

Mythical 601

Chapter 601: The Heavens Are Unjust, I Shall Take Action, Who Dares to Stop Me

Chen Xi never expected that Li You would cause such a commotion. A sword was directly thrust into the table, making it impossible not to draw attention. The previously lively gathering instantly fell silent, and everyone stared at the sword embedded in the table, which continued to tremble and hum softly. No one dared to continue speaking.

At this moment, the cold and fierce aura surrounding Li You was so intense that even Zhuge Liang, seated far away, felt pressured. Zhuge Liang still remembered Li You's usual calm and emotionless demeanor. What could have made the always composed Li You so angry?

"Hmm..." Madam Zhang suddenly noticed the unusual quietness in the outer hall. She frowned, then stood up, bowed slightly, and said, "Everyone, please wait a moment. I shall go and see what has happened in the outer hall."

"May I ask why Master Li is so agitated?" Zhuge Liang stood up and respectfully inquired of Li You. He had clearly heard Li You's earlier words, "The heavens are unjust, so I shall strengthen myself. For thousands of years, mankind has conquered nature." What could Chen Xi have said to make the usually calm Li You utter such rebellious words?

At this moment, Fa Zheng also stood up and looked at Jia Xu. He was very curious about what topic could have made Li You say such things. It was such an important and infuriating topic, yet they hadn't included him.

"Heh heh heh, cursing the heavens for their injustice... The people of the Central Plains cannot fill their bellies. We struggle with all our might just to ensure the safety of one region. We work tirelessly for ten years, only to rebuild the glory of Huaxia, and yet we only now learn that there are places where crops are harvested three times a year—three times a year!" Li You directly drew his sword, his expression revealing no hint of his emotions.

"Master Li, please calm down. Lord Xuande has gone to change his clothes and will be here shortly. This matter of governance can wait." Madam Zhang bowed gracefully to Li You, her voice clear and melodious. This was the first time she had ever temporarily stood in for Liu Bei in front of others.

Without waiting for Li You to respond, Madam Zhang gestured to the servants outside. She ordered them to remove the table and replace it with a new one laden with food. Then, she instructed the singers and dancers to enter, restoring the lively atmosphere. Only after confirming that Li You would not lose his temper again did she slowly withdraw.

"Send someone to notify Lord Xuande. His clothes are not important; inform him of everything that has transpired in the main hall without missing a word." After stepping out, Madam Zhang instructed the maid beside her. By now, even Liu Bei's maids had come to recognize Madam Zhang as the matron in crucial moments, no longer hesitating as they once had.

"Literary Master, your reaction was a bit too intense. Was it necessary?" Chen Xi smiled wryly, looking at the sullen Li You beside him. He had no idea what had sparked Li You's earlier anger.

"Calm down, Literary Master. Calm down. Those lands will eventually be ours. Don't worry." Lu Su also pulled Li You aside, trying to persuade him. Jia Xu, who was nearby, had also become noticeably more serious.

"You don't understand. Neither Zijing nor Zichuan has truly witnessed human tragedies. Zichuan was born into a prestigious family, and Zijing has endless wealth. You haven't experienced it." Jia Xu spoke in a low voice. "Compared to what you encountered after you took over Mount Tai, that region wasn't even that tragic. In Xiliang, you'd see people fighting to the death for a single bite of food, only to become someone else's meal after they died!"

At this moment, Jia Xu's eyes gleamed with a cold light. Unlike Lu Su and Chen Xi, who hadn't seen much of the world, he had truly witnessed hundreds and thousands of refugees, of whom only a few survived. He had also witnessed the horrifying scenes where, due to the Han Dynasty's inability to provide aid, nine out of ten people in Yong and Liang died when they went out to forage.

Compared to the truly starving people of Yong and Liang, the Qing and Yan regions at least had wealthy families to plunder. When the number of refugees reached a certain point, they could simply rob a few wealthy families and find food. Although the casualties were heavy, it wasn't even close to the scale of suffering in Yong and Liang.

Especially after Chen Xi took over Mount Tai, the Qingzhou region was hardly considered tragic anymore. At least Chen Xi never stopped providing disaster relief to maintain the numbers of the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou. Although the Yellow Turbans were always hungry, they didn't starve to death. They were also united; none were full, but none starved to death either. The actual starvation rate was

less than ten percent, which was incomparable to the desolate lands where no roosters crowed across thousands of miles in Yong and Liang.

"Uh, I indeed haven't seen truly tragic situations. The worst was Xuzhou, and beyond that, at least since I came to Mount Tai, I've managed to protect quite a few people." Chen Xi nodded in agreement. Although he didn't share Li You and Jia Xu's deep attachment to grain, he could still understand their sentiments.

"I generally don't watch human tragedies. I just do my best to prevent them, like now." Lu Su said calmly. "No matter how tragic this era is, I won't curse it. I'll use my hands and my mind to change it. I can't change past tragedies, but if the world remains the same after I die, it's because of my own incompetence!"

Jia Xu nodded. Chen Xi and Lu Su's responses were from different perspectives, but both left Jia Xu deeply moved.

Jia Xu couldn't help but reflect on whether he had ever had such resolve twenty years ago. Ten years ago, he might have just started to develop such thoughts. However, eight years ago, he had completely given up on changing the world, focusing only on survival. The shackles of the world were not something he could break, and by now, he had grown accustomed to self-preservation.

Li You glanced sideways at Jia Xu. Lu Su's words resonated with him. Unlike Jia Xu, he had never wavered in his resolve to shatter the world's rules. Whether he was beaten and bruised by counterattacks or betrayed by Dong Zhuo, even when disheartened, he never changed.

"Yes, one must not dwell solely on the past. The future is what matters most. If the world remains the same after we die, it is because of our own incompetence." Chen Xi nodded. Lu Su's words struck a chord with him. No matter how bad this era was, at least they were all striving to make it better.

"As I said before, if the heavens do not grant us what we need, then we must take it ourselves!" Li You sneered.

"Count me in." Jia Xu's eyes flickered with determination. "I've been lost for a decade. When self-preservation becomes a habit, and that habit becomes ingrained in my very being, even I have become accustomed to it. But if I can't control my own thoughts and actions, am I still myself? A man lives but

once; he must leave something behind. The heavens are unjust, so I shall take what is mine. Who dares to stop me!"

At this moment, the sharpness emanating from Jia Xu made Chen Xi feel as if it was blindingly bright, a brilliance of the highest order.

In all these years, when had he ever seen such sharpness? Li You couldn't help but be slightly lost in thought. Was this the Jia Wenhe he had been waiting for? Perhaps. Gleaming with unparalleled brilliance, this was the true Jia Wenhe.

"Heh heh heh, how could I miss such an important matter?" Liu Bei, having changed his clothes, had overheard most of the conversation. When Jia Xu spoke, he finally stepped out of the inner hall.

"Lord Xuande," Chen Xi cupped his hands, and the others all stood to greet him.

"Today is a private gathering, so there's no need for formalities," Liu Bei said to everyone. He turned back to look at the four people in front of him and sighed deeply, "Zichuan, if only you had been born twenty years earlier."

Chapter 602: My Conscience Is Clear

Chen Xi was taken aback for a moment, then smiled and said, "Since ancient times, the ruler's virtue ensures wise ministers. Twenty years ago, Xun Gong was so powerful—who in the world today could easily claim victory over him? Wise ministers need a virtuous ruler, and when the ruler is wise, naturally the ministers will be capable."

Chen Xi's words made Liu Bei shake his head slightly, but he had to admit that the Han Dynasty's accumulated problems could not be solved even if Chen Xi had been born twenty years earlier. The ailments left by the Emperors Huan and Ling were not something that could be eradicated overnight. The aristocratic families had already accumulated enough power over the past hundred years.

Li You resonated deeply with Chen Xi's words. While strategists and generals are important, they are still secondary to the ruler. Every ruler has their own charm, and it is through this charm that they attract capable civil and military officials. Under their leadership, they build an empire. Without that leader, even a group of outstanding officials and generals would be like headless flies.

"The ruler's virtue ensures wise ministers; a wise ruler ensures capable ministers. Yes, the most important thing is the core ruler." Liu Bei shook his head helplessly. The concept of dynastic rule is unavoidable.

"Let's stop discussing these matters that we cannot change." Liu Bei waved his hand helplessly. He had always harbored a deep respect for royal authority, so when this topic came up, he was fully aware of the issues but chose to avoid discussing them. Continuing the conversation might lead to remarks bordering on treason.

Li You and Chen Xi exchanged a glance, both seeing the light in the other's eyes. The difference was that Li You's expression remained calm, while Chen Xi had a slight smile on his face. It wasn't impossible to change things. If they couldn't change the past, could they not change the future?

"I suppose, Lord Xuande, you are curious about what we were discussing earlier," Chen Xi asked after regaining his composure.

"Of course, I, like Wenru and Wenhe, have witnessed the Yellow Turban Rebellion and seen the suffering of the displaced people. I understand the helplessness of wanting to save but being unable to do so. What the world lacks is grain. If possible, I would ensure that every household has enough food. The place you spoke of is very important!" Liu Bei sighed. Currently, in Mount Tai, most households have enough food, but it is still not enough to meet Liu Bei's aspirations.

Compared to Li You and Jia Xu, who had also witnessed the chaos of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, Liu Bei did not harbor the same resentment towards the heavens. His demeanor remained calm, but beneath his calm words lay the same thoughts as Li You and Jia Xu. In this regard, their ideas were completely aligned.

"I can't say." Chen Xi shook his head. "I can only confirm that such a place exists, but right now, we have more important tasks. We must proceed step by step. Rushing things won't help. Defeating Yuan Shao and securing the Central Plains has always been our strategic goal, and that cannot change. We must also seize the five million qing of land in the north. Only then can we accumulate enough strength."

"In that case, I won't ask further. When the day comes that we conquer the north, I will ask again. I hope that by then, Zichuan will not have forgotten." Liu Bei nodded.

At this moment, Liu Bei was convinced of his eventual victory. If he had once harbored any fear of Yuan Shao's wisdom and power, or any sense of moral hesitation, now Liu Bei could confidently say that his conscience was clear. He was determined to eliminate Yuan Shao. After defeating Yuan Shao and securing the north, he would finally be qualified to save more people!

Liu Bei walked away with a confident stride, leaving only his back to Chen Xi and the others. Jia Xu and the others then turned to Chen Xi, and in the end, Chen Xi could only brace himself and say that they must possess strong power before they could develop and utilize such a place.

In fact, Chen Xi wasn't joking. The Baiyue region indeed had three harvests a year, but even by the Tang Dynasty, it was still a place of exile. It required development, and it would take the strength of an entire nation and twenty years of effort to see initial results.

Over the years, without the investment of two generations, the Baiyue region would still be far from becoming the land of fish and rice. For now, acquiring it would be pointless, and it would only waste too much time and effort.

"Only then will it be interesting," Lu Su said, his calm expression radiating strong confidence. "Expanding territory and opening new lands is our responsibility. This is good too; the opponents in the Central Plains are too few and far between. Once we defeat Yuan Benchu, I wonder who else will be worth our careful planning."

"Zijing, don't underestimate the heroes of the world." Li You glanced at Lu Su and said, "Cao Mengde is not to be underestimated." Then Jia Xu added, "Sun Bofu is also a remarkable figure, not to be taken lightly."

"If Cao Mengde had not suffered the defeat in Xuzhou, he might have been able to achieve something. But now, he's just a minor clown. If he were nearby, we could easily crush him. Sun Bofu, bound by Yuan Gonglu, is unparalleled in righteousness, but he is destined to be unable to retaliate!" Lu Su sneered. In this world, only one person was a true opponent—Yuan Benchu. The others were merely mediocre. Although they were talented, their bad fortune prevented them from succeeding!

Chen Xi also nodded. Although Cao Cao and Sun Ce were highly capable, their current predicaments were largely due to bad timing. On the other hand, Yuan Shao was growing stronger by the day. His

current strength was nearly three times what it was historically, and this was only because his advisors and generals had limited his potential. Otherwise, he would have been even more formidable.

"Let's not talk about this anymore. I'll call Xiaozhi over." With that, Jia Xu waved to Fa Zheng. Fa Zheng had been itching to know what had transpired on Chen Xi's side, and now he finally received the invitation.

"Kongming, you come over too." Li You and Lu Su both beckoned to Zhuge Liang. These matters were also within their rights to know.

The group quickly recounted the events. Compared to Liu Bei, Jia Xu, and Li You, who truly understood the world's cruelty, Lu Su and Chen Xi had seen glimpses of it. Fa Zheng and Zhuge Liang, however, had only read about such tragedies in books and were still young and inexperienced.

But fortunately, both of them were extraordinarily gifted. Although they had never suffered or witnessed real tragedies, they could still somewhat grasp the significance of a place with three harvests a year. However, they lacked the deep-seated understanding that Li You and Jia Xu possessed.

"First, pacify the north. We've prepared so much there, and defeating Yuan Benchu will bring us great benefits," Zhuge Liang said.

From the beginning, their strategic focus had always been to stabilize the north. Regardless of how important that land with three harvests a year was, Zhuge Liang believed that securing the north and building strength steadily was the correct path. After all, they could still produce enough grain to be self-sufficient, so there was no need to take unnecessary risks.

"Pacify the north, defeat the Wuhuan and Xianbei, and reclaim five million qing of land. Our grain production will double, and then what battle could we not fight?" Fa Zheng was no fool. He also knew how to choose his battles wisely. Although he favored cunning strategies, he wasn't one to waste effort when they could secure a decisive advantage with steady progress.

Chapter 603: A Small Misunderstanding

That night, all the civil and military officials who attended the banquet learned about the northern lands and knew that Qu Qi had a way to resolve the issue of long-term settlement there. As for the matter of triple annual harvests, those who heard it could only pretend they knew nothing.

"Five million qing of land?" Mi Zhu didn't know how to describe his feelings. His desire for land had long diminished, as the Mi family already possessed vast wealth. However, the sheer scale of that number still left Mi Zhu shaken.

"Today's events, I ask that everyone keep them to yourselves. If Yuan Benchu were to find out, we would be in trouble," Chen Xi said as he rose after the banquet. If this matter were to leak, Yuan Shao would surely attempt to seize the opportunity. Compared to the difficulty of attacking Liu Bei, Yuan Shao fighting the Hu people would be as easy as disciplining a child.

As for the issue of long-term settlement in the northern lands, while challenging, it was not without solutions. Chen Xi had initiated the wool-spinning plan, which, although slow, provided a path forward. Once the authenticity of the information was confirmed, Yuan Shao would not hesitate to occupy the area and begin land development, given his current formidable capabilities.

"I also ask that you do not send people to investigate. In time, all will be revealed, so there is no need to rush," Madam Zhang also stepped forward and said. The Zhen family had fully sided with Liu Bei, having realized that with Yuan Shao in charge, their fate was sealed. However, if Liu Bei rose to power, the Zhen family would still be related to the ruling family, at least as relatives by marriage.

The gathered officials all nodded in agreement. Now was not the time to alert the enemy. The Hu people were not the problem; Yuan Shao was. Even among Liu Bei's civil and military ranks, not everyone was as confident in Liu Bei as Chen Xi, who dared to declare certain victory.

After everyone had left, Chen Xi bowed to Madam Zhang. "Madam, please refrain from acting on your own. While the Zhen family has great influence in Jizhou, Yuan Shao is no ordinary figure. I ask that you do not let this matter leak."

Madam Zhang felt a bit embarrassed. She had indeed been considering sending someone to investigate. After all, the Zhen family's position in their homeland was quite advantageous, and any excuse could be used to visit the Xianbei lands. However, after Chen Xi's reminder, she quickly agreed to hold back.

After Liu Bei escorted Chen Xi out, Chen Xi followed a group of city guards on his way home. He wasn't worried about being assassinated, as there was likely a top-tier expert shadowing him. Moreover, Zuo Ci was also present.

"Strategist." Just as Chen Xi was turning corners and contemplating whether to buy something for Chen Lan and the others, Zhao Yun suddenly appeared in front of him.

At that moment, Chen Xi suddenly felt a disturbance behind him. Almost simultaneously, Zhao Yun lunged at the source of the disturbance with his spear. Chen Xi's keen spiritual sense clearly observed how Zhao Yun's spear seemingly vanished without a trace before striking the disturbance.

"Thud!" The sound of sand hitting the ground brought Chen Xi back to his senses. When he turned around, he saw that a large section of the stone-paved road had been shattered into gravel. At the same moment, the sky suddenly darkened, and a silvery-gray cloud quickly enveloped the center of Fenggao.

"Kill!" Simultaneously, a squad of city guards surrounded the black shadow that had dodged Zhao Yun's strike and transformed into a shadowy figure.

Without any orders, sixteen soldiers raised their crossbows and fired at the still-airborne figure. Without waiting to see the results, they raised their large shields, readied their weapons, and attacked from different directions. Meanwhile, nine other soldiers quickly raised their shields and moved to protect Chen Xi.

Just before the crossbow bolts struck the shadow, it flickered under the pressure of the cloud and regained its balance, deflecting several bolts with its spear. As it tried to retreat, more bolts came from behind. After deflecting them, the shadow heard the sound of armor clanking as soldiers closed in.

In no time, over five hundred city guards, clad in silver armor, wielding large shields and weapons, and radiating a silvery-gray glow, had completely sealed off the area. Their speed left Chen Xi at a loss for words.

"Surrender immediately, assassin!" "All units, ready your weapons, raise shields, prepare for close combat!" Two deputy commanders of the city guards shouted simultaneously, and the soldiers moved in perfect unison, unaffected by the dark, windy night.

Chen Xi held his head in his hands, unsure of what to say. He needed to diffuse the situation before Liu Bei arrived, or it would be too embarrassing.

"This is a misunderstanding..." Han Qiong said with a bitter smile. He had only sensed Zhao Yun's emotional fluctuation, and now, in an instant, things had escalated to this point. It was truly a tragedy.

"Stop!" Chen Xi quickly ordered.

The city guards halted after Chen Xi's command. Although they remained in formation, they did not launch an attack.

"This is Elder Han, who is here to protect me. This was an accident," Chen Xi explained with a wry smile. Han Qiong also lowered his spear, no longer ready to fight. He had been startled by the speed of the soldiers' response—about twenty squads had arrived almost instantly.

"Master Han..." Zhao Yun said with a bitter smile. He had found the opponent's defensive moves familiar, and now he realized it was his senior uncle.

With Zhao Yun's words and Chen Xi's explanation, the city guards quickly dispersed. The twenty-five soldiers who had originally been patrolling the area lined up and continued their patrol as if nothing had happened, though the silvery-gray cloud in the sky still lingered, subtly suppressing everyone's inner energy.

"Cough, cough, cough. Zilong, your strength has grown. That strike just now was powerful. Even if an ordinary general managed to block it, they would likely suffer internal injuries," Han Qiong said with a cough, trying to hide his embarrassment.

Zhao Yun's spear strike had indeed been blocked, but the force transmitted through it had forced Han Qiong into a defensive stance, leaving him slightly injured. The fact that the stone-paved street had been shattered into sand was a testament to that power.

"You flatter me, Uncle," Zhao Yun replied modestly. "I still need to continue building my inner energy. No matter how advanced my techniques, a solid foundation is irreplaceable."

"Alright, it seems you have matters to discuss. I won't disturb you." With that, the light around Han Qiong twisted, and he disappeared. Among the masters of secret techniques, Han Qiong, Tong Yuan, and Wang Yue were the most skilled.

Zhao Yun shook his head. Although he had heard from his master that someone was protecting Chen Xi, he hadn't expected it to be his senior uncle. This discovery made Zhao Yun feel much more at ease about Chen Xi's safety.

Chapter 604: What Is Missing

"Zilong, you appeared very suddenly earlier, which is why Elder Han reacted the way he did," Chen Xi sighed as he spoke. In that earlier situation, it was clear that Zhao Yun's appearance had been too abrupt, prompting Han Qiong to prepare to strike without even thinking, which led to him revealing his presence. Otherwise, Zhao Yun probably wouldn't have noticed Han Qiong.

To be honest, Chen Xi still couldn't understand why Han Qiong felt the need to stay hidden. Did all experts enjoy being mysterious and elusive? But on that note...

"Zilong, can you turn invisible?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"Invisible?" Zhao Yun looked at Chen Xi, puzzled. "Do you mean like this?"

As he spoke, Zhao Yun's body began to disappear from his feet upwards until he completely vanished. Then, like scattered snowflakes, he gradually reappeared, once again fully visible.

"It's a simple secret technique. When my master taught me, I only had to watch it once to learn it," Zhao Yun said casually. "I know many such techniques. This one just involves bending light, and at most, it diminishes one's presence. However, at my level, even if I fully activate this technique, as long as someone glances at me, I can still sense where they are."

Not far from Chen Xi, Han Qiong had the urge to spit blood. He finally understood why his senior brother always spoke of Zhao Yun with both pride and frustration. To think that Zhao Yun would describe such a high-level technique as "simple"! Han Qiong had spent a long time mastering it himself!

"Oh, so that's how it is. So as long as someone glances at you, you can sense their location?" Chen Xi asked in amazement.

"That's about right. My senses have become much sharper, and my intuition has improved significantly," Zhao Yun nodded. "For example," he glanced around and pointed to a spot, "my senior uncle is right there."

Han Qiong bitterly revealed himself, completely baffled as to how Zhao Yun had discovered him. He hadn't left a trace, yet Zhao Yun had found him so effortlessly. It defied logic.

"Zilong, please escort Marquis Chen back. I have some matters to attend to," Han Qiong said with a wry smile before flying off. He could feel the pressure emanating from Zhao Yun, a clear sign that Zhao Yun had already surpassed him, his senior uncle.

Zhao Yun cupped his hands in respect toward Han Qiong, then scanned the surroundings once more. After confirming that there were no other presences, he closed his eyes. When he reopened them, Zuo Ci, who had been secretly watching from Jingling Hall, smiled bitterly as his spiritual perception suddenly vanished without a trace.

Chen Xi didn't perceive the change as clearly, but to him, the biggest difference was that the moment Zhao Yun opened his eyes, the once faint noises in Fenggao turned into complete silence.

"It's much safer this way," Zhao Yun said with a smile. "Strategist, there's something I'd like to ask you."

"Go ahead," Chen Xi nodded. "What is it?"

"You once mentioned that you personally calculated the destinies of the various civil and military officials in the world, correct?" Zhao Yun asked, a bit embarrassed.

Chen Xi felt slightly awkward. Back at Hulao Pass, he had said that somewhat offhandedly. Although what he said wasn't untrue, asking for more detailed predictions would be difficult, given how different the world had become.

"That is true. What I said back then should be mostly accurate, though some people might have transcended their destined calamities and gained a new lease on life. After all, fate is not fixed, and I can't guarantee absolute certainty," Chen Xi replied as they walked, weighing his words carefully. He wasn't sure why Zhao Yun was asking this now.

"I understand. Zijian seems to have overcome his destined calamity, and I believe that when anyone does so, their abilities will see a significant increase," Zhao Yun mused, speaking somewhat cryptically.

After thinking for a moment, Chen Xi said, "Indeed. Those who overcome their destined calamity are usually people of great courage or absolute conviction. Once they free themselves from the heaviest burdens, it's only natural that their abilities would improve."

As Chen Xi said this, he couldn't help but think of Li You. Li You was a monster in his own right. Not only did he possess an immense amount of spiritual power, but the sheer purity of it was frightening. If anyone in this world could change the fate of an entire province without external assistance, Li You would be the only one. His spiritual power had continued to grow ever since his second breakthrough, though the growth had slowed considerably.

"Strategist, I believe I will also overcome my destined calamity in the future. I have already received intelligence about Yanzhou, and Lu Bu's strength far surpasses mine. You have seen it yourself, but you also once said that at my peak, I could rival Lu Bu. The only explanation is that I will overcome my destined calamity," Zhao Yun said in a low voice. "So, Strategist, could you tell me what my calamity is?"

Chen Xi was speechless. Changban Slope? Well, in that battle, it certainly seemed like a situation of certain death, but Zhao Yun survived, and afterward, his combat prowess seemed to transcend barriers, receiving the same treatment as Lu Bu—surrounded and besieged, yet always prevailing.

The problem was that Zhao Yun was asking Chen Xi what his destined calamity was. How was Chen Xi supposed to answer that? If someone in this world could force Liu Bei to flee across the river with the people, or push one of Liu Bei's generals into a desperate solo battle, then Chen Xi, Jia Xu, and Guo Jia might as well slit their own throats.

"Zilong, what are you worried about?" Chen Xi asked, frowning.

"Because we're heading to Yanzhou soon, and I can't defeat Lu Bu. I can clearly sense the gap between us. Although I could escape unscathed, defeat is still defeat. I have a feeling that even if the three of us joined forces again, like at Hulao Pass, he might still walk away unscathed," Zhao Yun said with a bitter smile. Lu Bu's strength had become abnormal.

It was precisely because he had sensed Lu Bu's power that Zhao Yun had come to ask Chen Xi about his destined calamity. The more he understood Lu Bu, the more he recognized his immense strength, which made Zhao Yun eager to find a way to catch up.

Chen Xi rubbed his temples and stopped walking. He looked at Zhao Yun in front of him and felt an odd sensation. Zhao Yun might not be lacking in strength—he might not even be weaker than Lu Bu in terms of raw power. What Zhao Yun seemed to be missing was something else entirely.

"What's wrong, Strategist?" Zhao Yun asked when he saw Chen Xi stop.

"Zilong, I don't think what you need is to overcome a calamity," Chen Xi suddenly raised his head. "You probably don't have a calamity. What you're lacking is a certain mindset—a mindset of invincibility. When you compare yourself to Lu Bu, what do you think he has that you don't?"

Zhao Yun looked at Chen Xi in confusion, carefully considering the comparison. In terms of strength, inner energy—whether in quality or quantity—Zhao Yun was not inferior. Recovery? That wasn't it either; he was just as fast. Power, skill, speed, his steed, his weapon? None of these seemed to be areas where he was clearly outmatched by Lu Bu. So why did he feel that even two of him could only defeat but not injure Lu Bu?

Chapter 605: A Heart of Invincibility

Regarding Zhao Yun's question, Chen Xi didn't have a perfect answer. The more he understood Zhao Yun, the more he realized how powerful Zhao Yun truly was. In terms of inner energy, technique, and combat ability, Zhao Yun wasn't lacking compared to Lu Bu. The only difference was raw strength, but Zhao Yun was significantly faster than Lu Bu.

In other words, when it came to pure strength, Zhao Yun and Lu Bu were more or less evenly matched. Yet, whenever Lu Bu appeared, he was typically surrounded by two or three experts of Zhao Yun's caliber. Even if he couldn't win, he was never easily defeated, making the gap between them seem larger than it really was.

Chen Xi's assessment wasn't far off. In terms of raw power and overall attributes, Zhao Yun and Lu Bu were evenly matched. Both had consumed divine stones, both recovered quickly, but their mindsets were distinctly different.

Zhao Yun had a formal background, with a master guiding and teaching him properly from a young age. Tong Yuan had always been very satisfied with Zhao Yun's talent but also instilled in him the unique humility of Chinese culture to prevent arrogance. "Yun'er, you must be humble. Remember, there is always someone stronger out there. You must be cautious to avoid being caught off guard."

Lu Bu, on the other hand, was a wild fighter. He fought and fought, from small scuffles to grand battles, from Jiuyuan to the grasslands, and then back to Bingzhou, and finally to Hulao Pass!

Humility? Why would he need that? If you could defeat him, then you would have the right to teach him!

Humility? No, he was invincible. If anyone doubted that, they could step forward. It didn't matter who they were—he would win. If they didn't accept that, he'd make them accept it. Did someone dare to deny his invincibility? Today, he would show them why he was invincible!

Ordinarily, humility is a virtue. It's generally the right approach. But for someone like Lu Bu, humility was clearly not fitting. If an ordinary person claimed to be invincible, they would be dismissed as arrogant and quickly put in their place. But in Lu Bu's case, even if people didn't like it, they had to admit it.

By now, no matter how much people might dislike Lu Bu, they acknowledged that he was the strongest warrior of the current era. This included top-tier fighters like Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, and Huang Zhong. When they spoke of Lu Bu's strength, they all tacitly agreed on his supremacy, and Lu Bu himself believed he was invincible.

Whether it was arrogance or confidence, Lu Bu embraced the idea that whenever he appeared, he would be besieged. He accepted the notion that single combat between warriors was not bound by strict rules, and the fact that other warriors had no qualms about ganging up on him was an implicit admission that they couldn't defeat him one-on-one!

By this point, aside from a few ignorant individuals in remote corners, perhaps only Zhang Fei still harbored the belief that he could single-handedly defeat Lu Bu. Zhang Fei had no fear. He would fight, even if he couldn't win. If he lost, he'd come back next time and still be the first to challenge Lu Bu in single combat!

This was why Zhang Fei managed to keep up with Lu Bu. His mindset was different. His goal wasn't to survive a certain number of moves or to draw with Lu Bu as Zhao Yun hoped. Zhang Fei's goal was to hang Lu Bu on his spear...

Though Zhang Fei's ambition might have been unrealistic, you couldn't deny that his determination made him stronger. After all, the mindset you bring influences the strength you can unleash.

Zhao Yun's mindset was strong, even excellent!

But compared to his strength, Zhao Yun's mindset only allowed him to harness his power rather than push it to its limits.

In contrast, with similar raw power, Lu Bu's mindset, whether it was confidence or arrogance, was far beyond Zhao Yun's. Zhao Yun had a problem with how he perceived himself.

Chen Xi's response left Zhao Yun momentarily stunned, but he quickly understood where his problem lay.

Unfortunately, understanding the issue didn't mean resolving it. If understanding were enough to achieve results, many of the world's problems would disappear—like restoring the Han Dynasty, for example.

Zhao Yun lacked Lu Bu's dominating presence. Lu Bu dared to declare himself invincible to the world, but even if Zhao Yun reached the same level, he wouldn't be able to make such a claim. He would humbly say that Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were just as strong as he was and that he still needed to work harder...

This was a matter of personality and mindset. Chen Xi could point it out to Zhao Yun, but he couldn't make Zhao Yun stronger than Lu Bu. That was unrealistic. If Zhao Yun wanted to defeat Lu Bu, he'd have to rely on himself.

The next day, Chen Xi packed his things, bid farewell to Liu Bei, and said goodbye to Fan Jian and Chen Lan. Then he set off with Zhao Yun's army. By the time Zhao Yun had arrived the previous day, the supplies and baggage had already been sent ahead to Yanzhou. All that remained was to march with the troops.

During the march, Zhao Yun and Chen Xi didn't discuss the matter of mindset further. Chen Xi had no better solutions—his knowledge of psychology was shallow, and Zhao Yun wasn't suited to an arrogant mindset. Well, in some cases, such a mindset might be considered confidence.

Zhao Yun, too, continued to reflect on the gap between himself and Lu Bu. In the end, he returned to the same conclusion: Lu Bu's strength came from within, not just in terms of power but also in terms of mindset. Lu Bu was someone who combined invincible strength with an invincible mindset, though he lacked invincible wisdom.

As Zhao Yun pondered his own situation, Chen Xi was also reflecting on himself. If Zhao Yun underestimated his own abilities, what about Chen Xi? Looking back, Chen Xi realized he had always exuded a sense of confidence, an unshakable confidence. The wisdom of understanding others and the self-awareness of knowing oneself—Chen Xi was enveloped in the intelligence to recognize others and the accumulated wisdom of millennia.

Chen Xi thought with a touch of helplessness.

It wasn't that Chen Xi looked down on Jia Xu and the others, but rather that he stood atop the river of time, gazing down upon the traces of the past. No matter how capable people like Lu Su or Zhuge Liang were, they couldn't grasp the flow of time the way Chen Xi could. Though his view was blurry, it was far more accurate than anyone else's.

"It seems that I must take the top position. Even if there's no 'first' in civil affairs, I have to hold that spot. I can't let anyone challenge it. If this era of brilliant stars needs a bright moon to overshadow them, then let me be that moon. At least I can ensure that this moon remains full and flawless forever!" Chen Xi muttered to himself as he gazed at the heavens, a sharpness emanating from him. After all, he was still young and had his moments of youthful arrogance.

Chapter 606: The Rebellion's Self-Destructive Group

Chen Xi was indeed helpless. The first time he went against popular opinion to establish the merchants' association, some people objected. But in the end, reality harshly proved them wrong. Yet, it hadn't been long since then, and now, with Liu Bei's power growing once again, certain people had secretly begun to stir things up.

The saying "as long as there is life, there will be factional struggles" finally made sense to Chen Xi. There were always some petty fools who believed that Chen Xi was just a lucky upstart, spoiled by favor. Internally, it seemed like it was time to consolidate power again. For some reason, every time power increased, it had to be tested.

Yang Xiu watched the people in his circle, nodding expressionlessly in agreement with their proposal. In truth, Yang Xiu felt immense frustration. He had no interest whatsoever in the former Qingzhou gentry and the officials transferred from Xuzhou. To him, these people seemed to have a collective brain malfunction!

Yang Xiu was quite satisfied with his current position as the Chief of the Lesser Treasury of Taishan and the County Magistrate of Bo County. Although he had once been the Prefect of Shangdang, it couldn't compare to his current role!

Taishan was far wealthier than Shangdang, with plenty of books to read and ample free time. It was a vast improvement over that miserable place. No one oppressed him, and his life was going great. Why would he want to oppose the competent officials under Liu Bei? Was he tired of living?

Of course, Yang Xiu wasn't foolish. He understood why the former Qingzhou gentry were dissatisfied with Liu Bei. After all, Liu Bei had distributed the entire Qingzhou to the Yellow Turbans, reclaimed excess land for the state, and began military farming. These former gentry families returned to find they had nothing left, so naturally, they were unhappy.

As for Xuzhou, after being harshly dealt with by Li You, Liu Bei didn't interfere, and instead relocated Xuzhou's gentry officials under his direct supervision, sending their core members to Xuzhou. This significantly weakened the influence of Xuzhou's gentry.

For these aristocratic families, it was practically a blood feud. However, despite their grievances, some of the more forward-thinking families understood that Liu Bei and Chen Xi weren't out to destroy them completely. Their policies mostly aimed to limit the power of the gentry, leaving them with some options for survival.

But there would always be self-important individuals in this world. The people surrounding Yang Xiu were exactly that. They were driven by a desire to overthrow Chen Xi, Li You, and their allies, aiming to render Liu Bei powerless. Such an unrealistic plan held no appeal for Yang Xiu. Why ruin a good life by getting involved in such suicidal schemes?

"Brother Yang, you seem a bit tired. Could it be...?" one of the Qingzhou gentry, the head of the Li family, asked with a smile.

"It's not that. I just find this all quite dull," Yang Xiu replied in a loud voice, instantly drawing everyone's attention.

"What insight do you have, Brother Mingtong?" asked Wen Ying, the head of the Wen family, who sat at the head of the table.

Wen Ying had been a staunch opponent of Liu Bei. Ever since the Yellow Turban Rebellion forced him to flee Qingzhou, he had been too afraid to return. When Liu Bei brought order to Qingzhou, Wen Ying showed up with deeds and contracts, demanding that Chen Xi return hundreds of qing of fertile land to him and compensate his family for years of losses.

The first time Wen Ying went to confront them, Chen Xi was present. Out of goodwill, Chen Xi offered other compensation, but the land that had been distributed was non-negotiable. Chen Xi promised not to shortchange him, but Wen Ying found the compensation too meager for the renowned Wen family of Qingzhou and refused to accept the same treatment as others.

Chen Xi promptly ignored him. After being rebuffed, Wen Ying gathered a crowd to cause trouble on his second attempt. This time, Chen Xi wasn't around, so the matter was handed over to Li You.

The outcome was straightforward, with all the troublemakers thrown in prison. When Li You handled the case, as the sole legislator, judge, and arbiter, it was impossible for the opposition to win. Naturally, they all suffered for it.

Li You left no loose ends. He thoroughly investigated the backgrounds of those who dared to cause trouble. After all, what aristocratic family didn't have some skeletons in their closet? Even the Xun and Chen families had their dark secrets. In this case, these troublemakers stood no chance and were

directly marked for ironclad prosecution. Had there been a public trial, they would have all met their end.

Unfortunately for them, a new law had just been enacted, stipulating that unless the crime was treason, the most severe punishment would be lifelong forced labor. Because of this, the group narrowly escaped death, and Li You had no interest in dealing with these small fry any further. Once the matter was handed over, Wen Ying quickly fled.

In short, under Wen Ying's leadership, a group of individuals dissatisfied with Liu Bei's policies due to issues of profit distribution quickly gathered together. Through their efforts, this group had steadily grown.

Now, this group included various families and individuals from Qingzhou, Taishan, and Xuzhou, all of whom were unhappy with Liu Bei's policies.

This group, which boasted many members and a wide reach, appeared quite powerful. However, this was purely their own perception. To someone as clear-headed as Yang Xiu, this was nothing but a joke!

As a force with no military power, no top-tier leaders, and limited financial resources, opposing Liu Bei was a farce. If they somehow succeeded, Yang Xiu believed it would be akin to Emperor Xian unifying the world.

Ignoring all the chaotic nonsense, Yang Xiu simply found the whole affair incredibly boring. Why had they invited a successful man like him to this gathering of failures?

Yang Xiu had experienced various extraordinary events in his life. For instance, after his wife passed away, he attended a grand court meeting in Luoyang, where he caught the eye of a twelve-year-old girl and eloped with her.

When her father found out, Yang Xiu had already taken full advantage of the situation. Her father, Cai Yong, was furious but said nothing. Instead, he added a dowry and gave Yang Xiu five cartloads of books, sending his daughter, Cai Zhenji, to live with him.

In cultural circles, the Yang family was considered small and insignificant, unlikely to last more than a few generations. The Cai family, on the other hand, was aristocracy. But those five cartloads of books had given the Yang family a solid foundation.

As if that weren't enough, after a few years, Yang Xiu returned to his hometown in Taishan, where he met his sister-in-law. Unlike his rather unreliable wife, his sister-in-law was highly educated. His son had already surpassed other children of his age, which, for an aristocratic family, was the key to future success.

With everything going so well, why waste time chatting with this group of failures? Yang Xiu only felt one thing: boredom. He would rather spend his time managing Bo County, as he was quite satisfied with Liu Bei. Attending this gathering had been something he was dragged into against his will.

Chapter 607: Securing All Sides

"Let me say this—you're all completely unreliable! Here's how we'll do it: I'll ask questions one by one, and you'll answer them one by one. That way, everything will be clear!" Yang Xiu suddenly stood up and slammed his palm on the table, his cold gaze sweeping over everyone. The room instantly fell silent, and the central position that Wen Ying had held was abruptly stripped away.

"First question: What is the ultimate goal of this group?" Yang Xiu scanned the crowd as he asked.

The group hesitated, then started talking all at once—restoring their family's status in Qingzhou, undermining Liu Bei, getting rid of Chen Xi, maximizing their own benefits—it was a chaotic mess.

Yang Xiu sneered to himself. He was certain that there were too many of Jia Xu's spies in this group; otherwise, it wouldn't be this disorganized. As the Chief of the Lesser Treasury, Yang Xiu had to deal with people like Li You, so he had a good estimate of Li You's and Jia Xu's abilities.

"Second question: How do we achieve this ultimate goal?" Yang Xiu continued, not caring whether the group had reached a consensus. After all, most of the people here were as good as dead, so he didn't need to hold back.

Another round of chaotic buzzing ensued. They couldn't come up with a unified plan. Any capable and insightful people who were still in Taishan had already aligned with Liu Bei. Those who were unhappy had long since left, so it was easy to imagine the quality of those who remained!

Wen Ying's face turned alternately pale and flushed. After a long pause, he stood up and slapped the table. "Everyone, in this matter, I have been negligent. Please give me a few days, and I will provide a satisfactory answer."

However, no one paid any attention to Wen Ying's words, and the room remained in disarray. Yang Xiu sat in his chair, sneering as he glanced around at everyone, his gaze lingering on three individuals in particular for a moment.

In the end, this so-called conspiracy meeting dissolved into nothing. After the dozen or so representatives left, Yang Xiu chuckled and walked outside. He resolved never to attend such a meeting again. He expected Jia Xu, the master of intelligence, would soon have a word with him.

"Master Yang, my lord invites you," a thin young man blocked Yang Xiu's path after he had taken only a few steps.

"Where?" Yang Xiu asked calmly.

As expected, he was taken to Jia Xu. "Mingtong, you saw what happened today. What are your thoughts?" Jia Xu asked.

"A disorganized rabble," Yang Xiu replied coolly, then paused to think. "However, these people are likely just pawns thrown away by the enemy. From what I saw today, all they can do is talk; they won't be able to take any real action."

Jia Xu glanced at Yang Xiu. "Go back and continue your duties as the County Magistrate of Bo and Chief of the Lesser Treasury. This matter no longer concerns you. You're more suited for internal affairs."

Yang Xiu stood, bowed to Jia Xu, and then left. He had no interest in this matter from the start and had been dragged into it against his will.

"Wenru, what do you think?" Jia Xu asked, looking toward the screen behind him.

"Is there even a need to investigate further?" Li You emerged from behind the screen. "This is likely one of Yuan Benchu's backup plans. But I'm his biggest wildcard."

"Yuan Benchu is going to be furious with you," Jia Xu said with a wry smile, thinking of the situation. It was a tragedy waiting to happen.

"If he dies of rage, that would be ideal!" Li You sneered. "The last time the merchants' association was disrupted, I noticed something strange. Although part of the reason was our non-intervention, the spread of the unrest was too fast. This time, I'll wipe out this group in one fell swoop and see how Yuan Benchu continues to gather information on us!"

In truth, Li You didn't harbor any particular animosity toward the aristocratic families and nobility. He only developed a murderous intent toward those who obstructed his path. Unfortunately, those who stood in his way were usually members of the aristocracy.

"Wenru, Cao Mengde has entered Guanzhong. We're out of reach for now. Do you have any ideas?" Jia Xu rarely took the initiative to address the other warlords who were disrupting the realm.

"It is indeed troublesome. We need to focus all our efforts on Yuan Benchu for now. As for Cao Mengde, I think we should leave him alone for the time being. As for Zhiran and the others, I already have a plan to handle them," Li You said calmly.

Jia Xu's most valid point was that they couldn't reach Guanzhong, which was why Liu Ye had been sent there in person. Some things couldn't be determined solely by intelligence.

"I'll leave dealing with those folks to you. I trust you'll also make sure to plant our people behind the potentially growing power of Cao Mengde," Jia Xu nodded, fully confident in Li You's ability to handle the matter.

"Zhiran and the others have already paved the way. I just need to guide them out, and Cao Cao won't have any reason to oppose the people of Guanzhong and Yongliang," Li You said calmly. He was genuinely impressed by Li Jue's performance in Guanzhong.

Of course, Li You also knew that a strategist capable of such intricate planning wouldn't willingly serve under someone who couldn't become a true ruler. But regardless of any hidden agendas, with such a move, Li You was confident he could rehabilitate Li Jue and his cohorts. Sometimes, all a ruler needed was an excuse, and once given that excuse, it was enough.

Li Jue and his men were indeed guilty of many crimes, but that didn't mean they couldn't be pardoned. Whether Emperor Xian had been coerced or acted willingly, his decree had absolved them of their crimes. All Li You needed to do was give Emperor Xian a way out, allowing Li Jue and his men to be fully pardoned.

Li You frowned as he thought about it. He knew that Ma Teng and Li Jue weren't on the same page, but the Qiang and Hu people only respected strength!

"Wenhe, keep an eye on Guanzhong and Yongliang when you can. I'm off to play the wildcard against Yuan Benchu," Li You said calmly, then left without lingering.

Jia Xu nodded, indicating that he would keep an eye on Guanzhong and Yongliang, though only in passing.

In truth, Jia Xu's interest in Guanzhong and Yongliang was far less than his interest in Yuzhou. Compared to the distant Guanzhong, Yuzhou was a fat piece of meat that, after being nurtured by many, was now ripe for the taking.

By now, Jia Xu had almost finished preparing Yuzhou. The most dangerous figure, Zhou Yu, had been placed under house arrest in Shouchun due to the "authentic" rumors Jia Xu had spread. Sun Ce was also affected, unable to leave Shouchun. At the same time, the civil and military officials whom Sun Ce had promoted were all being suppressed.

It wasn't that Sun Ce and Zhou Yu couldn't resist; Sun Ce simply didn't want to provoke a conflict with Yuan Shu. As a result, Zhou Yu had no choice but to remain under house arrest in Shouchun. With Zhou Yu out of the picture, Yuzhou and Jingzhou had become vulnerable.

Chapter 608: Ambush Troops

"This road is well-built, Gongyou," Chen Xi commented as he traveled along the road to Yanzhou by carriage. Compared to the journey from Xiapi to Fenggao, the trip from Fenggao to Linyi took only ten days.

"Secretary Sun is now a well-known master builder," Hua An replied with a smile. After Hua Xiong left, his fellow townsman, Hua An, replaced him as Chen Xi's bodyguard.

"Are Lu Fengxian and his men not digging on the Yanzhou side?" Chen Xi asked after a moment of thought.

"No, on the contrary, Chen Gongtai wants to purchase some materials for building straight roads from us," Hua An said with a chuckle.

Hearing this, Chen Xi nodded. It wasn't that he couldn't ride a horse, but after Pang Tong's tragic accident—dying from an arrow while riding—he preferred to avoid the same fate.

[Chen Gongtai has a good eye and clearly understands the importance of these roads,] Chen Xi mused. [But I wonder if he's planning to build the main logistics route towards Taishan or Weijun after completing the supply lines. Of course, he might not have to build it himself; someone else might do it.]

Compared to Yuan Shao, who acted without hesitation, and Yuan Shu, whose mind wasn't focused on the grand scheme, Chen Gong had more considerations. He knew that logistics lines had to be built to reduce grain loss and speed up troop movements. However, after establishing these lines, deciding where to build the provincial roads would require choosing an ally. Of course, someone else could build those roads, too.

Chen Xi was pleased with the current situation. At least Sun Qian's road construction hadn't been hindered by Chen Gong, which suggested that Chen Gong might lean towards their side. However, the road leading to Linyi wasn't yet a provincial road.

In fact, Chen Xi didn't know that Chen Gong wasn't just ignoring Sun Qian's road construction. He also turned a blind eye to Yuan Shao's roadwork. Since he hadn't clearly sided with anyone, both Yuan Shao and Liu Bei were building roads. When the situation escalated, what did it have to do with him? In reality, he was just searching for a new backer.

However, Yuan Shao's road from Weijun to Yanzhou was progressing slowly. After all, the inferior cement was only produced on Liu Bei's side. Yuan Shao wanted the formula, but the Zhen family claimed they couldn't obtain it, and Yuan Shao's spies had no luck either. They had to follow the rules, and fortunately, Chen Xi didn't mind selling the product to Yuan Shao, so the Zhen family could still supply a decent amount.

Regarding the inferior cement, Yuan Shao always believed the more, the better. Confident that he wouldn't lose to Liu Bei, Yuan Shao boldly built roads to the borders of Qingzhou, just as Liu Bei did. However, courage alone couldn't substitute for cement, so Yuan Shao had to store up a portion and repair roads as best he could.

As a result, all the necessary roads in Jizhou were built, as were those in Youzhou. In Bingzhou, only the main roads were constructed. Even so, the speed of Yuan Shao's army and supply transport greatly increased, which pleased him immensely.

However, due to the faster mobilization and logistics, Gongsun Zan's hopes of counterattacking southern Youzhou were completely dashed. Shen Pei, stationed in Youzhou, was confident in his defensive capabilities. Despite Gongsun Zan's reputation as the "White Horse General," Shen Pei believed it would be nearly impossible for Gongsun Zan to breach his defenses.

When Chen Xi learned that Shen Pei had replaced the governor of Youzhou, he gave up hope that Gongsun Zan could retake Youzhou. It wasn't that he underestimated Gongsun Zan, but Shen Pei's defensive track record was terrifying. Compared to renowned defensive generals like Cao Ren and Hao Zhao, Shen Pei's achievements were awe-inspiring.

When Shen Pei defended Yecheng, Cao Cao was at his peak, personally leading his forces with all his top strategists and generals. Despite being isolated and without reinforcements, Shen Pei held Yecheng for six months. In the end, it was only because his nephew betrayed him and opened the gates that Cao Cao finally captured the city.

This achievement would have shocked even Hao Zhao and Cao Ren, making them acknowledge Shen Pei's prowess. So, when Chen Xi found out that Shen Pei was in Youzhou, he completely abandoned the idea of Gongsun Zan's counterattack. Compared to the aggressive advances of elite troops, Shen Pei's defense was like an impregnable fortress.

Not to mention, Gongsun Zan was already half-crippled. Even at his peak, he would have been infuriated by the situation.

"Where are we now?" Chen Xi asked. "How many days until we reach Linyi?"

"Strategist, General Zhao ordered us to slow down two days ago, concerned that we might encounter immediate battle upon reaching Linyi. We should rendezvous with General Guan tomorrow," Hua Yun explained. Since they were on the march, Zhao Yun was at the vanguard, while Chen Xi stayed in the middle of the formation.

"Tomorrow?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow. "Tell Zilong to send out more scouts. We're close to linking up, so we should avoid giving the enemy any opportunity. Although Zilong isn't worried about ambushes, it's best not to risk it—losing soldiers is never a good thing."

"Understood." Hua Yun handed his reins to another guard and rode off to inform Zhao Yun.

"Indeed, every advantage comes with its drawbacks. This road speeds up our march, but it also limits our movement, making us vulnerable to ambushes," Chen Xi murmured as he gazed into the distance.

"Zhang Ming, take 1,000 White Horse Volunteers and cover our left rear. Huang Shao, reinforce the left flank's defenses. The hills in this area are on our left, so send out more scouts," Zhao Yun instructed Xue Shao and Huang Shao, ordering one to lead cavalry and the other to lead infantry to secure the position.

"Yes, sir!" Huang Shao and Xue Shao saluted, then led their troops to the left.

Meanwhile, a large force of cavalry and infantry, clad in Lu Bu's leather and cloth armor, was stationed in the hills several miles away from Chen Xi's group. A scout reported to a tall general.

"Reporting! General, our scouts have encountered enemy scouts. We've confirmed that it's the Taishan army under Zhao Yun's command!" the scout reported loudly.

"Direct contact, eh?" The tall general, clad in silver armor and wielding a spear, smiled. "What's my name?"

"General, you are Zhang Wenyuan of Yanmen!" the scout responded loudly.

"Good, remember this well—I am Zhang Wenyuan of Yanmen!" Zhang He shouted, and his soldiers echoed his words.

There was no need for Zhang He's men to disguise themselves. They were genuine Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry. By bringing them along, Zhang He aimed to win favor with Lu Bu. No matter Lu Bu's character, he still harbored deep feelings for Bingzhou, which made this a promising avenue for exploitation in Xun Shen's mind.

Zhang He and his Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry were also present to solidify a harsh reality: Lu Bu did not welcome Liu Bei. Once this became clear, both Liu Bei and Lu Bu would have only one option. When that time came, regardless of their wishes, Lu Bu would have no choice but to ally with Yuan Shao!

Chapter 609: A Battle of Equals

"Reporting, General! Our scouts have encountered the enemy, and we've confirmed that there are 2,000 cavalry lying in ambush ahead," the scout leader reported to Zhao Yun. "They appear to be under Zhang Liao, part of Lu Bu's forces."

"Lu Bu's forces?" Zhao Yun raised an eyebrow. "Order the army to prepare for battle. Infantry, form up to protect the strategist. White Horse Volunteers, await my command!"

Although Zhao Yun found it surprising that Lu Bu's army would attempt an ambush, the battlefield is full of unexpected events.

"Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry, huh? Let me see if you truly deserve the title of one of the Three Great Cavalry Forces, alongside the White Horse Volunteers," Zhao Yun muttered as he gazed at the horizon. He could already see the dust rising in the distance—a sign that thousands of horses were thundering toward them.

"They're not bothering to hide their movements. Are they planning a direct confrontation? That makes sense. Among the Three Great Cavalry Forces, the White Horse Volunteers are the weakest in close combat," Chen Xi remarked as he received the information from Zhao Yun. However, he was puzzled by why Zhang Liao would attack at this time. It didn't make sense from any angle.

"A man and two horses, huh? Yuan Benchu certainly has the advantage in this regard," Zhao Yun mused to himself, though he felt no fear.

With a single thrust of his spear, Zhao Yun led his White Horse Volunteers forward like a rolling tide, surging toward the enemy. The lead white horse shot forward with an almost unnatural speed, like an arrow loosed from a bow.

"Prepare to die!" Zhang He roared as he unleashed a burst of silver inner energy. A massive silver shield appeared over the Wolf Cavalry, and with a mighty shout, Zhang He slashed out a blade of light hundreds of meters long, aimed directly at Zhao Yun.

Zhao Yun frowned, focusing on Zhang He's direction. He found it odd—Zhang He shouldn't be this weak. While the attack was powerful, it wasn't enough to scatter Zhao Yun's army's energy, nor could it even harm him.

With a simple thrust of his spear, Zhao Yun deflected the light blade without even tapping into the White Horse Volunteers' collective energy. The blade was effortlessly redirected and sent flying.

Zhang He was left stunned by the sight. He finally understood why Yan Liang had warned him not to play tricks with Zhao Yun. This was beyond ordinary techniques!

As Zhang He stood there in shock, the White Horse Volunteers had already closed to within a hundred paces of the Wolf Cavalry's front lines. Then, to Zhang He's amazement, the White Horse Volunteers raised their bows and shot arrows that flew the hundred paces and struck true!

"White Horse Volunteers!" Zhang He exclaimed in shock. If there was one cavalry force Zhang He both knew and hated the most, it was the White Horse Volunteers. Back when Yuan Shao's vast armies had been unable to defeat Gongsun Zan, it was all because of the White Horse Volunteers. They were just too fast—absurdly fast!

Had it not been for Ju Yi's victory at the Battle of Jieqiao, when all the conditions favored him, the White Horse Volunteers would have been unstoppable across the land. Their speed was unparalleled. As one of the most elite units in the world, they didn't boast superior defense, attack, or endurance—everything was focused on speed. They were the fastest cavalry!

"Thud, thud, thud!" In the first exchange, Zhang He's Wolf Cavalry lost a dozen riders, with many more being hit by arrows. However, the Wolf Cavalry wasn't easily intimidated. As soon as the arrow rain subsided, they drew their own bows and began to return fire.

Zhao Yun glanced at Zhang He's side, estimating their losses. The Wolf Cavalry wouldn't be easy to take down. The White Horse Volunteers' attacks weren't particularly powerful since their energy was primarily focused on speed, but the Wolf Cavalry's defense wasn't that thick either.

"Thud, thud, thud!" Another volley of arrows rained down. Unlike the versatile Wolf Cavalry, the White Horse Volunteers specialized in mounted archery.

In terms of archery on horseback, the White Horse Volunteers had absolute confidence. As soon as the enemy loosed their arrows, they responded with a second volley of their own. Then, as if acting on instinct, the entire White Horse force veered to the sides at incredible speed, drawing more arrows from their quivers for a third volley.

"Spread out and engage!" Zhang He ordered, confident that his Wolf Cavalry could withstand the White Horse Volunteers' archery and close the distance to engage them in melee combat.

The Wolf Cavalry, infuriated by the White Horse Volunteers' repeated volleys, spread out and charged without hesitation. Compared to large-scale battles, the Wolf Cavalry excelled in wolf-pack tactics.

"Thud, thud, thud!" The White Horse Volunteers, relying on their incredible speed and rapid shooting, continued to inflict damage on the Wolf Cavalry.

However, the continuous shooting meant the White Horse Volunteers had to keep stabilizing their formations, giving the Wolf Cavalry a chance to close in. Despite the White Horse Volunteers' superior speed, the Wolf Cavalry doggedly pressed on, flanking, cutting off, and chasing down their foes.

The Wolf Cavalry's relentless pursuit and counterattacks gradually hemmed in the White Horse Volunteers. After a series of arrow volleys, the Wolf Cavalry finally managed to catch up, and the two forces became locked in fierce combat.

The battle quickly turned into a chaotic melee. The Wolf Cavalry's wolf-pack tactics aimed to wear down the enemy bit by bit, while the White Horse Volunteers' strategy of encircling and harassing the enemy with arrows followed a similar philosophy—both sought to grind down their opponents.

As a result, the battle between these two forces became a true contest of equals. Whenever the White Horse Volunteers unleashed a volley of arrows, the Wolf Cavalry would retaliate in kind. When the White Horse Volunteers dodged at high speed, the Wolf Cavalry would seize the opportunity to launch a countercharge.

Likewise, whenever the Wolf Cavalry attempted a flanking maneuver, the White Horse Volunteers would respond with a rapid volley, disrupting the Wolf Cavalry's movements. The Wolf Cavalry, equally skilled in mounted archery, would then return fire, and the cycle would continue, with both sides trading blows in a relentless exchange.

Seeing this, Zhang He couldn't help but sigh. If only Xun Shen and the others had completed the Bingzhou campaign earlier and brought the Wolf Cavalry back into the fold, the history of the Battle of Jieqiao wouldn't have been dismissed as a mere stroke of luck for Yuan Shao!

"Zhao Zilong! Do you dare face me in single combat?" Zhang He shouted, leading a group of dozens of Wolf Cavalry as they charged toward Zhao Yun's position.

With the energies of both armies entangled and the fierce fighting between the two forces suppressing inner energy techniques, Zhang He wasn't afraid to challenge Zhao Yun. After all, his defeat at Le Ling by Guan Yu's hand had driven him to push his abilities to new heights, and now, he was not to be underestimated!

Zhao Yun glanced at the fierce battle between the White Horse Volunteers and the Wolf Cavalry with a hint of regret. He knew that only through such brutal battles could his troops become more elite. But facing off against the truly formidable Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry? Damn Zhang Liao!

Chapter 610: A Back-and-Forth Struggle

"Why wouldn't I dare?" Zhao Yun's face showed a trace of coldness. He could sense the power hidden within his opponent, but even if Zhang He unleashed his full strength, Zhao Yun had absolute confidence in his own abilities. Moreover, under the dense battlefield cloud energy, he feared no one!

With a tug on the reins, Zhao Yun's steed, the Night Illumination Jade Lion, charged toward Zhang He. Behind him, a dozen of Zhao Yun's personal guards flanked him as they rushed toward their opponent.

"Take this!" Zhang He, already wary of Zhao Yun's strength after their initial exchange, thrust his spear with all his might, avoiding revealing his true abilities. The strike was forceful and decisive.

"Clang!" Zhao Yun deflected Zhang He's spear with a swift thrust of his own. A large blossom of spear energy bloomed before Zhang He's eyes, and before he could react, the spearhead shot forward like a flower bursting into bloom.

"Slash!" Zhang He managed to block with his spear, but the force of the blow tore a piece of armor from his shoulder, though it didn't draw blood.

Zhang He, his eyes gleaming with a bloodthirsty light, stared at Zhao Yun. His opponent wasn't overwhelmingly strong, nor did his inner energy seem particularly powerful. The cloud energy suppressed both of their abilities, making Zhao Yun an ideal match—a worthy opponent.

Laughing heartily, Zhang He swung his spear fiercely toward Zhao Yun. Zhao Yun, holding his spear in his right hand, thrust it toward Zhang He's chest with incredible speed, so fast that it was nearly impossible to track.

"Bang!" Zhang He, relying on instinct, parried Zhao Yun's lethal strike. In response, Zhao Yun swung his spear, killing two of Zhang He's guards.

"Die!" Zhang He ignored the deaths of his guards and aimed a powerful thrust at Zhao Yun's waist. The spear strike, heavy with force, caused the air to crackle. Zhao Yun, however, calmly used the butt of his spear to deflect Zhang He's attack and simultaneously killed another of Zhang He's guards with a quick counter.

"Zhao Yun! Do you dare face me in single combat?" Zhang He shouted in anger. He could tell that Zhao Yun's focus wasn't on him. Every move Zhao Yun made seemed aimed at his guards, a clear sign of disdain.

"You're too weak," Zhao Yun said, glancing at Zhang He. "If you fought with your full strength, it might be interesting. But as it stands now..."

"You're courting death!" Zhang He roared and thrust his spear with all his might. He hadn't expected Zhao Yun to be so strong—his physical strength seemed inferior, his inner energy at the same level as Zhang He's, yet Zhao Yun's effortless movements revealed a strength far beyond his own. Was this the power that allowed him to stand toe-to-toe with Lu Bu?

Zhao Yun thrust his spear forward in a simple, unadorned move. Zhang He met it with all his strength, but in the next moment, it felt as if he'd collided with a speeding truck. He was sent flying backward, crashing into his own men.

"Urgh..." Zhang He spat out a mouthful of blood, staring at Zhao Yun in shock. "Such a technique exists?"

As he recalled the techniques Yan Liang had been practicing, Zhang He realized how similar they were to Zhao Yun's move—methods that condensed power without dispersing it.

"You're just too weak," Zhao Yun said as he swept his spear through Zhang He's remaining guards, scattering them. With their cloud energies evenly matched, neither side could dominate the other in terms of inner energy suppression.

Seeing his guards scattered, Zhang He didn't hesitate. He mounted his horse and fled, realizing that this duel was unwinnable. Without using his full strength, he couldn't last ten moves against Zhao Yun.

"Trying to escape? Let's see you try!" Zhao Yun swept aside the last of Zhang He's guards and charged after him.

"Thud, thud, thud!" Seeing Zhao Yun's pursuit, the Wolf Cavalry turned and unleashed a rain of arrows at him. Zhao Yun twirled his spear, deflecting the arrows with ease, while the White Horse Volunteers responded with their own volley, overwhelming the Wolf Cavalry and shifting the battle's momentum.

Zhang He glanced back at the relentless Zhao Yun, fury building within him. He looked again at the state of his Wolf Cavalry, realizing that if this continued, his elite troops would collapse. He couldn't let Zhao Yun pursue them indefinitely.

Without further hesitation, Zhang He ordered his soldiers to scatter and relay messages to the Wolf Cavalry's commanders. After fleeing a bit longer, Zhang He abruptly turned and charged at Zhao Yun, while the Wolf Cavalry, in perfect unison, wheeled around to confront the White Horse Volunteers!

"Slash!" The Wolf Cavalry's sudden reverse charge caught many of the unprepared White Horse Volunteers off guard, and several were unseated. Meanwhile, Zhang He engaged Zhao Yun once more.

"Clang!" Zhang He, with a calm expression, thrust his spear at Zhao Yun. The two crossed weapons, and Zhang He was sent flying sideways, while Zhao Yun took two steps back.

"Again!" Zhang He shouted, his face serious, as he spurred his horse toward Zhao Yun. His spear seemed coated in a layer of dark energy as he hurled it toward his opponent.

Zhao Yun remained composed, deflecting Zhang He's spear. He could feel the condensed power in that strike—it was not to be blocked head-on.

"Get out of my way!" Zhang He's deflected spear suddenly surged with a terrifying force, exploding the air around it as it drove toward Zhao Yun.

"Bang!" Zhao Yun, holding his spear with both hands, blocked Zhang He's attack with even greater speed. As their weapons clashed, Zhao Yun felt his hands go numb, while Zhang He's hands began to bleed.

Despite the blood dripping from his hands, Zhang He didn't relent. He seemed possessed, his eyes blazing with madness as he launched a desperate assault on Zhao Yun. Each attack was more forceful than the last, each strike heavier than the one before.

Ten moves, twenty moves, thirty moves—Zhang He unleashed a final, powerful strike that forced Zhao Yun back. As Zhao Yun braced for the next attack, Zhang He shouted, "Retreat!"

At the same moment, the sound of gongs echoed from the rear of the Wolf Cavalry. The soldiers, who had been preparing to counterattack, turned and followed Zhang He in a swift retreat.

Zhao Yun hesitated for a moment, then shouted, "Attack!" Leading the White Horse Volunteers, he charged after the retreating Wolf Cavalry.

They pursued for about ten miles until Zhang He reached the hills where he had previously set his ambush. Zhao Yun and his White Horse Volunteers followed closely behind.

"Kill!" The ambushers hidden in the hills shouted as Zhao Yun passed by, loosing a rain of arrows down on the White Horse Volunteers below.