had already securely placed Chen Xi at the top.

"Alright, alright, let's get back on topic and stop talking about this. We'll know once Xu Zijiang releases the rankings. There's no point in guessing now," Jia Xu finally put an end to their idle chatter. After all, they had drifted too far off course.

"Agreed, let's not discuss this anymore. We should focus on whether to send Zhao Zilong to Yanzhou," Lu Su sighed. People of this era placed great importance on reputation. If the civil officials ranking were to be released, even the usually composed Lu Su might struggle to remain calm. After all, everyone wanted to see where they stood.

"Let's send Zhao Zilong," Jia Xu nodded in agreement. "I also suggest that Zichuan be the commander, with Gongyou accompanying the army."

Xun Yue, who had been quietly reviewing legal matters, suddenly had a gleam in his eye after Jia Xu's suggestion. After witnessing Sun Qian's remarkable organizational skills, Xun Yue had been deeply impressed, and Jia Xu's proposal sparked a new idea.

"I second Jia Wenhe's suggestion." After speaking, Xun Yue discreetly nudged Man Chong with his foot. Man Chong glanced at the ceiling, contemplated for a moment, and then spoke, "I second it as well."

"Jianwei Corps as the main force—does Wenhe mean to advance our positions to the Linyi area in Dong Commandery?" Li You pondered the possibility for a long time before nodding. "I also support Gongyou accompanying the army."

Chen Xi frowned in thought. The Linyi area, located in Yanzhou, extended into the Heishan (Black Mountain) range, and could serve as a gateway to Jizhou and Bingzhou. More importantly, building a city there would remove the western front's conflicts from Mount Tai, giving them a stronghold for both capturing Yanzhou and fighting against Yuan Shao.

"Agreed, but I don't accept being the commander," Chen Xi nodded but swiftly declined the role of commander.

"Let's first bring Zilong back to Mount Tai and then discuss the rest," Lu Su said, concluding the discussion. Regardless of the other matters, it was crucial to have Zhao Yun return to Mount Tai since the year was drawing to a close.

"Gongyou, start preparing materials and craftsmen. This time, we'll show Chen Gongtai what it means to be truly well-resourced and how to advance step by step. We've also recruited many of the Heishan troops, so there's no shortage of labor. Let's settle them there," Chen Xi instructed Sun Qian.

"As for the Heishan troops, let's scatter them. They're quite different from the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans, and many of the Heishan leaders have questionable backgrounds," Lu Su said, tapping the table with a serious expression. "Relocate some of the people from Xuzhou, and move part of the Heishan troops to Xuzhou."

"Agreed," Li You nodded, pleased with Lu Su's approach—it left no room for future problems.

"Regarding Zhang Yan, I think he should be stationed in the new city," Chen Xi suggested after a moment of hesitation. He still couldn't fully understand the decisions made by Guan Hai and Zhang Yan. After all, he wasn't the type to sacrifice himself for the greater good, and historically, neither were they. The current situation only reinforced the idea that the performance they had put on earlier had been incredibly convincing.

"Agreed, Shuzhi!" Lu Su nodded, then turned to Wang Xiu, who was recording the minutes, and said, "Please submit a report of our discussion on Yanzhou to Xuande Gong immediately."

"Understood!" Wang Xiu put away his writing materials and respectfully replied to Lu Su.

Once Wang Xiu had left, Jia Xu and the others returned their attention to Lu Su, who said thoughtfully, "This approach seems appropriate."

"It's time to let them out. Besides, Kongming can now handle all of Shuzhi's administrative duties," Li You praised Zhuge Liang after glancing at him.

"Indeed, some of the students from Mount Tai Academy have also completed their studies," Chen Xi remarked, reflecting on the progress. "Let's send them out. It's time to put their skills to the test. Once

we've conquered Hebei, there will definitely be some position reshuffling due to vacancies. We might as well let them practice now."

"Qu Hanmou mentioned that he's made some progress recently and needs you to visit," Lu Su added, recalling something Qu Qi had asked him to relay to Chen Xi.

"Why doesn't that guy just come to my place? Why go through you?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled. "I'll visit him soon."

Chapter 580: Research Results

The decision to send Zhao Yun to Yanzhou was finally settled. The remaining issue was whether Chen Xi would assume command.

If Chen Xi didn't take command, according to the standard chain of command, even if Zhao Yun went to Yanzhou, he would only be able to act in support and wouldn't have the authority to lead operations independently. This could easily give Chen Gong the opportunity to defeat them one by one.

"Forget it, let's not discuss this for now. Zilong will need some time to arrive in Mount Tai, so I'll think about it more," Chen Xi sighed.

Chen Xi knew that in large-scale military operations, there had to be a chief commander making decisions. Although both Guan Yu and Zhao Yun were fully capable of making these decisions, Chen Xi's presence would signify a higher level of command rather than Guan Yu leading Zhao Yun, or vice versa.

"Zichuan, even if you go, you won't need to do much. You'll mainly oversee the construction at the rear, and there's no danger. Most importantly, there's no one better suited to personnel planning and construction than you. Even though the Heishan army has been scattered, there are still hundreds of thousands of them. I wouldn't trust anyone else with such a large-scale project," Lu Su said with a wry smile.

Lu Su didn't understand why Chen Xi, who used to leave without hesitation, was now so reluctant to take on the role of commander.

"Why don't you go, Zijing? You can handle the situation, and your rank is high enough to serve as commander. You're also skilled in construction and have plenty of experience, more so than I do," Chen Xi said helplessly. He just didn't want to leave. His wife had just become pregnant, and being sent on a campaign felt too cruel.

However, such sentiments couldn't be expressed in this era. A man who was attached to his home wasn't considered a good man in this time. Building achievements and making a name for oneself was the ideal.

"Me as commander?" Lu Su was momentarily taken aback but then felt a hint of interest. Stroking his beard, he said, "It's not impossible."

But before Chen Xi could push the matter onto Lu Su, Lu Su took a deep breath and added, "The problem is, I have to stay in Mount Tai. You're good at planning, but you're too lazy to handle the details. Right now, we need to manage plans for Jizhou, Youzhou, and Bingzhou, as well as future issues beyond the border."

"..." Chen Xi sighed. He could handle these tasks if he followed Lu Su's previous framework, but it was hard to match Lu Su's meticulousness. In this world, only Zhuge Liang could rival Lu Su in diligence—both men seemed to compete over who slept less.

"Forget it, let's wait until Zilong arrives and discuss it then," Chen Xi sighed. "I'll take my leave now."

After Chen Xi left, Jia Xu and the others were puzzled, unable to understand Chen Xi's thinking. In the end, they could only attribute it to his different way of thinking.

After navigating through the streets, Chen Xi arrived at a secluded area in the northern part of the city where Hua Tuo's medical research center, Zheng Hun's civil engineering and waterworks research center, and Qu Qi's agricultural research center were located. Qu Qi's experiments mostly took place outside the city, while Hua Tuo had many hospitals within the city, but this quiet spot was ideal for research.

"Doctor Hua, you seem to be in good spirits," Chen Xi greeted Hua Tuo, who was accompanied by a group of students.

While many scholars looked down on doctors as belonging to a lowly profession, no one treated Hua Tuo that way, especially after he successfully controlled the typhoid epidemic. Without needing any promotion from Liu Yan, Hua Tuo's reputation spread, with scholars praising him in their conversations. After all, everyone feared death, and befriending a divine doctor like Hua Tuo was a guarantee of life.

"Lord Chen, you look healthy as well—your complexion has improved," Hua Tuo observed, examining Chen Xi. "If you're not here because of an illness, what brings you to see this old man?"

"I'm just checking if you need anything," Chen Xi said with a smile, realizing that Hua Tuo's habit of diagnosing people on sight was second nature. However, he was pleased to hear that he was in good health.

"I don't lack anything. Officials come every ten days to check our inventory and ensure that all medicinal supplies are well-stocked. If I need any special herbs, there's always someone to illustrate them for me, and I receive them the same day," Hua Tuo replied, casting a glance at Chen Xi. The officials assigned to him were highly efficient.

"Oh, that's good to hear," Chen Xi nodded.

"You seem to have other matters to attend to, so I won't keep you. I need to adjust some prescriptions today," Hua Tuo said, gesturing to Chen Xi.

At this point, Hua Tuo had accepted his situation. Initially, he was somewhat dissatisfied with Mount Tai's protective measures, but now that he saw how many lives he could save, he no longer had any complaints.

"Please, go ahead," Chen Xi said, making a gesture of invitation.

After Hua Tuo left, Qu Qi finally dared to show himself. "That old man is finally gone. Lately, he's been wearing me out, always saying I'm weak and need rest. He even uprooted all the herbs from my experimental plot before I could finish studying them!"

Qu Qi spoke with a tone of grievance, feeling utterly helpless against Hua Tuo. He couldn't even explain to Hua Tuo that the herbs were his own cultivated plants, so he just had to endure it. In this era, herbs were all wild, and Hua Tuo had once asked Qu Qi why so many herbs were growing in his yard...

"It's just Doctor Hua's habit of gathering herbs. You'll get used to it. But have you succeeded in your herb cultivation project?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"Not entirely. Large-scale cultivation isn't possible yet. I haven't fully mastered the process. I can grow herbs, but scaling up is still an issue," Qu Qi replied with frustration. He felt like he was being bullied by Hua Tuo, but he couldn't fight back against the man who was likely the greatest doctor of their time.

"Then why did you call me here?" Chen Xi asked, annoyed that he had rushed over without even checking on Chen Lan, only to find no significant progress.

"I've perfected cotton cultivation," Qu Qi said with a grin. "Not only that, but I've also figured out how to remove the seeds and spin the fibers into thread."

Chen Xi was stunned for a moment, then overjoyed. "It's done!"

"Just like you said, it's a reliable crop. I spent so much time in Shanglin Park, where previous generations treated this plant as just a flower. Who knew it had such a valuable use? As for improving the variety, my suggestion is to focus on quantity first," Qu Qi said, filled with admiration and offering his recommendation.

"You already know what I'm planning?" Chen Xi asked curiously.