

Mythical 611

Chapter 611: A Critical Flaw in Intelligence

At the same time, Zhang He turned back, preparing to counterattack, only to see that Zhao Yun's forces had not descended into chaos. Instead, they had quickly reformed into formation and were steadily retreating from the ambush zone.

Zhao Yun, observing the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry across from him and the archers lying in ambush, estimated his remaining forces and decided not to engage in a futile fight. He gradually pulled his troops back, and once they had created sufficient distance, the White Horse Volunteers swiftly withdrew from the area like the wind. Zhang He chose not to pursue.

After weighing the strength of both sides, Zhang He ultimately decided against chasing them. His mission had already been accomplished.

Meanwhile, Chen Xi sat in his carriage, waiting for Zhao Yun's return. The sudden ambush puzzled him, but he wasn't concerned about his current position being attacked.

Chen Xi furrowed his brows as he pondered the situation, though he didn't immediately connect the ambush to Yuan Shao. His habitual thinking clouded his judgment.

Chen Xi couldn't help but frown. Given that Liu Yan had personally gone to meet Chen Gong and sincerely discussed terms of allegiance, no one would suspect that Liu Bei's side had never intended to recruit Lu Bu. As a result, Yuan Shao's side would find it nearly impossible to offer better terms than Liu Yan.

Chen Xi's frown deepened. If their plans had indeed been exposed, it would be a significant setback.

Realizing he was overthinking the situation, Chen Xi shifted his perspective.

A glimmer of realization flashed in Chen Xi's eyes—perhaps he didn't need to overthink it.

"Strategist, General Zhao has returned," Hua Yun called from outside the carriage.

Chen Xi silently opened the carriage door and stepped down, watching as Zhao Yun returned with the White Horse Volunteers and several hundred riderless horses.

"Zilong, it seems you had a difficult time," Chen Xi remarked.

"Not exactly. The Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry is indeed one of the finest forces in the world, and they fought my White Horse Volunteers to a standstill," Zhao Yun replied, shaking his head. Meanwhile, the soldiers quickly fortified their position, sent out more scouts, and medics tended to the wounded.

"You're certain it was the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry?" Chen Xi asked calmly.

"Yes, I'm sure. Their tactics were unmistakable, and only a force like the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry could match the White Horse Volunteers so evenly," Zhao Yun confirmed. "It seems Lu Bu has indeed sided with Yuan Benchu. We should return the favor in kind."

"No need for that," Chen Xi said, shaking his head. "Whether or not Lu Bu has aligned with Yuan Benchu doesn't matter. We can simply focus on defeating Yuan Benchu."

"But why is that?" Zhao Yun asked, puzzled. "The attackers were clearly under Lu Bu's general, Zhang Liao. Why target Yuan Shao?"

"If they've aligned with Yuan Shao, then they're one and the same. Attacking either one is fine. If they haven't aligned, then our reason for attacking Yuan Shao is even simpler. Zhang Liao must have disguised himself, so regardless of the circumstances, we don't need to overthink it. Just attack him directly," Chen Xi explained with a shrug.

At first, Chen Xi had wondered why Lu Bu would attack them. But then he realized it didn't matter whether Lu Bu was responsible or not. By targeting Yuan Shao, they'd avenge the attack regardless, making it a straightforward solution—no intricate strategies required.

Zhao Yun blinked in surprise, struggling to follow the logic. But as Chen Xi explained further, it all made sense. No matter the reason behind this strange battle, it ultimately didn't matter. If the ambushers

were disguised, Yuan Shao deserved the blame. If it really was Zhang Liao, attacking Yuan Shao would still be justified.

"Then what was the point of this ambush?" Zhao Yun asked, now feeling like he had an intellectual advantage over the enemy. The strategy seemed pointless.

"How should I know what the person behind this was thinking?" Chen Xi rolled his eyes. "Maybe they just wanted to lower our intelligence to their level, hoping to defeat us with experience."

"So, we're going to fight Yuan Shao?" Zhao Yun asked with a slight smirk.

This plan might have worked if Chen Xi hadn't seen through it. After all, with Lu Bu's personality, he'd never explain himself. Once the fighting started, Lu Bu would never back down, making it more likely that he'd align with Yuan Shao out of necessity.

Moreover, they were still a day away from the battlefield where Guan Yu, Yan Liang, and Lu Bu were clashing. Regular scouts wouldn't be able to detect such a distance, meaning Lu Bu probably had no idea about this battle. Even if he found out later, by then, he'd be forced down a single path.

However, once Chen Xi stepped back to reevaluate the situation, he saw it all as a joke. The strategist behind it, in his view, had a critical flaw in their intelligence.

"Of course we'll fight him," Chen Xi said with a nod. "There's no need to overthink it. We'll just attack. It would be a shame not to take advantage of this lack of intelligence."

Zhao Yun wiped away some sweat, though he, too, felt the enemy's strategy was flawed. Chen Xi's blunt criticism was still a bit much for him to handle.

Meanwhile, Zhang He, leading his cavalry and infantry on the return journey, had no idea that Chen Xi had entirely dismissed his plan. He felt quite satisfied with Zhao Yun's cry of "Zhang Liao!" and confident in the combat performance of the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry. Indeed, they had proven to be a match for the White Horse Volunteers.

As Zhang He bandaged his wounds and led his troops north, he felt assured that no one aside from Zhao Yun's army and himself knew about this battle. He had taken precautions, using most of his infantry as a reserve force to prevent any of Lu Bu's scouts from discovering the ambush.

Confident that his plan was flawless, Zhang He felt a surge of excitement. He admired Lu Bu's martial prowess and believed that bringing him under Yuan Shao's banner would greatly benefit Yuan Shao's ambitions.

This was why Zhang He had willingly concealed his true strength, using only his silver-tier inner energy to risk his life in a duel with Zhao Yun. Now, his loyalty was firmly with Yuan Shao, and he was willing to fight for Yuan Shao's grand ambitions!

Chapter 612: This Situation Is Truly Tragic

After running for several dozen miles, Zhang He removed his silver-gray armor and replaced it with heavy black armor. He swapped his silver spear for a solid black steel spear and changed his helmet to one with black plumes. His previously pale face was washed clean, revealing a bronzed complexion. As for his small mustache, it would be gone by the time Zhao Yun and Guan Yu met him again. By then, Zhang He would have a full beard, and even if Zhao Yun encountered him face-to-face, he would never recognize that Zhang He had disguised himself.

This was also why Zhang He did not launch a night attack. Although the night might have provided the best cover, it also meant that many things would be harder to see, leading to overthinking.

Tian Feng was confident that as long as Chen Xi thought things through carefully, he would have doubts. And once those doubts arose, even if Chen Xi couldn't obtain intelligence from Lu Bu's side, he would likely hold back and prioritize the bigger picture.

Having completed his mission, Zhang He no longer hesitated and immediately led his remaining cavalry and infantry back to Wei Commandery. He planned to return in a few days, posing as reinforcements. Alongside him would be Jiang Yiqu, Han Meng, and others.

That night, one of Zhang He's deputy generals, dressed as a scout, rode swiftly back to Tian Feng's main camp. This movement went unnoticed by anyone.

The reason for this was simple: the three forces had each set up their camps at a distance from one another and had all increased the number of scouts to avoid giving the others an opportunity. As a result, the late-night movements of scouts did not arouse any suspicion.

"Deputy Administrator Tian, General Zhang has sent a secret order," the deputy general reported as he rushed into Tian Feng's main tent without delay.

"Present it," Tian Feng ordered with a nod.

A guard took Zhang He's secret message and handed it to Tian Feng, who opened it and allowed a smile to form on his face. He trusted Zhang He's abilities. Compared to the straightforward nature of Yan Liang and Wen Chou, Zhang He was outwardly fierce but meticulous in detail. Because of this, Tian Feng had confidence in executing such a plan.

After reading the message, Tian Feng threw it into the oil lamp, burning it to ashes.

"You should get some rest," Tian Feng said lightly, feeling more assured about the upcoming plan. He dismissed the deputy general with a wave of his hand.

"Understood," the deputy general responded with a bow, then quietly left the tent.

As Tian Feng exhaled a breath of relief, he began to carefully consider the terms proposed by Chen Gong.

Chen Xi had been quite ruthless, offering Chen Gong extremely favorable terms. Since they had no intention of recruiting Lu Bu, they could afford to offer Chen Gong generous conditions, knowing that he wouldn't be a threat. With this approach, there was no need for Chen Gong to make outrageous demands—Liu Yan's offer alone was enough to tempt him.

Moreover, Chen Gong had some admiration for Liu Bei's aspirations. As Liu Bei's strength continued to grow, those who had once dismissed his goals as mere fantasy or empty talk were now forced to take them seriously.

Strength brings confidence. It's like how Lu Bu could claim to be invincible under the heavens—even though many cursed him in their hearts, they still had to acknowledge it. Similarly, those who once saw Liu Bei as a minor figure now saw him as a giant, forcing them to reconsider their previous mockery.

Some even began to believe that Liu Bei might truly achieve his ambitions. This "might" reflected a growing consideration among the wise, a significant step from the previous ridicule.

Clearly, Chen Gong was now leaning toward Liu Bei, and the terms offered by Liu Yan were so generous that even Chen Gong found them a bit overwhelming. If not for the sincerity he sensed from Liu Bei's side, Chen Gong might have thought Liu Bei was simply trying to deceive him. However, after much consideration, Chen Gong realized that Liu Bei seemed genuinely unsure of how to deal with Lu Bu.

What Tian Feng didn't know was that Chen Gong's negotiations with their side couldn't compare to the progress he had made with Liu Bei's side. The only sticking point in Chen Gong's discussions with Liu Yan was Lu Bu; otherwise, they would have reached an agreement long ago. Liu Bei's side had even offered Zhang Liao, Gao Shun, Cao Xing, Hao Meng, and Cheng Lian positions with extremely favorable terms. For example, Zhang Liao would be promoted directly to deputy general of a corps, and after some training and proof of his abilities, he could even command a full army!

The problem was that Lu Bu hadn't done anything to betray Chen Gong, so Chen Gong couldn't abandon him. As for the terms offered by Tian Feng, they were good, but compared to Liu Bei's offer—excluding the matter of Lu Bu—they fell short.

This was unavoidable. After all, Chen Xi had essentially taken the favorable terms Yuan Shao could offer Lu Bu and distributed a significant portion of them to Chen Gong and his men. Naturally, this made the offers more attractive.

Because of this, the negotiations had reached a deadlock. Chen Gong and Liu Yan kept revisiting old points, trying to finalize terms and join Liu Bei's side, while Tian Feng continuously revisited their discussions, hoping to bring Lu Bu and his generals over to their side.

Overall, this situation was nothing short of tragic. Regardless of the misfortune, negotiations had to continue. And when talks failed, it would come down to who had the stronger fist. Fortunately, Liu Bei's fist was strong enough now.

"Greetings, Commander," Guan Yu, Guo Jia, and Xu Chu, along with other generals and officers, stepped out of the camp to welcome Chen Xi. At times like this, when the armies converged, proper protocol had to be observed—no one would act out of line.

Before Chen Xi could speak, Guan Yu handed over the military seal to him. As the commander of this campaign, Chen Xi needed to hold the seal to legitimize his authority.

"Let's return to camp," Chen Xi said as he took the reins, leading the way back. Despite his dislike for riding, he had to mount a horse for the formal entry into camp.

Once inside, the atmosphere relaxed. After everyone shared updates on recent events, the conversation naturally shifted back to the earlier ambush.

"In that case, we should attack Tian Feng's main camp," Guo Jia suggested after hearing the details of the ambush. Zhao Yun hadn't elaborated, but Guo Jia quickly proposed this course of action.

"Oh? You think so too?" Chen Xi asked, curious. Based on his assessment, Guo Jia shouldn't have been able to view the situation from this angle, considering there was still the possibility of Lu Bu benefiting as a third party.

Chapter 613: Is the Curtain About to Rise?

"Don't tell me you're not," Guo Jia teased with a playful grin.

"Of course I am, but I just didn't expect you to be so certain," Chen Xi replied with a smile. It was quite surprising that Guo Jia had come to this conclusion.

"No, quite the opposite. I'm not certain, but I feel it doesn't matter anymore. Whether it's Yuan Shao's doing or not is irrelevant. Defeating Yuan Shao is what truly matters. If we don't, everything else is just empty talk. And as for someone else benefiting from the chaos, they need to have the foundation to do so," Guo Jia said with confidence, shaking his head.

Zhao Yun was at a loss for words. He realized that both Chen Xi and Guo Jia thought in unconventional ways, not following the usual paths of reasoning. However, Guo Jia made more sense—regardless of who was behind the attack, it was still a reason to go after Yuan Shao.

"..." Chen Xi fell silent for a moment, then slowly nodded. "You're right. We're past the point of careful scheming. Let's use our strength to show Chen Gong who the true ruler of the Central Plains is!"

"Not just him, but the whole world," Guo Jia added with a slight nod and a confident expression. "I can already feel the grim and bloodthirsty atmosphere of the battlefield in the air. I have a feeling that our war with the North is about to officially begin."

Chen Xi was taken aback. In that moment, he vaguely felt as if he had grasped some crucial insight. His expression turned thoughtful, but as the feeling faded, he looked up and said, "Impossible. The decisive battle for control of the Central Plains won't happen until we're fully prepared."

"Let's hope so..." Guo Jia replied, casting a meaningful glance at Chen Xi. There were some things that no amount of planning could change, and if both sides were still unprepared, it might be better to strike first.

"Don't do anything unnecessary," Chen Xi warned, eyeing Guo Jia, worried that he might provoke a full-scale war before they were ready.

"Don't worry, I won't. But my instincts tell me that some things won't be swayed by our will alone," Guo Jia said, his expression hesitant. It was the first time Chen Xi had seen such uncertainty in Guo Jia.

"If that happens, we'll deal with it. Even if Yuan Shao's foundation is deep, do you really think we would lose? Although he's becoming increasingly formidable, what difference does it make?" Chen Xi spoke with composure, though he couldn't help feeling a bit uneasy.

"Even if we're not fully prepared, the worst that could happen is that we won't be able to both conquer and govern the world at the same time. If chaos ensues, we'll just restore order afterward. I, Zijing, Kongming, and Wenru are all skilled in such matters!" Chen Xi's unease spurred him to resolve that if Guo Jia's prediction did come true, they would face it head-on. His confidence in their abilities was unwavering.

"You're right," Guo Jia nodded, dropping the subject. He then turned to Zhao Yun. "Zilong, are you ready to face Lu Bu this time? Do you have confidence?"

"In this world, I doubt anyone has confidence when facing Lu Bu," Zhao Yun responded with a wry smile. Not everyone could match Zhang Fei's mindset. For most, claiming confidence against the strongest warrior was mere bravado.

"Good. In that case, after lunch, we'll challenge him," Guo Jia said with a smile. "With General Guan and General Xu standing by, you can fight without worry. There will be no danger."

Guo Jia and Chen Xi exchanged glances, both understanding each other's intentions.

"That's fine. Although I'm confident I can escape from Lu Bu unscathed, having someone to back me up is reassuring. Since the last time we faced off at Hulao Pass, I'm curious to see how much closer I've gotten to him," Zhao Yun nodded, showing no fear of Lu Bu.

"Be careful, Zilong," Guan Yu said, placing a hand on Zhao Yun's shoulder. He infused a bit of his inner energy into Zhao Yun to help him gauge his own strength, then let go with a satisfied nod.

"I will be careful. The difference isn't as vast as I feared. He's indeed powerful, but not invincible," Zhao Yun reassured Guan Yu after sensing the strength Guan Yu had demonstrated.

"We're counting on you," Guan Yu said, patting Zhao Yun's shoulder. Although Guan Yu was always brimming with confidence, even he had no good strategy against the monstrous Lu Bu. Despite the suppression of inner energy by the battlefield's cloud energy, the difference in their abilities was overwhelming, and Guan Yu knew it.

"Take care, General Zhao," Xu Chu said with a bitter smile. "Before I fought Lu Bu, I thought all inner energy masters were about the same. But after facing him, I realized that guy is a freak of nature. Maybe he traded his personality and intellect for sheer strength."

"That might be the case. Who knows, maybe his muscles have taken over his brain—and who knows, maybe they've reached his soul too," Chen Xi suddenly quipped.

Chen Xi's remark didn't distract the others, though. Guo Jia had witnessed this reaction several times recently—mentioning Lu Bu always had this effect. His terrifying strength left a lasting impression on everyone.

"By the way, Zilong, that sword is yours now," Guan Yu said, changing the subject as his gaze fell on the sword at Zhao Yun's waist. He smiled and added, "It's a fine sword, but I rarely use it. Consider it yours."

"Thank you," Zhao Yun replied with a smile, drawing the Yitian Sword from its sheath. This sword had been captured by Guan Yu during the battle in Xuzhou, along with the Golden Armor and the steed Zhaohuang Feidian, which Guan Yu now rode.

"General Guan, let me gift you a fine steed in return. On the battlefield, only a great horse can bring out our full potential," Zhao Yun said as he swung the Yitian Sword and then mentioned Guan Yu's mount with a smile.

"No need," Guan Yu shook his head slightly.

There weren't many exceptional horses in the world, and Zhaohuang Feidian was already one of the best. It was at the peak of the Qi Refinement stage, just a hair's breadth away from breaking through to the next level. But that small difference was as vast as heaven and earth.

The most noticeable difference was that a horse at the Inner Qi Separation stage could run through the air, whereas a Qi Refinement stage steed could only gallop on land.

As for other differences, if an ordinary horse was a hindrance to Guan Yu in battle, then a steed like Zhaohuang Feidian would offer only a slight improvement. Only a horse at the Inner Qi Separation stage could significantly enhance his combat power. Unfortunately, such steeds were rare and hard to come by!

Of course, Zhaohuang Feidian's current limitations were due to its age—just three years old. It couldn't compare to Chitu, who had been fighting alongside Lu Bu since the age of two, but it had great potential to reach the Inner Qi Separation stage.

Zhao Yun chuckled as he walked out of the tent. He whistled, and in an instant, Guan Yu sensed two bursts of Inner Qi Separation energy rapidly approaching. It didn't take long for him to realize what they were.

"Is that Chitu?" Guan Yu asked, surprised as he stared at the tall red horse. But then he noticed the distinctive tufts of hair on the horse and realized it wasn't Lu Bu's steed, the roaring Chitu.

Chapter 614: Making Friends Through Martial Arts

"This horse is called Curly Red Hare, a fine steed brought back by Zhang Shiping from the southern barbarians. Only the most extraordinary warriors can tame it. General Guan, do you have the spirit to conquer it?" Zhao Yun asked with a smile, patting Curly Red Hare's neck. The horse snorted and immediately dashed away like a fiery streak, while Guan Yu leaped into the air, becoming a blur of green as he landed on the horse's back.

Whether it's the fiery Red Hare or the Curly Red Hare, any Red Hare seems destined to be Guan Yu's companion. Without a Red Hare, Guan Yu's life wouldn't be complete. It's the Red Hare that truly elevates Guan Yu to the pinnacle of his journey.

After all, it was with the Red Hare that Guan Yu became the "God of War." People may forget about Guan Yu's wife or his father, but they always remember his Red Hare.

The Red Hare dashed away like a blaze of fire, but Guan Yu moved fluidly, pushing his limits as he landed on the horse's back. No matter how Curly Red Hare ran, jumped, flew, or twisted in midair, Guan Yu held on tightly, determined that this horse was meant for him.

After a series of wild maneuvers, Guan Yu finally tamed the Curly Red Hare, riding it down with satisfaction. The horse had resisted because it could sense that Guan Yu genuinely wanted to ride it, unlike Zhao Yun, who only kept it as a pet without riding it. But in the end, it couldn't escape Guan Yu.

"Thank you, Zilong," Guan Yu said, clasping his fists in gratitude as he sat on the horse. He now had a burning desire to ride the Curly Red Hare and face off against Lu Bu. He was confident that even if he couldn't win, he wouldn't get injured.

"General Guan looks like he's brimming with energy, ready to take on Lu Bu. Are you planning on sparring with him?" Guo Jia teased with a smile. He could sense Guan Yu's excitement. Ever since Zhang

Fei was injured, Guan Yu had been in low spirits. Even after sending Zhang Fei back to Xuzhou, his mood hadn't improved much.

"Lu Bu is indeed formidable. Even with the Red Hare, I'm still not his match," Guan Yu said, tugging on the horse's mane. By this time, the Curly Red Hare had completely submitted to Guan Yu, no longer resisting and even trying to curry favor by shaking its head. "But another round with him is definitely necessary."

As he spoke, Guan Yu dismounted and handed the Green Dragon Crescent Blade and Red Hare to Zhou Cang, instructing him to prepare the horse with armor and bells—everything needed to make it look magnificent, to Guan Yu's satisfaction.

"Hmm, it seems everyone is in high spirits. How about we go challenge Lu Bu this afternoon?" Chen Xi suggested. He couldn't stay in Guan Yu's camp for long; the construction of the city at Linyi was more important. To bring Chen Lan and Fan Jian over, the new city had to be built, or he wouldn't feel at ease.

"Aren't we being a bit hasty?" Chen Chi interjected. As the logistics officer of this army, he felt that challenging Lu Bu on the same afternoon that Chen Xi arrived, while the soldiers were still tired from marching and currently cooking, might be rushing things.

"We don't need many people, just a few hundred will do. While I don't particularly like Lu Bu's character, given the current situation and his courage, we could host the duel on our side," Chen Xi said after some thought. The situation hadn't yet escalated to the point of antagonizing Lu Bu, and Lu Bu's strength made it impossible to capture him.

"Yes, we can invite Lu Bu over to our side for the challenge. We don't need a large force, eight hundred to a thousand men will suffice," Guo Jia agreed, glancing at Chen Xi as he continued.

"Exactly. After all, our goal is to win Lu Bu over, and a friendly sparring session can help build rapport and bridge the gap between us," Chen Xi added with a calm smile, while Guo Jia followed up with a similar suggestion.

"Is that so?" Guan Yu frowned. While he acknowledged Lu Bu's prowess, he couldn't stand Lu Bu's lack of character.

If Lu Bu hadn't committed patricide, Guan Yu might have been willing to accept him, even if Lu Bu was arrogant, lacked social skills, and had a problematic mind. But with the crime of patricide, coupled with disloyalty and disrespect, Guan Yu couldn't imagine serving under the same roof as him.

"Just kidding—it's only a cover. If Lu Bu comes over for a friendly spar, what do you think Tian Feng would make of it?" Chen Xi chuckled, understanding Guan Yu's expression and knowing that someone as loyal and righteous as Guan Yu could never align with Lu Bu.

"Tian Feng would certainly see it as a serious threat. But given the current relationship between the three sides, he would know that there's still room to salvage the situation and would rush to renegotiate with Chen Gong," Guo Jia said with a smile, picking up the conversation.

"Tian Feng would likely go personally, leaving the camp under the command of Yuan Tan and possibly Yan Liang—Yan Liang might not even be there," Chen Chi quickly deduced, clapping his hands as he realized what was happening.

"Then we attack without hesitation," Chen Xi said with a grin. "Send a strong general with cavalry to charge in, burn and kill, then retreat. And don't forget to taunt Tian Feng—whether or not it was his doing, blame him!"

"Our forces are new here, and our formation isn't stable yet. Challenging Lu Bu to a friendly duel and trying to win him over makes sense. With Zichuan here, his status and rank are sufficient to negotiate favorable terms quickly. This will have a significant impact on Tian Feng's calculations," Guo Jia nodded, offering further explanation.

Guan Yu, Zhao Yun, and Xu Chu all came to the same realization. After a brief discussion, it was decided that the task of raiding the camp would fall to Xu Chu and Chen Chi, while Chen Xi would send a letter to Lu Bu as the commanding general.

The letter was carefully crafted through a series of discussions and eventually framed as an invitation to a friendly sparring match to foster mutual understanding and, who knows, possibly work together in the future. The language was polite and gave Lu Bu plenty of face.

"Prepare the food. Let the soldiers have a hearty meal. Oh, and prepare lunch for Lu Bu's side too. Maybe not too much meat, but make sure there's plenty of steamed buns and rice," Chen Xi said with a

smile. After all, for many soldiers who had often gone hungry, even plain steamed buns with a bit of salt were satisfying enough.

"We're not short on food. Since it's a friendly spar, let's leave a good impression," Chen Chi agreed, though he sighed as he remembered Lu Bu's suspicious nature. "I'm just worried Lu Bu won't eat it."

"Don't worry. With his strength, even poison couldn't kill him. Besides, he knows no one would resort to such underhanded tactics at this level," Chen Xi replied casually.

"Since it's a friendly spar, we should provide ample food and drink. Cook the remaining half of the beef, and prepare a large jar of medicinal spirits, slightly diluted, along with a smaller jar of undiluted liquor. If we're going to show sincerity, let's show it fully!" Guo Jia shot a glance at Chen Xi, a bit dissatisfied with his stinginess. After all, this was supposed to be a friendly exchange through martial arts!

Chapter 615: The Cause of Yesterday

After everyone agreed on the plan, Chen Xi, as the commander-in-chief, personally penned a letter to Lu Bu, inviting him to a friendly duel.

Chen Xi had no idea how Lu Bu would react upon reading this letter. Although many years had passed, Lu Bu still occasionally recalled the letter he received at Hulao Pass whenever he felt lonely.

That letter was the only time Lu Bu received unconditional assistance from his fellow Bingzhou countrymen. The more he was looked down upon, the more Lu Bu wanted to prove himself, and because of this, he became even more determined to repay such kindness.

Moreover, in Lu Bu's eyes, the people who helped him back then were his fellow countrymen, not his subordinates, so he considered their aid an act of kindness rather than an obligation.

This was why, whenever Lu Bu felt lonely, he would recall that letter. He even went as far as to recreate it from memory, constantly reminiscing about his past in Bingzhou. That letter represented Lu Bu's last emotional connection to his homeland. Though he had destroyed the original in a fit of anger, it remained etched in his memory, one of the last refuges for his heart.

For this reason, when Lu Bu received the letter sent by Chen Xi, his first reaction was a sense of familiarity. The handwriting felt so familiar, and the tone of the letter evoked a sense of nostalgia, even though Lu Bu couldn't quite place where he had seen it before. He didn't connect it with the recreated letter he kept close to his heart.

Though he couldn't recall the exact origin, Lu Bu couldn't help but feel a sense of goodwill toward the person who wrote the letter. Compared to Zhang Fei, who had provoked him, the author of this letter was clearly polite and respectful.

"Fengxian, what does the letter say?" Chen Gong asked upon noticing the rare smile on Lu Bu's face. Seeing Lu Bu's reaction, Chen Gong set aside his worries, recalling the last time Zhang Fei had provoked Lu Bu.

"Chen Zichuan has invited me to a friendly duel," Lu Bu replied with a smile. "For some reason, seeing this handwriting feels familiar. It lifts my spirits. Gongtai, what do you think?"

Chen Gong was momentarily stunned. A single letter could lift Lu Bu's spirits to such an extent? It seemed almost unbelievable. But seeing Lu Bu's calm demeanor and genuine curiosity, a stark contrast to the anger and frustration he'd shown after Zhang Fei's provocation, Chen Gong realized the letter had a significant effect.

"In that case, why not go and meet them?" Chen Gong suggested. In his view, if Chen Xi could calm Lu Bu and prevent him from becoming agitated, it indicated that Liu Bei's camp was serious about negotiating with Lu Bu and had sent Chen Xi to handle it personally.

"I was thinking the same," Lu Bu nodded, speaking with a rare tranquility. He couldn't explain why, but receiving this letter had greatly improved his mood.

"How many men do you plan to bring with you?" Chen Gong asked with a smile.

"Why bring many? Since it's a friendly duel, I'll just take Wen Yuan with me," Lu Bu replied. Although he couldn't recall where he'd seen the familiar handwriting, he subconsciously associated it with the memory of sharing that letter with Zhang Liao.

"What?" Chen Gong was taken aback. He couldn't believe Lu Bu would make such a risky decision, all because of a letter. What exactly was written in that letter to make Lu Bu so determined?

"General, you mustn't go alone! If the enemy ambushes you with elite troops, it might be difficult even for you to escape unscathed!" Chen Gong stood up immediately, trying to dissuade Lu Bu. This was madness!

"What do I have to fear?" Lu Bu laughed. "With my Halberd in hand and Red Hare beneath me, I am unstoppable. Even if they did ambush us, who could stop Wen Yuan and me from leaving?"

Seeing that Chen Gong was about to continue his objections, Lu Bu's expression turned serious. "This is a friendly duel. Liu Xuande is known for his integrity and faithfulness. He wouldn't dare act rashly, especially with Yuan Benchu keeping him in check. What do I have to fear?"

At this moment, Lu Bu's determination became clear. He was adamant about going, and he wanted to appear as heroic as possible. Though he couldn't recall why the handwriting seemed familiar, his subconscious urged him to maintain his dignity in front of the person who wrote the letter.

"Wen Yuan, would you accompany me?" Lu Bu turned to Zhang Liao.

"I would be honored to go with you, Fengxian," Zhang Liao replied, using Lu Bu's courtesy name instead of his usual title. This was a rare occasion where Lu Bu displayed the heroism and hope he once had, unburdened by the usual pressures.

"Good! Then we shall go together. Gongtai, you will remain in charge of the camp, and make sure Gongzheng oversees the defenses," Lu Bu commanded, his good mood leading him to temporarily set aside any disputes with Gao Shun.

"Very well," Chen Gong agreed after some thought. After all, with Lu Bu's unmatched prowess and Red Hare's speed, no one could stop him if he wanted to leave.

Moreover, Zhang Liao was a formidable warrior himself, so he wouldn't be a burden. If Chen Xi did act treacherously, it would tarnish the reputation Liu Bei had painstakingly built over time, and Lu Bu simply wasn't worth such a significant gamble for Chen Xi.

Afterward, Lu Bu, filled with curiosity, went to groom Red Hare. He couldn't explain why, but the sight of that familiar handwriting had left him feeling inexplicably excited. Despite being unable to recall the reason, he embraced the excitement rather than suppress it.

Once Lu Bu had polished Red Hare's coat to a glossy shine, adorned the horse with its finest armor, and attached golden bells, he finally felt satisfied. He then went to prepare his own attire.

Lu Bu knew exactly what he would wear—his finest armor, the same Tang lion armor he had worn at Hulao Pass. He would don the beast-belt sash, have Diao Chan personally place the three-pronged golden crown upon his head, and wear the bright red Shu brocade cloak. He would go to meet the author of that letter with the dignity he felt they deserved.

At that moment, Lu Bu's mind was a whirlwind of emotions. He didn't fully understand why he needed to be so meticulous, but once he donned his armor, his chaotic thoughts faded away, leaving only a calm mindset and a sense of reverence, as if he were about to meet a long-lost friend.

Chapter 616: The Final Step

Zhang Liao waited outside the camp for Lu Bu to join him on their journey. When Lu Bu finally appeared, Zhang Liao felt a fleeting sense of *déjà vu*, as if he was witnessing the same Lu Bu who once single-handedly challenged the heroes of the world—proud, aloof, yet undeniably heroic.

Lu Bu rode out of the camp on Red Hare, and in that moment, his mind transcended its limits. For the first time since Xiang Yu, someone had taken the most crucial step in mastering the "spirit" aspect of the trinity of essence, energy, and spirit.

"Let's go, Wen Yuan. I don't know why, but I suddenly feel as if I've transcended many things. I've gained a new perspective," Lu Bu said with a bold smile. "Come, let's meet them."

"Let's go, Fengxian!" Zhang Liao responded, stunned by Lu Bu's transformation. He bowed deeply, following Lu Bu closely, like a green leaf complementing a brilliant flower.

As Lu Bu stepped out of the camp, nearly every Internal Energy practitioner across the Central Plains felt a sudden tremor in their hearts. Almost instinctively, they all turned to face the same direction.

"Erlai, what's wrong?" Cao Cao asked, noticing that Dian Wei seemed uneasy as they faced off against Yang Feng and Zhang Ji in Sizhou.

"I don't know, but there's something coming from that direction... something that really bothers me," Dian Wei grumbled, pointing toward Yanzhou.

"Big brother, I feel the same," Xiahou Dun added, frowning as his left eye, which had never fully healed since being blinded by Gan Ning, twitched uncomfortably.

"Gongming, what's going on?" Yang Feng asked, confused as he saw Xu Huang clutching his double axes with a faraway look in his eyes.

"I felt a wave of energy from the east that made my heart race," Xu Huang replied, staring toward the horizon in shock.

"Bo Yuan, what are you looking at?" Zhang Ji asked his nephew, Zhang Xiu, who seemed distracted.

"Uncle, I think Lu Bu has taken the final step," Zhang Xiu murmured. Though he had reached the pinnacle of Internal Energy, he had no idea how to take the next step, his path seemingly at a dead end.

"The final step?" Zhang Ji asked, shocked. He knew his nephew was among the top ten fighters in the land, but what exactly did this "final step" mean?

"Yes. If Refining Qi into Steel is the limit of human potential, then Internal Energy has already surpassed what it means to be human. The next level is something beyond humanity," Zhang Xiu replied, his eyes flashing with a deadly seriousness. He couldn't fathom what lay beyond his current abilities, but Lu Bu had already taken that step.

"Is he that powerful?" Zhang Ji asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"Yes. He is incredibly powerful," Zhang Xiu muttered to himself, then added, as if to clarify, "Truly powerful."

"Zijian, what are you looking at?" Liu Ye asked Hua Xiong, who had suddenly reined in his horse.

"Lu Bu... he's broken through," Hua Xiong said, immediately recognizing the tremor in his heart as a sign of Lu Bu's advancement.

"Broken through?" Liu Ye was momentarily stunned, then quickly realized what Hua Xiong meant—Lu Bu had surpassed Internal Energy.

"Well, it's out of our hands now. We'll leave it to Zichuan to worry about. For now, I plan to speak with Cao Cao and see if we can form an alliance. After all, we're both here to rescue the Emperor," Liu Ye remarked casually.

In Yanzhou, Zhao Yun, Guan Yu, and Xu Chu all felt the tremor in Lu Bu's spirit the moment he broke through, and they instinctively stood up. Even Han Qiong, who had been concealing himself, was shocked into revealing his presence.

"What happened?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled by their sudden reactions.

"Lu Bu has taken the first step," Zhao Yun said in disbelief.

"No wonder he's Lu Bu," Han Qiong murmured, regaining his composure before disappearing once more.

That afternoon, Chen Xi and the others waited for Lu Bu's arrival with a mix of anticipation and uncertainty.

At the same time, in Yuan Shao's camp, Yan Liang also felt the unsettling energy. Tian Feng, however, was thrilled. The stronger Lu Bu became, the more valuable he would be as an ally. But when news arrived that Lu Bu and Zhang Liao had gone alone to Chen Xi's camp, Tian Feng was struck as if by lightning.

Going alone to the enemy camp? To Tian Feng, this wasn't a show of courage; it was a sign of submission. Without hesitation, Tian Feng decided to go personally to Lu Bu's camp. This time, he would not play any tricks. He was prepared to offer anything to keep Lu Bu from siding with Liu Bei, even if it meant convincing him to remain neutral.

"Yan Liang!" Tian Feng called out after preparing gifts.

"Guard the camp carefully. Prepare for the possibility that Lu Bu might defect to Liu Bei," Tian Feng ordered solemnly. After all, once someone submits, it's common to prove loyalty through battle.

"Understood!" Yan Liang replied earnestly, seeing the fear in Tian Feng's eyes.

"If Lu Bu and Chen Xi attack together, hold out for just one day. Our reinforcements will arrive soon!" Tian Feng continued. The situation was dire, but they hadn't yet fallen into the abyss.

"Understood!" Yan Liang saluted, "I will defend the camp with all my might and give them no opportunity."

"Good. I'll go speak with Chen Gong," Tian Feng said, trying to maintain his composure as he hurried to Chen Gong's camp. However, his quickened pace betrayed his anxiety.

Meanwhile, after Lu Bu's departure, Chen Gong spared no effort in hosting Liu Yan. The terms Liu Yan had previously offered were already quite favorable, and now, with Lu Bu meeting Chen Xi personally, Chen Gong felt confident that an agreement was imminent. Naturally, he treated Liu Yan like one of their own.

"Wait, what?" Liu Yan nearly spat out his drink, his eyes wide with shock. The wine dribbled down his chin. "You said Zichuan is personally negotiating with General Lu?"

"Yes, indeed!" Chen Gong replied with a smile. "I thought before that Lord Xuande might be hesitant because of his reservations about General Lu, but it seems I was mistaken. Please forgive any previous offenses, Weisuo." With that, Chen Gong raised his cup and downed it.

"Of course, of course. No need to apologize, Gongtai. We were both just doing our jobs. Now, let's enjoy our wine together," Liu Yan replied, trying to maintain a facade of calm, even though his mind was in turmoil.

Chen Zichuan negotiating with Lu Bu? Liu Yan couldn't believe it. It didn't align with their overall strategy. Liu Bei's forces were strong enough that adding Lu Bu wouldn't make much of a difference. Moreover, Lu Bu was difficult to place—keeping him might create more problems than benefits.

If Lu Bu were stationed elsewhere and swayed by someone, he could become a serious threat. If kept in the main camp and he became discontented, who could stop him?

For these reasons, Liu Yan immediately sensed that something was amiss when Chen Gong mentioned this. Whether or not his suspicions were correct, his survival was paramount, so he began planning his escape from Lu Bu's camp.

Chapter 617: Worth a Try

Chen Xi believed that mealtime shouldn't be spoiled by unpleasant matters, so he had the area cleaned thoroughly. If there had been dancers and singers, it would have been a perfect setting to enjoy beef and wine on a crisp autumn day while visiting friends.

"Not bad, right? I think we gave him plenty of respect," Chen Xi said with a smile to Guo Jia. "How did I do?"

"Indeed, very well," Guo Jia responded with a grin. "Zhongkang is already prepared and ready to move at any time, but I didn't expect you to have such a formidable bodyguard. However, to avoid any backlash from Lu Bu, I think it would be wise to have him sit up front. While Yun Chang and Zhongkang might not notice him, Lu Fengxian surely would."

"You're right," Chen Xi agreed, then turned and called out, "Elder Han, I'm sure you heard that." There was no response from behind him. Just as Chen Xi was about to explain to Guo Jia, he noticed that Han Qiong had already appeared in front of him.

"Elder Han, please take a seat," Guo Jia said with a slight bow. However, Han Qiong merely walked calmly to a seat slightly behind the main one and sat there, seemingly lost in his own thoughts.

After arranging everything, Chen Xi and the others waited for Lu Bu to arrive. If Zhang Fei had been present, he would have undoubtedly cursed Lu Bu for making them wait. But without Zhang Fei, everyone was civil and patiently awaited Lu Bu's arrival.

"He's coming," Zhao Yun, ever sharp-eyed, was the first to notice a small figure in the distance. Although Lu Bu was neither galloping nor moving slowly, Zhao Yun could sense the relaxed yet joyful aura emanating from him.

"This complicates things. Quickly call Zhongkang back," Guo Jia said immediately. "It seems that plans can't keep up with changes. Lu Bu actually came with only one person."

"As expected of Lu Bu," Chen Xi said, standing up with a smile. This kind of boldness was truly fitting for the title of the strongest warrior in the land.

Since parting at Hulao Pass years ago, Chen Xi was once again face-to-face with Lu Bu. Compared to the arrogance he displayed at Hulao, the Lu Bu standing before him now, clad in the same armor, had gained a certain steadiness. Time had indeed left its mark on him.

Even so, the moment Chen Xi saw Lu Bu, he couldn't help but feel a sense of awe. Despite being accompanied by only one person, Lu Bu exuded an overwhelming presence, as if the heavens and earth themselves served merely as a backdrop for him. This was Lu Bu—the undefeated and invincible warrior!

"Lu Fengxian of Jiuyuan greets Lord Chen," Lu Bu said as he reined in his horse, appearing at the meeting grounds in an instant. He cupped his hands in a respectful salute, showing no trace of his former arrogance.

"Wen Hou, there's no need for such formality. Please, take a seat," Chen Xi gestured with a hand, inwardly sighing. Lu Bu was indeed a remarkable figure, but he had repeatedly chosen the wrong path. Yet, despite all the mistakes, his brilliance couldn't be overshadowed. Truly, he lived up to the reputation of being "Lu Bu among men."

"Very well!" Lu Bu said, tossing his crimson battle cloak aside as he strode forward, heading for the seat of honor on the left. Chen Xi couldn't help but think, This is what it means to stride with the presence of a dragon and a tiger—no wonder he's the strongest warrior of our time.

"Yanmen's Zhang Wen Yuan greets Lord Chen," Zhang Liao said as he saluted Chen Xi with his spear.

"General Zhang, please, take a seat as well," Chen Xi said with a smile, then glanced at Zhao Yun. As expected, Zhao Yun subtly shook his head. No matter how well Zhang He disguised himself, the rigidity of his internal energy couldn't be hidden. Zhang Liao, on the other hand, had a more fluid internal energy.

At that moment, Guan Yu and Zhao Yun were also impressed by Lu Bu's courage. They both nodded slightly in acknowledgment. Neither of them was the type to stubbornly refuse to admit the truth, and they were genuinely struck by Lu Bu's boldness. Regardless of his character, they had to admit that Lu Bu was indeed an extraordinary person.

"As for the matter of our friendly martial exchange, we'll discuss that later. Wen Hou and Wen Yuan, I'm truly surprised by your arrival. My previous preparations now seem trivial. All guards, return to the camp. Since this is a friendly meeting, we'll show our utmost respect. Ruan Yu, lead the soldiers back to the camp and have Zhongkang join us here!" Chen Xi stood up and saluted, showing his respect for Lu Bu's courage.

Given that Lu Bu and Zhang Liao had come alone, Chen Xi immediately realized that Tian Feng's camp would now be on high alert. Thus, it would be unwise to launch an attack on their camp.

Moreover, Lu Bu's current demeanor suggested that negotiations might be possible. There was a saying, Appearance reflects the heart, and Lu Bu now exuded a strong sense of calm and confidence.

"Understood!" Ruan Yu stood up and led the seven or eight hundred soldiers out of the area, leaving only a dozen or so soldiers to serve food and drink. The transition was seamless, truly a display of military discipline.

Lu Bu nodded at Chen Xi. With the departure of the soldiers, Lu Bu felt completely at ease. Without the interference of internal energy, no one in the world could stop him. This only further convinced him of Chen Xi's sincerity.

As expected of the renowned Lord Chen—upright and straightforward. Joining Liu Bei's camp seems like a wise choice. None of the people here are narrow-minded, Zhang Liao thought with a smile, feeling that Lu Bu was ready to join Liu Bei.

Thanks to Chen Xi's skillful handling of the situation and Lu Bu's cooperative attitude, the atmosphere soon became lively. Even Guan Yu and Zhao Yun, impressed by Lu Bu's boldness, refrained from causing any tension. Surprisingly, Zhang Liao even performed a sword dance on a whim.

"Oh, isn't this Xu Pangzi?" Lu Bu laughed when he saw Xu Chu rushing over, clearly in high spirits.

"Wen Hou, I heard that you came here with just one other person. I thought it was a joke, but it turns out it's true," Xu Chu replied in his deep, booming voice.

Unlike the others, Xu Chu, despite his unwavering loyalty, had a deep respect for strength. Though he didn't approve of Lu Bu's actions, he greatly admired his abilities.

"Hahaha, I salute you with this cup!" Lu Bu said, his face flushed with a pleasant buzz from the wine. He appreciated Xu Chu's straightforward compliment. He preferred this kind of honesty, as he had never been good at scheming.

"Thank you, Wen Hou," Xu Chu said, downing his drink in one gulp, only to be taken aback. "Is this... alcohol?"

Indeed, Chen Xi had previously experimented with distilling alcohol, but the highest concentration they had achieved was only around 60 degrees, with most being in the 50s. Still, the name "alcohol" stuck.

Xu Chu's reaction made it clear to Lu Bu that Chen Xi and his companions had gone to great lengths to please him, further increasing his satisfaction.

"Alcohol, what a fitting name. This is indeed the purest essence of wine! It's the finest strong liquor I've ever tasted," Lu Bu exclaimed with a hearty laugh. "With such excellent wine and a slightly tipsy atmosphere, and since this gathering is about exchanging martial arts, as the guest, why don't I go first?"

Chapter 618: Next Time

As they spoke, Lu Bu leaped into the air, and with a casual swing of his Sky Piercer halberd, the area within a few dozen meters suddenly came to a halt. It was as if everything had been restrained, and everyone felt a sudden weight on their bodies. Then, Lu Bu's halberd moved, wielding immense power as he began to swing it with unparalleled might.

Lu Bu wielded his halberd with ease, unaware of why he felt so unrestrained at that moment. Although he had never been overly protective of his techniques, he had never displayed them so clearly before.

The overwhelming momentum continued to build, and a golden halo appeared around Lu Bu, encasing him in a sphere of energy that spanned fifty meters. He stood like a divine being, with an aura so intense that it almost became tangible.

Xu Chu stared at Lu Bu with his mouth agape. The difference between this and the last time they fought was stark—Lu Bu must have been holding back before. The gap in power was simply too vast. Within that fifty-meter radius, Lu Bu's aura had almost solidified.

Han Qiong unconsciously picked up a cup of wine, finally understanding Wang Yue's words: "After Hulao Pass, Lu Bu's momentum has reached its peak. No one in the world can match him anymore." Truly, a monster.

Guan Yu and Zhao Yun exchanged glances. Seeing Lu Bu's technique, a glimmer of battle intent flashed in their eyes. Zhao Yun slowly reached for his silver spear and stood up.

"Wen Hou, such a splendid performance deserves a worthy partner. Yun humbly requests to join you," Zhao Yun said, gripping his spear tightly as he looked at Lu Bu.

"Come, Zhao Zilong! It has been years since our last encounter at Hulao Pass. Let me see how much you've improved!" Lu Bu swung his halberd horizontally, and the immense aura that had enveloped him was instantly retracted. Glowing with a golden light, he turned to face Zhao Yun.

"Please enlighten me!" Zhao Yun responded, holding his spear as he charged directly at Lu Bu, a silver-blue light trailing behind him.

With a thunderous explosion, both figures were sent flying back. However, Lu Bu quickly halted his backward momentum, his aura only growing stronger as he charged toward the silver-blue light that was Zhao Yun.

"Zhao Zilong, you truly have mastered both metal and water elements, combining rigidity with flexibility. You use the strongest metal energy to cultivate a flexible internal force, and the most flexible water energy to cultivate a rigid internal force!" Lu Bu, engulfed in golden light, chased after Zhao Yun, his halberd crashing down with immense force.

After their first clash, Zhao Yun had gauged Lu Bu's strength—he was powerful, incredibly so, but not unbeatable. So when Lu Bu deduced his cultivation method, Zhao Yun wasn't too surprised.

As Lu Bu's halberd swung down with enough force to cleave him in two, Zhao Yun remained calm. His right hand trembled as he raised his spear, and with a deft twist, he turned defense into offense, aiming directly at Lu Bu's throat with blinding speed.

"Clang!" Lu Bu's face lit up with joy as he parried Zhao Yun's spear with the edge of his halberd. However, Zhao Yun twisted his wrist, causing his spear to bend and rise. Stepping onto Lu Bu's halberd, his silver spear vibrated violently, igniting like a phoenix as it shot toward the sky.

Lu Bu gripped his halberd with both hands and slashed down, shattering the phoenix into pieces. Then, he continued to swing his halberd relentlessly at Zhao Yun.

"Clang! Clang! Clang!" A rapid series of thunderous clashes echoed as Zhao Yun and Lu Bu engaged in a fierce battle, their weapons colliding like thunder and lightning.

After another clash, Zhao Yun, sensing the futility of his current approach, withdrew a hundred paces.

"Why did you stop attacking? Your 'Hundred Birds Facing the Phoenix' and 'Hundred Phoenixes Facing the Sun' are formidable techniques. Why are you holding back?" Lu Bu asked as he hovered in the air, staring at Zhao Yun.

"Those techniques cause too much destruction. They should only be used in life-or-death situations. Besides..." Zhao Yun trailed off, his gaze fixed on Lu Bu. He had a feeling that even if he used both techniques simultaneously, they might still be ineffective against Lu Bu.

The stronger he became, the more Zhao Yun realized that neither 'Hundred Birds Facing the Phoenix' nor 'Hundred Phoenixes Facing the Sun' truly suited him. Although these were top-tier techniques, he felt that they didn't fully bring out his potential. He needed a martial art that truly aligned with his strength.

"Wen Hou, Yun has one technique. Please evaluate it," Zhao Yun said, gripping his spear as he slowly advanced toward Lu Bu.

"Come!" Lu Bu responded, his halberd swinging with immense force toward Zhao Yun's silver spear. However, at the last moment, Zhao Yun's spear trembled, exploding into a flurry of spear strikes—some thrusting, some sweeping, some stabbing, and some parrying. It was as if every spear technique in existence was manifested in that single strike.

Lu Bu was momentarily stunned, but a smile quickly spread across his face. He unleashed his full strength, swinging his halberd with unstoppable force. One sweep of his halberd shattered countless spear strikes, yet more immediately followed. As the battle intensified, the techniques began to simplify.

Thousands of strikes gradually condensed into hundreds. Basic thrusts and stabs evolved into complex techniques, but even these techniques—'Phoenix Pecking,' 'Hundred Phoenixes Facing the Sun,' and 'Hundred Birds Facing the Phoenix'—were continuously refined, until only one strike remained.

"Break!" Zhao Yun shouted as he unleashed a single, extraordinary thrust. In that moment, every technique he had ever mastered was concentrated into this one strike.

"Bring it on!" Lu Bu roared as he too reached his peak, his halberd crashing down with unparalleled might. Zhao Yun's spear shot forward with unstoppable momentum.

Lu Bu's halberd collided with Zhao Yun's spear, and the spear split into seven parts, striking at Lu Bu's vital points like a serpent. Zhao Yun's mastery of both rigidity and flexibility was on full display.

Although momentarily overwhelmed, Lu Bu remained composed. Realizing that there was no turning back, he reversed his halberd and parried Zhao Yun's strikes with the shaft. In one sweeping motion, he shattered six of the seven spear strikes. Only the final strike managed to collide with his halberd, producing a sharp metallic ring.

Lu Bu steadied himself, glancing at the scratch on his armor. "Zhao Zilong, you are indeed formidable. If not for the disparity in our internal energy, I might have been injured by you."

"A spent force," Zhao Yun replied with a sigh. Lu Bu's strength was awe-inspiring. Although his 'Seven Serpentine Strikes' was still in its infancy, it was designed for speed, precision, and lethality. Yet, Lu Bu had managed to block it.

"No, I can tell that you've been holding back. If you were to unleash your full internal energy, your power would far exceed this." Lu Bu said boldly, now embracing his role as a pure martial artist. "Next time, release your full strength, and we'll have another match!"

Chapter 619: The Bottom Line

"When the opportunity arises, I'll be there. I hope by then, you haven't fallen to someone else's hand," Zhao Yun said calmly, though his words carried a deeper meaning.

After their open-hearted battle, even Zhao Yun couldn't help but caution Lu Bu. Such a formidable warrior, if he were to fall victim to some scheme, it would indeed be a great loss.

"Hahaha, you needn't worry about that. How could Lu Bu, who has roamed the world undefeated, possibly die at the hands of others?" Lu Bu laughed heartily. "I will wait for you. I will stand at the peak of martial arts, waiting for your arrival. My instincts tell me that you and I will clash again, and next time, it will be a true battle at the summit!"

"Thank you for your kind words." Zhao Yun was taken aback, and for a fleeting moment, he had a vision of the icy snowfields of the northern plains, where the two would meet again in combat. This brief illusion vanished quickly, but Zhao Yun was certain it was not just his imagination.

"I'll take my leave now. General Guan will be your next opponent, and this time, there will be a surprise." Zhao Yun offered Lu Bu a respectful bow before dissipating his inner energy and descending from the sky.

Lu Bu opened his mouth, wanting to call out to Zhao Yun, knowing that Zhao Yun had more strength hidden within him, but the other had chosen not to use it.

Guan Yu, watching Lu Bu in the sky, could hear their exchange clearly. At this moment, he felt something strange about Lu Bu—the heroic figure in the sky, could that really be Lu Bu?

After landing, Zhao Yun loosely grasped the Yitian Sword with his left hand and let out a sigh. His spear technique had indeed reached its peak, but his swordsmanship was no less formidable. Compared to the intricate and mysterious "Seven Serpentine Strikes," the dual mastery of spear and sword was his greatest strength. However, until now, he had never possessed a sword worthy of fully unleashing his skill.

Gazing up at Lu Bu in the sky, Zhao Yun resolved that this time would be different. However, he had no way of knowing that after this battle, it would be a very long time before he would see Lu Bu again.

"Strategist, does he have any hope of survival?" Zhao Yun finally couldn't help but ask Chen Xi, their voices inaudible to anyone else.

"None... but then again, the heavens are unpredictable. Perhaps there is hope. Who knows? At least for now, I see no way. His heart is too wild. Other than Diao Chan, I don't know who else could tame his heart. Such a person might be moved temporarily by a moment of heroism, or might perform acts worthy of a hero out of loneliness, but his heart is too untamed..." Chen Xi did not speak aloud, but his words reached Zhao Yun's ears without missing a syllable.

"So that's it, a heart too wild," Zhao Yun sighed deeply, understanding Chen Xi's concerns. "Yes, his current bravery and heroism don't guarantee he won't revert to his old ways. The human heart needs a tether, whether it's emotions or morals. Only by restraining one's desires can one truly be called human."

"Indeed, the human heart must have a tether," Chen Xi responded without shifting his gaze from Lu Bu in the sky. "But I am curious—what has made him so heroic now?"

As Zhao Yun and Chen Xi conversed, Guan Yu and Lu Bu had already begun their duel. Guan Yu was strong, but compared to Zhao Yun's brilliance, he fell short. Each of Guan Yu's powerful strikes was unable to wound Lu Bu.

"Guan Yunchang, your strikes are powerful, but they don't last long. You have an excellent grasp of your energy, and every strike is unleashed at the peak of your spirit, which makes them immensely powerful. However, this also means that once your morale and fighting spirit stop rising, each of your strikes will only grow weaker!" Lu Bu remarked as he struck Guan Yu away with his halberd, not injuring him in the slightest. In this moment, Lu Bu truly carried the demeanor of a grandmaster.

Guan Yu remained calm, as his technique was inherently like this. His goal was always to finish the battle within ten strikes, or at least inflict a serious injury on his opponent. Even if his strength waned afterward, it would be difficult for the opponent to defeat him.

"Take my final strike, Wen Hou!" For the first time, Guan Yu addressed Lu Bu with respect. While he had always acknowledged Lu Bu's strength, he had never before called him by his honorific title. This time was different.

"Good! I, too, want to see what surprise Zhao Zilong mentioned." Lu Bu laughed, speaking to Guan Yu without the arrogance and disdain he once held.

Guan Yu whistled, and a streak of fire shot across the sky, its distinct form causing Lu Bu to pause. Unconsciously, Lu Bu also whistled, and the moment his steed, Red Hare, saw the curly-maned Red Hare, it felt an urge to charge forward. However, intimidated by Lu Bu, it hesitated. Now, at Lu Bu's command, Red Hare bolted forward.

"Red Hare?" Lu Bu clicked his tongue in amazement at Guan Yu.

"I have one strike I would like you to evaluate, Wen Hou!" Guan Yu shouted as the green-blue energy surrounding him merged with the fiery red light of his steed, intensifying until a greenish-red blaze engulfed him. His momentum surged, surpassing one peak after another until it even overshadowed Lu Bu's.

With Guan Yu's energy fully infused, everyone present could hear the dragon-like roars emanating from his Green Dragon Crescent Blade. Riding his Red Hare, Guan Yu coldly yet confidently declared, "Take my Green Dragon Crescent Slash!"

With a mighty roar, Guan Yu's Red Hare became a streak of fire, charging directly at Lu Bu.

As Guan Yu swung his blade, the sky suddenly darkened. It was as if a crescent moon glowed faintly as it cut through the sky, accompanied by a thunderous roar. The ground shook violently, and when the strike missed, it left a gaping trench several hundred meters long.

When the dust settled, both Lu Bu and Guan Yu were still mounted, hovering in the sky.

"Why did your strike miss?" Lu Bu asked, his expression momentarily conflicted before regaining composure.

"I'm not as strong as you, but I have my principles. My pride wouldn't allow me to use such a method to kill a stronger opponent!" Guan Yu replied, his breathing heavy but his tone cold and aloof. He rarely explained himself, but seeing Lu Bu's internal struggle and his eventual admission, he decided to offer an explanation.

"Principles, huh?" Lu Bu muttered to himself before regaining his composure. "You had the chance to kill me just now. I was careless—I wouldn't have been able to dodge that strike."

"..." Guan Yu's eyes widened slightly, surprised that someone like Lu Bu would admit such a thing rather than become enraged.

"But you'll never get that chance again," Lu Bu continued, his tone shifting. "You threw away your only opportunity to become unbeatable."

"Next time, I'll be stronger. My blade will be faster and more powerful," Guan Yu replied, locking eyes with Lu Bu. He could sense Lu Bu's acknowledgment.

"Moreover, I will claim the title of the strongest under heaven myself. Don't die before then!" Guan Yu declared, the impact of Lu Bu's words resonating deeply within him.

Chapter 620: A Soul Bound by Dreams

Guan Yu turned his back to Lu Bu and descended slowly to the ground. Lu Bu couldn't see Guan Yu's expression, but Chen Xi and the others could. They saw the helplessness in Guan Yu's face—perhaps Lu Bu could only be described as a man who had encountered the wrong people.

"I won't die, Guan Yunchang, and you shouldn't die either!" Lu Bu called out after Guan Yu had landed. "If we meet on the battlefield again, I will show mercy. If we don't face each other, then one day, I will repay the favor you showed me today!"

Guan Yu didn't respond, nor did he say anything like "don't show me mercy." He knew that Lu Bu truly had the right to say such things to any opponent, because he was an invincible war god. As long as he wasn't careless, it was hard for anyone in the world to kill him.

Zhang Liao, watching this scene, felt a sense of relief. Lu Bu had finally done a good deed. Zhang Liao could see clearly from below that although Zhao Yun and Guan Yu still harbored some resentment towards Lu Bu, they were impressed by his heroic and majestic display this time and did not hold any serious hostility.

As for that biggest troublemaker, the loud-mouthed Zhang Fei, Zhang Liao figured that with one in the north and the other in the south, surely such a vast land could accommodate both of them. Everything seemed to be heading in a positive direction. Next, they should be able to reach a high level of agreement and eventually join Liu Bei's forces.

With this in mind, Zhang Liao was visibly eager, waiting for the next step to begin. However, throughout the whole process, Chen Xi hadn't spoken, which made Zhang Liao feel extremely conflicted. What was the purpose of this so-called friendly exchange through martial arts? Of course, Zhang Liao realized he might be too anxious, but Chen Xi's calm demeanor was driving him crazy!

"Wen Hou, before we part, let me offer you a final toast. We live in different regions and serve different lords. Once we part today, it may be difficult to share wine together like this again," Chen Xi said, raising a cup of wine from the main seat.

Zhang Liao's heart leaped with joy. Finally, they were getting to the heart of the matter! He quickly looked at Lu Bu. Serving different regions and lords—wasn't that a hint that they could join forces? Saying that it would be hard to meet again—wasn't that suggesting that now was the time to find a way to unite?

Zhang Liao was screaming in his mind, desperately hoping Lu Bu would understand. He felt that this was his moment to step in and answer.

"Part for years to come?" Lu Bu paused, and suddenly, everything became clear to him. He realized why he had felt so excited, why he had dressed so grandly, why he had come here, and why his mood had been so good.

In an instant, Lu Bu understood everything. He had been trying to show his valor, his heroism, and his most impressive self because he wanted the approval of his fellow countrymen. He longed to return to Bingzhou, but he felt too ashamed to go back.

Bingzhou was the place that had birthed and raised him. The desire to return to his roots, his homesickness—it weighed heavily on him. How many times had the Wolf Cavalry dreamed of returning to Bingzhou? How many times had they sighed and looked north, suppressing their longing to continue following Lu Bu across the world? But Lu Bu felt too ashamed to return to Bingzhou.

The three thousand northern Wolf Cavalry had followed him in breaking the Xiongnu and battling the Xianbei, bringing glory to the Han soldiers and earning Lu Bu the title of Flying General.

When he left Bingzhou, he carried the hopes of the people there. He thought the battle in Luoyang would be easy, but upon arrival, he realized how powerful Dong Zhuo truly was.

Even under his leadership, the invincible Wolf Cavalry of Bingzhou had been defeated head-on by the Western Liang forces. If he hadn't fought his way into the Western Liang army and cut down their command banner, the Wolf Cavalry would have been routed.

That time, over three thousand of his fellow countrymen, whom he had sworn to protect, perished on the battlefield. Yet Ding Yuan insisted on continuing to fight for the throne. Lu Bu didn't understand why they had to persist. He only wanted to bring the Wolf Cavalry back safely.

Later, unable to tolerate Ding Yuan sending the Wolf Cavalry into increasingly unbalanced battles, he killed Ding Yuan after being provoked by Li Su and joined Dong Zhuo. At that time, he saw Dong Zhuo, strong and valiant, as a good choice for a protector. With such a shield, the Wolf Cavalry could suffer fewer losses.

Unfortunately, Dong Zhuo, who once said "one day you will belong to me" even as Lu Bu cut down his guards and broke his command banner, had become corrupt after entering Luoyang—rotten to the core.

Yet, despite his corruption, at least his Wolf Cavalry had survived.

But corruption is corruption. Lu Bu had acted for Diao Chan, and Dong Zhuo had died. He did not regret it, but why did Wang Yun insist on fighting?

He had failed again. With or without Dong Zhuo, the Western Liang cavalry remained terrifyingly strong. The three thousand men he had sworn to protect had been reduced to just over ten thousand. He didn't know how to explain it. He still remembered his promise to bring them back, but why were they gone? Without them, how could he go back?

With each battle, the Wolf Cavalry dwindled, and his heart grew colder. He felt that the possibility of returning to Bingzhou was becoming increasingly remote. The last time he impulsively wanted to return, he reached the border between Henei and Bingzhou. Just one more step, and he would have been home, but he hesitated and withdrew his leg.

The only thing that brought him some comfort was that letter from his fellow Bingzhou countrymen. Even though the original had been destroyed, the copy that Lu Bu himself had recreated contained all his hopes for Bingzhou.

The people of Bingzhou still remembered him. He wanted to see that fellow countryman. If that person asked him to return, he would go back—back to the Juyuan of Bingzhou that haunted his dreams, to fight against the barbarians once more.

This was the only way he could think of to return. This letter embodied everything about Bingzhou and was the most fragile part of his soul.

"Can I meet the person who wrote that letter?" At this moment, Lu Bu's throat felt dry, but he managed to voice his request.

"What letter?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled.

"The letter inviting me here," Lu Bu replied, trying to maintain his composure, though his voice trembled noticeably.

"Oh, I wrote that," Chen Xi said with a strange expression, noticing Lu Bu's reaction.

"You wrote it..." Lu Bu asked, his voice shaking.

"Yes, Wen Hou, you seem to be trembling," Chen Xi said, his expression growing more curious. What was going on?

"Did you write me a letter before, back when I was in Luoyang?" Lu Bu's face twisted slightly.