

Mythical 621

Chapter 621: Incoherent and Chaotic

"Oh, right, that did happen." Chen Xi, completely oblivious to Lu Bu's expression, tilted his head and thought for a moment. "Yes, I did write you a letter back when we were in Luoyang."

"You can go to hell!" At that moment, Lu Bu erupted like a volcano. With a furious swing of his halberd, the ground before him shattered into pieces, and the overwhelming force of the attack was directed straight at Chen Xi.

"Boom!" Zhao Yun, who had an innate sense of clarity, had already felt something was amiss the moment Lu Bu asked about the letter. As soon as Lu Bu attacked, Zhao Yun immediately stepped in with his spear to intercept the blow. However, despite Zhao Yun's efforts, the immense power behind Lu Bu's strike still surged toward Chen Xi.

As Lu Bu struck, Han Qiong was taken aback. Desperately, he tried to shield Chen Xi with his own body, hoping to keep him unharmed. Fortunately, Zhao Yun's intervention bought them a moment, and Han Qiong managed to grab Chen Xi with one hand and, with a wave of his spear, disappeared from the path of Lu Bu's attack.

"Boom!" The banquet site was blown to pieces. In the next instant, Han Qiong, clutching Chen Xi, reappeared several hundred paces away, but he immediately coughed up blood, though Chen Xi remained unharmed.

"Lu Bu, prepare to die!" As the ground crumbled beneath them, Guan Yu, who had not reacted in time, was enraged. His eyes widened in fury, and his Green Dragon Crescent Blade swung toward Lu Bu's neck with unstoppable force.

At the same time, Zhao Yun also lunged at Lu Bu with his spear. Regardless of the reason, after that one strike, Lu Bu had to die!

"Why? Why!" Lu Bu frantically swung his halberd, each simple move displaying astonishing power. He completely ignored Zhao Yun and Guan Yu's attacks as he charged toward Chen Xi, his shattered dreams fueling his rage.

"Die!" Lu Bu roared as he wildly slashed at Guan Yu and Zhao Yun. In his mind, the only hope of returning to Bingzhou had been destroyed. He could never go back, never again. Hatred consumed him as the mental pillar that had supported him all this time collapsed...

"I can never go back, never go back!" Despite the countless openings in his frenzied attacks, Lu Bu's overwhelming strength made them irrelevant. His rage overwhelmed Zhao Yun and Guan Yu, pushing them back as he relentlessly pressed toward Chen Xi.

Zhang Liao was stunned. What was happening? That one strike from Lu Bu had left his mind in a complete mess. Weren't they just drinking and laughing together? How did it suddenly turn into this? What had happened in between? Did he mishear something?

"Zhongkang, thank you." Guo Jia, pale-faced, spoke to Xu Chu, who had shielded him. He had already noticed the blood dripping from Xu Chu's body.

"As long as you're safe, Military Advisor Guo, that's all that matters," Xu Chu replied, suppressing his wounds. Seeing that Guo Jia was only a bit disheveled, he continued, "I was taken by surprise when Lu Bu attacked. My mind went blank. Did I miss something?"

Regardless of what he might have missed, as soon as Lu Bu's strike came down, Xu Chu had lunged toward Guo Jia, determined to protect him. Although he managed to shield them both with his inner energy, the proximity of the attack meant that even though Lu Bu hadn't targeted Guo Jia directly, the residual force still injured Xu Chu. Blood continued to flow from his wounds.

"Where is Zichuan?" Guo Jia, alarmed, noticed a massive crater beside him and immediately grew concerned.

"Old Han has already taken the Military Advisor to safety," Xu Chu pointed to another direction.

"Lu Bu really is fickle. Since that's the case, don't blame me. I was willing to give him a way out because of his valor and heroism, but now he can die for all I care. Mobilize the army. Zichuan and I will leave here first," Guo Jia said, his face pale but his eyes cold. If he had any respect left for Lu Bu earlier, it had now turned into anger. He wanted Lu Bu dead.

"Zhang Liao, prepare to die!" Xu Chu, his anger boiling over, grabbed his large saber and scanned the area. Spotting Zhang Liao standing in the middle of the battlefield, ready for action, he charged at him with fury. Zhang Liao, frozen in shock, was dumbstruck.

"Clang!" When Xu Chu's horizontal slash hit Zhang Liao, it sent him flying. Only then did Zhang Liao snap out of it, but his mind was still reeling. He had no idea what had caused Lu Bu to suddenly lose control. How had things gone so wrong?

"Zhongkang, let's talk!" Zhang Liao, blocking another of Xu Chu's strikes, called out.

"Die! I'll kill you, bastard!" Xu Chu roared as he swung his saber at Zhang Liao again.

"It was just a mistake..." Zhang Liao deflected the blow and hurried to explain.

"Killing you would also be a mistake!" Xu Chu yelled, refusing to listen and continuing his assault.

"I don't even know what happened!" Zhang Liao dodged another strike and tried to explain again.

"I'll find out by killing you!" Xu Chu bellowed, relentlessly attacking Zhang Liao.

"Old Han, are you alright?" Chen Xi, looking at Han Qiong, who was standing beside him, leaning on his spear and spitting blood, asked with concern. He could no longer remain calm—what in the world was going on? Weren't they having a friendly conversation just moments ago? How had things turned out like this? Had Lu Bu lost his mind or something?

"I'll live. It's good that you're unharmed," Han Qiong replied, waving his hand.

Earlier, Han Qiong had used a secret technique, almost like teleportation, to cover several hundred meters in an instant. More importantly, he had directed most of his energy to protect Chen Xi from harm, rather than reinforcing his own body. As a result, his internal organs had taken a serious hit.

"That's good, that's good," Chen Xi said, relieved to see Han Qiong's face recovering rapidly. "But what is wrong with Lu Bu? Why did he suddenly attack me?"

"In the future, just avoid doing things like this, and that'll be help enough for me. Fortunately, Zilong reacted quickly. Otherwise, even I wouldn't have been able to keep you safe. Lu Bu is a madman—disloyal, unfilial, and lacking in a warrior's honor!" Han Qiong, his strength returning, began to regulate his breathing. He glanced at Chen Xi and warned him.

"I understand. I won't do something like this again. I just didn't expect Lu Bu to attack so suddenly," Chen Xi nodded, feeling the need to defend himself.

"Who knows what he's thinking!" Han Qiong sneered, then, with a cold laugh, he gripped his spear and charged into the fight between Guan Yu, Zhao Yun, and Lu Bu.

"Why, why? Why did you deceive me?" Lu Bu raged as he attacked Guan Yu and Zhao Yun. His dream of returning to Bingzhou was shattered. The last sliver of hope was gone. He could never go back, never again.

"Lu Bu, what are you talking about?" Chen Xi shouted at Lu Bu. "When did I deceive you? Where is your honor? Where is your courage? Now you're no different from a madman. What on earth are you saying?"

Chapter 622: A Turn of Events

Chen Xi's most outstanding trait was his calmness. He rarely got angry or shaken by anything. Once he made a decision, he would pursue his goal relentlessly. More importantly, Chen Xi had always believed that his intelligence was sufficient to execute his plans.

But for the first time, Chen Xi wavered because of Lu Bu's bravery, his boldness, and the many other aspects of his character. He didn't want to kill someone who had the potential to become a hero, so he extended an olive branch, hoping to keep him.

As long as Lu Bu spoke up, no matter why he was acting so brave and grand today, as long as he maintained that demeanor, Chen Xi was confident he could find a way to clear Lu Bu's name and settle him. But fate played a cruel joke. After Chen Xi wavered in his decision for the first time, the heavens made him swallow the bitter fruit, and his anger surged uncontrollably.

"Die!" Lu Bu ignored Han Qiong's attack and swung his halberd towards Chen Xi. Fortunately, Guan Yu and Zhao Yun desperately intercepted the strike.

"Slash!" Han Qiong's spear cut through Lu Bu's arm, slicing his armor open. But to everyone's shock, Lu Bu's wound healed at an alarming speed.

"Die?" A cold glint flashed in Chen Xi's eyes. How many years had it been since anyone dared to utter that word in front of him?

"Stop talking to him; that guy's just a lunatic," Guo Jia, equally enraged, approached with a grim expression.

"I think so too," Chen Xi replied, his face darkening. "I must have been blind just now. I'll never waver again."

"Let's get out of here. We only have the strength for close combat, and against a master like Lu Bu, one sweeping strike could shred us to pieces," Guo Jia sighed. "Let the army handle it. We're too close, and it's incredibly dangerous."

"Let's go." Chen Xi's face turned black, but he didn't hesitate. He followed Guo Jia and left.

In this situation, the two of them staying would only be a burden. The only mental attack they could muster was a suicidal move meant to drag others down with them, and being too close was simply too risky. As for physical attacks, they had little effect on someone like Lu Bu.

Ruan Liangyu immediately escorted Chen Xi and Guo Jia away. Once they left, Guan Yu, Zhao Yun, and Han Qiong could finally unleash their full strength, fighting Lu Bu with all they had. Surprisingly, the three of them quickly began to suppress Lu Bu after going all out.

"Die!" Lu Bu roared furiously as he slashed at the three of them. His once-glorious armor was now covered in numerous cuts from their attacks.

"Lu Bu, what are you fighting for?" Zhao Yun suddenly knocked Lu Bu's halberd aside with a powerful thrust, propelling himself backward, and then shouted at him with a heart-calming technique.

Guan Yu and Han Qiong also used the momentum to fly backward, forming a triangular formation around Lu Bu. It was clear to them that Lu Bu's mental state was far from normal.

Of course, if this were a battlefield, there would be no hesitation—they would kill Lu Bu without question. But today was supposed to be a friendly match, and Lu Bu's behavior had become far too bizarre. None of them wanted to push him too far. If they had grievances, they would settle them on the battlefield. A surprise attack like Lu Bu's would only earn him the scorn of true warriors.

"What for? What for? What am I fighting for?" Lu Bu howled at the sky, his voice filled with bitterness that turned into a sorrowful wail. The golden flames around him flickered erratically, and tears welled up in his eyes. He finally realized where his roots lay, where his home was. He wasn't homeless, but he could never go back—never go back!

"Zilong, there's no need for this. This man is a great threat. He nearly killed Zichuan with that attack. Even if we don't kill him, we must capture him!" Han Qiong warned Zhao Yun in a low voice.

"No, I think there's more to this than meets the eye. It can't be that simple," Zhao Yun shook his head. "Wenhou, even in your rage, you must have a reason. The Military Advisor treated you kindly, yet you acted like this. If you don't give us a reason today, we'll have no choice but to bring you to face the Military Advisor."

As Zhao Yun spoke, his left hand rested on the Heaven Relying Sword, and an incredibly sharp aura emanated from him.

"Kindness? Kindness..." Lu Bu's face was filled with bitterness and a sense of hopelessness. After a moment, he collected himself and glanced at the three men before him. "What more is there to explain? You want to take me to see him? Let's see if you have the ability. Come on, then!"

Meanwhile, Zhang Liao and Xu Chu were locked in a chase. To be honest, it wasn't that Zhang Liao couldn't fight Xu Chu. Even if Xu Chu were uninjured, Zhang Liao could still hold his own against him.

But Xu Chu had been severely injured by Lu Bu and couldn't keep up with Zhang Liao. Zhang Liao, on the other hand, didn't want to fight a wounded Xu Chu. He still hadn't figured out what had gone wrong—how had things turned out like this?

But as Lu Bu's howls, his sorrowful wails, and his frenzied attacks continued, along with the scattered words he muttered, Zhang Liao gradually pieced together the whole story. And once he did, he understood what had happened to Lu Bu.

Zhang Liao bitterly smiled. His mind wasn't dull, and having been involved from the start and knowing Lu Bu well, he quickly grasped the situation's cause and effect.

With a resigned smile, Zhang Liao knew that if he didn't act now, they would both die here—killed by their own foolishness.

"Fengxian, Bingzhou has been taken by Yuan Shao. Even if the people of Bingzhou still remember you, do you dare to return?" Zhang Liao, in a moment of clarity, shouted.

"Dare!" Lu Bu's eyes blazed with fury as he knocked back Guan Yu, Zhao Yun, and Han Qiong with a single strike, then roared at Zhang Liao.

"Then why fear the warlords? What do you have to fear?" Zhang Liao shouted back. "If the people of Bingzhou still remember you, go ask them yourself!"

Upon hearing these words, Lu Bu suddenly halted his halberd mid-swing. For the first time, someone had bluntly spoken such words in front of him.

"Go ask them... yes!" Lu Bu's expression calmed, and he muttered to himself. Then, he looked up at Zhao Yun and the others, snorted coldly, and whistled. Soon, the Red Hare horse galloped over.

Lu Bu mounted his horse, and Guan Yu, Zhao Yun, and Han Qiong did not try to stop him. They couldn't, even if they wanted to. Although they had managed to suppress the mentally unstable Lu Bu, preventing him from leaving would have been difficult. Moreover, after Zhang Liao's words, Lu Bu had regained his composure.

After taking a few steps, Lu Bu stopped and turned back to glance at Zhao Yun and the others. "Tell Chen Zichuan that this was a misunderstanding. I will repay him for this favor!"

Chapter 623: The Unpredictability of the Human Heart

People often hold various obsessions, and for Lu Bu, bringing the sons of Bingzhou back to their homeland was one of those obsessions. However, as more and more of the Bingzhou wolf riders perished, that shallow obsession turned into something he was most reluctant to talk about, becoming his most fragile side.

But this fragility was concealed by Lu Bu's overwhelming strength, so it remained unknown to others. Yet an obsession is still an obsession; whether one wishes to bring it up or not, it remains. Until one day, it is triggered.

On this day, Chen Xi's letter completely brought out the obsession hidden deep in Lu Bu's heart, making him see a glimmer of hope in the darkness. And because of this glimmer, a crack appeared in Lu Bu's hardened exterior, through which Zhang Liao glimpsed another side of him.

Perhaps at other times, even if Zhang Liao had known this other side and told Lu Bu to go find out for himself, it wouldn't have had any effect. On the contrary, it might have only angered Lu Bu. But today, everything was different.

Lu Bu had always harbored hope for returning to Bingzhou. But as that hope grew fainter, Lu Bu gradually sank into despair, becoming increasingly reckless. Chen Xi's letter reignited that hope, only for the subsequent answer to shatter his spirit completely.

At this moment, Lu Bu was like a drowning man grasping for anything to save him, and Zhang Liao's words offered him a new lifeline. Perhaps, at any other time, those words would have been meaningless, but at that moment, they were like the tolling of a bell, awakening Lu Bu.

No matter how slim the hope, it was still hope. And for Lu Bu, even if it was just a faint glimmer, at this point, he had no other choice.

"Zhang Liao, let's go!" Lu Bu gripped his halberd with one hand. Though his armor was in tatters, it couldn't hide the unmatched aura he radiated. As long as his spirit remained unbroken, as long as his will endured, no one in the world could defeat him!

Blocking Xu Chu's attack with his spear, Zhang Liao swiftly retreated. He could already see the army surging toward them. He was relieved that Lu Bu had finally come to his senses. If they had delayed any longer, they would have been surrounded and captured without any chance of resistance.

"Let's go!" Zhang Liao was overjoyed to see Lu Bu back to normal. He had often dreamed of returning to Bingzhou, and maybe this time, it would finally happen.

Zhao Yun and Guan Yu exchanged glances, vaguely grasping a sense of something deeper. Lu Bu was a pitiful figure, too.

"Can't return to Bingzhou? So close, so simple, yet unable to take that step. How laughable!" Guan Yu's expression remained cold and aloof, but he couldn't help but sympathize. Perhaps one day, if he found himself in a similar situation, he too wouldn't return. A man as proud as he was wouldn't turn back after betraying someone's trust.

"That Zhang Liao is tough, not an easy opponent. If he hadn't held back today, I'd have been in trouble," Xu Chu said with a bitter smile as he approached after Lu Bu and Zhang Liao left.

"His internal energy is abundant, but his real trouble is that if you can't defeat him quickly, he can wear you down," Zhao Yun sighed. "His energy may be plentiful, but even when unleashed, it doesn't have much destructive power."

"Zilong, Yun Chang, Zhongkang, Elder Han, are you all alright?" At that moment, Chen Xi arrived with the army.

"Thank you for your concern, Military Advisor," the group replied. Han Qiong, meanwhile, disappeared, signaling that he was unharmed.

"Lu Bu is truly troublesome. If he wants to leave, let him go. You all have been through a lot," Chen Xi sighed. He wasn't surprised that Lu Bu had gotten away—he had seen that monster in action before, and he knew there was no holding him back.

"No, we just didn't put in enough effort to stop him," Zhao Yun shook his head. "Lu Bu is indeed formidable, but in his current state, he wasn't our match. With enough effort, we could have held him back."

"No need to dwell on it. You did the right thing. We can settle this score on the battlefield later," Chen Xi smiled, not blaming Zhao Yun. Zhao Yun had always been like this, quick to take the blame.

"Indeed, Lu Bu may be unmatched, but that doesn't mean he can't be defeated. Throwing lives at him is a last resort. We have plenty of other strategies. Xiang Yu's bravery surpassed Lu Bu's by threefold, yet even he was outmaneuvered and killed," Guo Jia chimed in, his face twisted in a sinister grin. Lu Bu had thoroughly angered him.

Guan Yu and Zhao Yun exchanged another glance, and Zhao Yun stepped forward to relay everything Lu Bu and Zhang Liao had said, word for word, without adding any of his own interpretations.

After listening, Chen Xi's face turned as dark as the bottom of a pot, and Guo Jia's expression matched. The two of them exchanged a look, both understanding the situation.

"Sigh~ Fate, it seems!" Guo Jia sighed.

"Well, we'll see what Lu Bu decides. If I'm not mistaken, his choice will likely benefit us in the end. But we should prepare for it—the war with Yuan Shao might officially begin soon," Chen Xi sighed again. What a mess. It seemed his luck had run out.

"Perhaps it's for the best. At least we won't waste any more time," Guo Jia echoed the sentiment with a sigh.

Guo Jia had a good grasp of people's hearts, so he had a rough idea of what Lu Bu would choose. As for Chen Gong, he predicted that Chen Gong would follow Lu Bu. Even if Lu Bu claimed it was his decision alone, Chen Gong would still stick by him.

"But we can't let this Lu Bu matter slide. He really tried to kill me!" Chen Xi said, still displeased. If that blow had landed, he would have been reduced to a bloody mist.

"The bigger picture comes first," Guo Jia spread his hands.

"I know, so we'll deal with it later. For now, let's give Tian Feng a little trouble as payback and also to create an opportunity for Lu Bu," Chen Xi said with a smile. "I hope Tian Feng won't be too surprised!"

"That's exactly what I was thinking. Lu Bu tried to kill you and dragged me into it, so let's make things difficult for him. I'm sure Chen Gongtai, with his genius, can handle it!" Guo Jia agreed with a nod. There was no choice—attacking Lu Bu head-on wasn't the best strategy right now. The bigger picture was indeed more important.

"We'll deal with it later. I never expected Lu Bu to have this side to him. Maybe we'll have another chance to recruit him in the future. Let's see how he truly feels about Bingzhou. If the time is right, I believe we'll eventually win him over," Chen Xi said, waving off the topic. He didn't want to dwell on the near-death experience with Lu Bu—it was a terrifying thought.

"Yes, ambition isn't a problem. I was worried that Lord Xuande wouldn't be able to control him because Lu Bu had no bottom line or principles. But now, this is fine. The outcome of this friendly match isn't too bad. Still, I won't be attending any more gatherings like this," Guo Jia said, reflecting on the earlier disaster and feeling as if he'd swallowed a fly.

"I won't be organizing any more of these gatherings either—it's too dangerous," Chen Xi added, casting a glance at Guo Jia, also feeling a lingering fear.

Chapter 624: Reclaiming Lost Dignity

Liu Yan chatted with Chen Gong for a while before excusing himself due to feeling unwell. At that moment, Tian Feng arrived, and although Chen Gong had already assumed that his side was firmly aligned with Liu Bei, he didn't want to appear rude when Tian Feng came personally.

"Since you're not feeling well, Wei Shuo, please rest. Tian Yuanhao has come, and although it's inevitable that our two sides will eventually merge, I must still show him courtesy. I hope you'll forgive me," Chen Gong said with a smile, taking Liu Yan's excuse of illness at face value. If Liu Yan hadn't claimed to be unwell, Chen Gong wouldn't have bothered to meet with Tian Feng.

Liu Yan discreetly wiped away cold sweat, maintaining a calm expression as he bowed to Chen Gong. "Why such formality, Gongtai? There's no need for apologies between us. In the future, when we serve under the same roof, I'll look to you for guidance."

Having been a refined gentleman for so long, Liu Yan had mastered the art of saying the right thing to the right person. Even though he had suspicions, he maintained a serene demeanor, speaking words that brought a smile to Chen Gong's face.

"Well said, well said." Chen Gong stroked his beard, clearly pleased. "Thanks for the kind words. Since you're not feeling well, I won't keep you."

After Chen Gong left, Liu Yan finally felt the full extent of his anxiety. He silently cursed Chen Xi for not following conventional tactics while also planning his escape. Fortunately, Chen Gong, with his scholarly demeanor, allowed Liu Yan to come and go as he pleased. Since Chen Gong assumed Lu Bu would soon side with Liu Bei, he never imagined Liu Yan would think of fleeing. Thus, when Chen Gong went to meet Tian Feng, Liu Yan quietly slipped away unnoticed.

When Lu Bu and Zhang Liao returned, both were silent. After a long pause, Lu Bu spoke. "Wen Yuan, do you think Chen Zichuan's schemes are truly so terrifying? Could he have set this plan in motion so early, causing my mind to be thrown into chaos?"

Zhang Liao could only smile wryly. "It's often said that those embroiled in the situation can't see clearly, while outsiders have better perspective. Now that I've pieced everything together, I see it more clearly. Chen Xi likely just wanted to create a favorable impression or maybe laid down a casual trap to add pressure on Li Ru and deepen Dong Zhuo's suspicions. That's probably why he hesitated when you asked him and only remembered later."

As for the current outcome, Zhang Liao could only describe it as a twist of fate. Who could have predicted that Lu Bu's obsession would lead him to place such importance on a single letter, resulting in today's outcome?

Of course, Zhang Liao couldn't say all of this aloud. He still hoped to join Liu Bei's side. A ruler who valued benevolence might not always succeed, but if he did, his subordinates would benefit greatly. None of the great generals or ministers wanted to face the fate of being discarded like old tools once their usefulness had ended.

"I've heard people say that Chen Zichuan always plans ahead. That must be the case here. But you certainly shook him with that strike," Zhang Liao sighed. "Still, given where we stand now, we should keep moving forward. Military Advisor Chen was right: It will be hard to survive between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei."

"I want to return to Bingzhou!" Lu Bu turned to Zhang Liao and declared.

"Will we fight or negotiate?" Zhang Liao asked with a bitter smile. He had already decided to leave. If Lu Bu's answer didn't align with his principles, he planned to leave and head for Chen Xi's camp after returning to the base.

"Chen Zichuan always plans ahead, does he?" Lu Bu lifted his halberd, the sharp edge reflecting his determined face. "Why fight? If the Central Plains aren't suitable for me, then I'll go back to being the Flying General of the northern frontier, the god of war in the north. I'll make the barbarians tremble at my name!"

"I'll leave the battles in the Central Plains to Yuan Benchu and Liu Xuande. I'll return to being the Flying General of the North, the god of war. I won't involve myself in the battles here!" Lu Bu said arrogantly. "The icy winds and snow of the northern frontier, the boundless wilderness—I, Lu Fengxian, will be the first to blaze that trail!"

"I'll follow you to the ends of the earth, unwavering and eternal!" Zhang Liao reined in his horse and solemnly declared. "This will be a difficult path, Fengxian. Are you sure you want to walk it?"

"I will reclaim Yunzhong, Shuofang, Wuyuan, and Dingxiang!" Lu Bu looked back at Zhang Liao. "I'll show the Xiongnu and Xianbei that those lands belong to the Han people. Bingzhou has nine commanderies, not just five. I will take them all back and prove that the greatest province in the realm is not Yizhou, but Bingzhou in the north!"

"Reclaim them? And what if the people of Bingzhou don't accept you?" Zhang Liao asked, piercing directly at Lu Bu's weakness. "I've heard Yuan Benchu has been doing well there."

"Yuan Benchu? I don't look down on him, but he can only defend what he holds. He might protect Taiyuan, Shangdang, Shangjun, Xihe, and Yanmen, but he can't reclaim the lost lands! His focus is on the

Central Plains. He won't take them back!" Lu Bu sneered. "As for our people—I believe they will accept us!"

"Very well, I'm with you!" Zhang Liao clasped hands with Lu Bu. "Just like when we left Bingzhou in glory, remember your words—we'll bring back Yunzhong, Shuofang, Wuyuan, Dingxiang, and the half of Yanmen that belongs to my homeland!"

The Northern Xiongnu and Xianbei had no idea that, in the Central Plains, two men were planning to take back the territories they had claimed. But even if they did know, they would dismiss it. In the chaos of the Central Plains, reclaiming lost lands was far more difficult than simply defending them.

"Good! I think Gao Shun and the others have long wanted to return to Bingzhou. This time, we'll fight our way back!" Lu Bu felt a great weight lift from his heart.

"Now for the final question, Fengxian. This question will determine our future. Returning to Bingzhou will inevitably lead to conflict with Yuan Shao. How will we handle that?" Zhang Liao asked.

"Chen Gongtai will handle it! We just need to return to Bingzhou. Let the others play their games in the Central Plains!" Lu Bu replied casually. With the last of his burdens lifted, he felt an unprecedented sense of relief. Even his mind, which had been clouded, seemed to clear up.

"Very well," Zhang Liao nodded, though he sighed inwardly. Returning to Bingzhou wouldn't be easy.

The question Zhang Liao had posed would shape their future, but since Lu Bu had answered, Zhang Liao didn't press further. Perhaps ignorance was bliss, and simply fighting for their ideals was the best path. Yanmen, his homeland, was now under the barbarians' control. Jiuyuan, Lu Bu's homeland, had already been fully occupied by the invaders.

This was the real reason Lu Bu had been reluctant to return to Bingzhou. He had led the Bingzhou wolf riders away, but in doing so, he had left Bingzhou to fall under foreign rule. His people had been displaced, and now, he had resolved to correct that mistake. What had been lost would be reclaimed!

Allowing the people of Bingzhou to suffer under foreign rule was a disgrace. Fearing to face that disgrace was the mark of a coward. Even if that coward was powerful enough to ride through the world

unchallenged, he would still be a coward. Now, Lu Bu was determined to reclaim his lost dignity and prove himself!

Chapter 625: The Difficulties of Returning to Bingzhou

After returning to the camp, Chen Xi was in a rather foul mood. Although he had indeed not had the best intentions when he sent a letter to Lu Bu back then, it wasn't entirely meant to harm him. It was more of an opportunistic move, taking advantage of a situation as it arose.

But looking back, who would have thought that such a small, casual action would have such significant consequences? Chen Xi acknowledged that the incident had a substantial impact on Lu Bu, but he didn't feel it was directly his fault. Lu Bu's reaction stemmed entirely from his own internal vulnerabilities, didn't it? How could that be related to him?

"What a pity. If you had realized what Lu Bu was after just a little earlier, we could have already brought him over to our side," Guo Jia said with a conflicted expression. After some reflection, he realized they had missed a golden opportunity. If they had figured out Lu Bu's true intentions at that critical moment, they could have recruited him, and there would have been confidence in managing him.

"Easy for you to say in hindsight," Chen Xi said, pulling a face. "Who could have predicted that such a minor incident would lead to such a big result? It's just a case of things going wrong, but at least we're not in a terrible situation."

"That's true. If it weren't for Zhang Wenyuan's shout, we might be facing off against Lu Bu and Yuan Shao right now. So, in that sense, things didn't turn out so bad, but still, I can't help feeling dissatisfied," Guo Jia muttered, his face twisting into a grimace. "The duck that was almost in our hands has flown away. What a tragedy!"

"Alright, enough. This is already a good outcome. Without today's events, we would have clashed with Lu Bu sooner or later. Now, we've at least saved ourselves some trouble. If you're still upset, we can focus that energy on dealing with Yuan Shao. He's the real enemy," Chen Xi grumbled.

It wasn't just Guo Jia who felt dissatisfied; Chen Xi did too. They had been so close—if only he had realized the truth a bit sooner, he could have lured Lu Bu over. Afterward, regardless of the means used to help Lu Bu resolve his inner conflicts and return to Bingzhou, even if Lu Bu found out he had been tricked, he probably wouldn't have held a grudge.

“Is this what they call misplaced anger?” Guo Jia asked with a cheeky grin.

“This is called strategy, understand?” Chen Xi said with a dark expression. “We’ll attack Tian Feng’s camp, create an opportunity for Lu Bu, and let him go back. I want to see if he dares to return to Bingzhou!”

“He will definitely go back,” Zhao Yun interjected, taking over the conversation. “At his level, once he’s made up his mind, he won’t turn back.”

“Bingzhou, huh? It won’t be an easy fight,” Chen Xi said, tugging at his mouth. “If he really does go back and takes his homeland, then all past grievances will be forgiven. If I meet him again, I’ll greet him with respect.”

“That place is indeed tough to conquer,” Guo Jia added, grimacing. “It’s nothing like the barren wastelands of Saibei and Youyan. It’s one of the most fertile regions—the Hetao Plain. From ancient times until now, countless battles have been fought over that land. Wuyuan, Dingxiang, Yunzhong, Shuofang—those places are constantly contested whenever the Han dynasty weakens, all because of the Hetao Plain!”

The Hetao Plain is comparable to a granary. The Han dynasty and the nomads have fought numerous times over it, each side trying to seize it whenever they can. It’s where the strongest forces of the Xiongnu and Xianbei are stationed.

“Not an easy fight? Honestly, whether it’s us or Yuan Benchu, as long as we stabilize the Central Plains, we would both definitely aim to take that area back. The only reason Yuan Benchu isn’t making a move right now is because he has plenty of food and land. He doesn’t want to deplete his strength fighting the nomads and risk us taking advantage of it,” Chen Xi said with a cold smile.

If Yuan Shao really decided to attack the Hetao region, Chen Xi wouldn’t hesitate to turn around and strike Yuzhou. And if Yuan Shao moved north, Chen Xi would provide all the support he needed without touching Yuan Shao’s territory. But Yuan Shao stubbornly held the line at Yanmen and wouldn’t advance north. He only focused on eliminating the nomads in that area, and the Xiongnu and Xianbei, understanding Yuan Shao’s intentions, didn’t dare provoke him.

“His approach isn’t wrong. For him, containing our development is the top priority, while the nomads are just a minor nuisance,” Guo Jia nodded.

Chen Xi didn’t respond to Guo Jia’s disdain for the nomads. There were indeed nearly ten million nomads on the grasslands, but when it came to a serious fight, any of the northern warlords could easily scatter them. Even the forces in Sizhi, like Li Jue and Guo Si, had plenty of experience in slaughtering nomads.

“Let’s leave this discussion for later. For now, let’s go create that opportunity for him to return to Bingzhou. Once he’s there, how he develops will be up to him,” Chen Xi said, rising to his feet.

“Whether out of anger or strategy, we have to fight Yuan Shao. If that’s the case, let’s hit him hard. We need to act quickly before things change. A direct assault—if we lose with superior forces and commanders, we might as well give up on this business altogether!” Guo Jia said calmly. With the matter of Lu Bu settled, Yuan Shao was now their primary enemy.

“Exactly, a direct attack will prevent any unforeseen complications,” Chen Xi said with a cold smile. “Guan Yu, where are you?”

“At your command!” Guan Yu immediately rose to his feet.

“Lead two thousand cavalry and three thousand infantry. Wait for Tian Feng’s camp to be breached and charge straight for the command banner. Cut it down for me,” Chen Xi commanded.

“Understood!” Guan Yu replied.

“Zhao Yun, where are you?”

“At your command,” Zhao Yun responded calmly.

“Lead the White Horse Volunteers to circle the camp and cut off reinforcements from the enemy’s flanks. Prevent anyone from launching a surprise attack!” Chen Xi handed over another order.

“Understood,” Zhao Yun replied.

“Xu Chu, you will lead the Tiger Guard heavy infantry. Use the iron rams to smash through their defenses!” Chen Xi ordered.

“Understood,” Xu Chu said, rising to his feet.

“Chen Chi, you will lead the infantry in a frontal assault. Don’t worry about making each wave too powerful; just keep attacking like waves crashing against the shore, wearing them down. Make sure to equip the crossbow carriages properly!” Chen Xi instructed Chen Chi. “Fengxiao and I will join you.”

“Understood!” Chen Chi rose and clasped his hands in salute.

“If we go all out like this, what if someone attacks our rear?” Guo Jia asked with a frown.

“After the battle, we’ll head straight to the new city of Linyi! We’ll station ourselves there—it’s our stronghold. Since Lu Bu is about to leave, we don’t need to hide anything anymore. If Yuan Shao isn’t happy, he can come and take it. Linyi is a fortress in itself, and it will stabilize our rear,” Chen Xi said with a sneer.

“That works. Being open about it will make things go faster. As for Yanzhou, it seems we and Yuan Benchu won’t be resting this winter,” Guo Jia nodded, then sighed, thinking of the mess Lu Bu had left behind.

The fate of Yanzhou would still be determined by battle. Even if Lu Bu handed it over to Liu Bei’s side, a fight would still be necessary. Yuan Shao’s territory in Bingzhou and Yanzhou were completely connected, so even if Liu Bei legally received it, he would be lucky to secure half of it.

Chapter 626: The Heart for a Northern Expedition

Leaving aside Chen Xi and Guo Jia’s swift decision to drive Tian Feng and others out of Yanzhou and seize the initiative in capturing it, let’s focus on the negotiations between Chen Gong and Tian Feng. Despite Tian Feng laying all his cards on the table, Chen Gong merely laughed it off, showing no signs of wavering in his resolve.

After Tian Feng left with a bitter expression, Lu Bu and Zhang Liao returned. By this time, Chen Xi and Guo Jia had already assembled their forces and were preparing to attack Tian Feng's camp.

"We're heading back to Bingzhou?" Chen Gong felt as though his eyes were about to pop out of his head. How did things suddenly take such a turn?

"I'm going to retake Wuyuan, Yunzhong, Dingxiang, and Shuofang. I want to reclaim the lost lands of Bingzhou," Lu Bu declared resolutely.

"Hold on," Chen Gong immediately interrupted Lu Bu's grand declaration and turned to Zhang Liao. "Wenyuan, you tell me. I want to know what Liu Xuande's side is thinking. Joining him is clearly the best option. With such a grand display, it's obvious they want to recruit us. How did this conversation veer toward returning to Bingzhou?"

Zhang Liao recounted the entire sequence of events, although Lu Bu, standing to the side, grumbled in discontent but didn't stop him.

Chen Gong smiled wryly. It truly was a series of twists and turns. In his view, Chen Xi had indeed shown great sincerity, but Lu Bu's deep-seated obsession had derailed Chen Xi's efforts. What intrigued Chen Gong, however, was how Lu Bu's mindset had evolved to the point of making such a declaration, one that had even convinced Zhang Liao.

"Fengxian, most of the lost lands in Bingzhou are in the Hetao Plain. It's not easy to reclaim them. Are you sure you want to take them back? Moreover, in that region, we won't receive support from Liu Xuande, and being situated behind Yuan Benchu's lines could put us in a precarious position," Chen Gong cautiously probed. But after mentioning the potential crisis, he noticed a surprising resolve in Lu Bu's expression.

"If we don't receive support, we'll plunder the nomads. Many years ago, when I was in Wuyuan, that's exactly what I did. As long as we're strong enough, we can seize a fertile land that will sustain us. Once we've accumulated enough strength, we'll march north and conquer the nomads. Whether in terms of national righteousness or my own moral obligations, everything aligns with this goal!" Lu Bu said with conviction.

“Who gave you this plan?” Chen Gong frowned. This approach was almost identical to the method he had previously considered to break the deadlock. As for the first step—subjugating the nomads—it was in their nature to submit to the strong. As long as it wasn’t someone like Gongsun Zan, a madman bent on genocide, a thorough beating would make the nomads submit.

“No one told me. When I realized I needed to return to Bingzhou, this idea naturally came to mind, and I had a strong feeling that I must go back. Whether to correct my mistakes or for other reasons, my intuition tells me this is my last chance,” Lu Bu murmured, but as he uttered the words “last chance,” his eyes suddenly filled with firm determination.

Lu Bu’s obsession with Bingzhou ran deep. Zhang Liao’s words rekindled his hope of returning, and with that hope came a clear sense of direction. The concept of “spiritual clarity” applied to Lu Bu in this situation, although the subtleties were something only he could fully grasp.

As the first to break through the “spirit” stage of the triad of essence, energy, and spirit, Lu Bu had gained a vague yet profound sense of his future. At the moment Zhang Liao spoke, Lu Bu had a fleeting sense that if he didn’t act now, he might never have the chance. Coupled with his deep attachment to Bingzhou, he made the decision without hesitation. Upon deciding to return, Lu Bu felt a lightness in his heart and gained a sudden insight, immediately setting his sights on reclaiming the five counties of Bingzhou.

Unlike Xiang Yu, who gained unparalleled strength after breaking through the “essence” and “energy” stages, breaking through the “spirit” stage didn’t result in a sudden surge in physical power. Instead, it brought clarity to his desires and removed doubts from his heart.

In short, Lu Bu truly wanted to return to Bingzhou. As for reclaiming Wuyuan and the other lost territories, that was merely his way of avoiding the constraints of his past.

Chen Gong smirked, never having seen Lu Bu so clever before. But he didn’t dwell on it too much. Since Lu Bu wanted to return to Bingzhou, it might not be a bad move after all.

“In that case, we’ll withdraw from Yanzhou, taking all our supplies with us, and head to Wuyuan in Bingzhou. Fengxian, do you agree?” Chen Gong asked Lu Bu.

“Abandon Yanzhou?” Lu Bu hesitated, clearly pained by the thought. “But we’ll take all the grain and supplies with us. We won’t leave them a single scrap.”

“Very well, leave the rest to me,” Chen Gong nodded. He was now in full mental preparation mode, drawing heavily on his reserves, but he had no choice but to activate his mental talent to ensure everything was done properly.

“Is Mr. Weishuo here?” Chen Gong called out outside Liu Yan’s tent.

“Reporting to the strategist, Mr. Liu has already left,” a guard replied, handing Chen Gong a letter.

Chen Gong was momentarily taken aback, but after reading the letter, he smiled bitterly. Liu Yan had fled, yet he still tried to play innocent.

“Forget it. Tomorrow, I’ll personally visit Chen Zichuan. Some things can only be handled with Liu Bei’s help, and we need to eliminate any potential threats,” Chen Gong sighed and decisively deactivated his mental talent. He didn’t want to waste any more of his reserves.

Chen Gong sent a messenger to deliver a letter to Chen Xi’s camp, only to find that the camp was already empty. The army had long since marched to attack Tian Feng’s camp, opting for a brute force approach rather than seeking the element of surprise.

Of course, Chen Gong was unaware of this. After sending the letter, he began assigning tasks to his troops and dispatched orders to Cheng Lian in Puyang, instructing him to retreat and rendezvous with them in the northern territories. He also sent directives to various county officials, hoping to see if anyone would follow him to Bingzhou.

Chen Gong didn’t have high hopes for these letters, as most of Yanzhou’s officials were local gentry with little inclination to follow Lu Bu to Bingzhou. He wrote them out of a sense of duty, thinking that perhaps someone might decide to join them—who knew?

Aside from these tasks, Chen Gong began meticulously analyzing the situation in the Hetao region. The nomads there were no small threat, and if they didn’t make early preparations, their plans for a

northern expedition to reclaim lost lands could become a joke. Facing the formidable Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Qiang Hu directly in the Hetao region was a daunting prospect.

After carefully analyzing the situation with his mental talent, Chen Gong could only sigh in frustration. No wonder no one had tried to reclaim that land—it was a massive pit!

Chapter 627: Legion Talent, Battle Formations, and Military Soul

As the army set off, Chen Xi decisively activated his spiritual talent, using its abilities to resonate with all the soldiers. Sitting on the war chariot, Chen Xi held his folding fan and waved it through the air, casting a pale white light over the entire army.

Once Chen Xi activated his artificial legion talent, the morale of the entire army sharply increased, and their belief in victory deepened.

“What is this...?” Zhao Yun observed as a pale white light covered his silver-blue legion talent, and a sense of invincibility emerged within him.

“Legion talent?” Guan Yu glanced back in Chen Xi’s direction, filled with astonishment. “Zichuan is indeed extraordinary. A legion talent that can cover all the soldiers... I really was a frog in a well before.”

“The strategist actually possesses such power,” Xu Chu muttered, feeling somewhat embarrassed as an Inner Qi Expert. Then, thinking of Hua Xiong, who was even more unfortunate than himself—an exceptional cavalry commander and trainer but without a legion talent—Xu Chu felt somewhat better.

Speaking of which, Hua Xiong was indeed a tragic figure, possessing a fragmentary version of the Xuanxiang-level formation, having legion talent, and military soul, but due to his lack of intelligence, he remained unaware of it all.

Guo Jia, utterly shocked by what he witnessed, exclaimed, “You even have a legion talent? Is there any justice in this world?”

Chen Xi glanced at Guo Jia and scoffed, “Hmph. You thought my leadership skills were a joke? My legion talent is definitely among the top five in the world. Don’t underestimate me. Xuande didn’t bring me

along just to stand around. If I'm the main commander, leading the generals, I need to have some substance."

"This isn't just substance. This is beyond reason!" Guo Jia was clearly frustrated. "I thought you couldn't have legion talent without reaching Inner Qi Separation. Do you have Inner Qi Separation?"

"Of course not. But who said Inner Qi Separation is a prerequisite for legion talent? How do you explain the fact that Zhongkang doesn't have one?" Chen Xi smirked. "At its peak, my legion talent can cover three to five thousand men. Impressive, right?"

Guo Jia took a deep breath and calmed himself, saying, "What I meant was, how can you possess a legion talent? Isn't the prerequisite for it Inner Qi Separation, along with leadership ability? You don't meet either of those criteria."

"Alright, enough joking around. This is indeed a legion talent, and it's mine. As for how it came about, I can only say it was a fluke. I learned it from Zhou Gongjin. That guy is truly a genius," Chen Xi sighed, thinking that Zhou Yu would be furious if he knew how quickly Chen Xi had picked up on his technique.

"You can learn something like that? Teach me. Maybe I can pick it up too," Guo Jia said, his interest piqued. After all, this was a legion talent, and having one would be fantastic.

Chen Xi, seated in his chariot, carefully examined Guo Jia from head to toe before sighing, "Unfortunately, it seems you don't have the aptitude. I estimate that only Zhou Gongjin, Cai Zhaoji, and I have the potential for this. But Cai Zhaoji doesn't count, so it's just the two of us."

"You're kidding, right? Tell me, I refuse to believe it," Guo Jia grumbled. Although he had only met Cai Yan a few times and never met Zhou Yu, he considered himself exceptionally talented and couldn't accept being inferior to others.

"I'll explain the principle to you. Listen carefully. The so-called legion talent is essentially the unification of the soldiers' will with the commander's. This is why, after basic training, soldiers still need to undergo further integration under their commander. The more seasoned the troops, the easier it is for them to synchronize with their commander, making it easier to activate a legion talent, and the more effective it will be," Chen Xi began his long-winded explanation.

Although Guo Jia and Chen Chi were already aware of some of this, Chen Xi's clear explanation made everything more comprehensible.

"Next, it's quite simple. Once the Qi is connected, the commander's will is injected into it, influencing the soldiers, creating a collective will. This will, through the effect of Qi, manifests different results—this is the essence of a legion talent," Chen Xi explained, sharing his thoughts and verified theories.

"Hm, that does make sense. Now I understand how you obtained a legion talent," Guo Jia said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Speaking of legion talents, we must also mention battle formations. Once you understand the structure of a legion talent, you can more or less understand how elites are formed. Similarly, you can probably guess what battle formations are. That's why I say that among us, only Zhou Gongjin and I can achieve this. It's difficult for others," Chen Xi smiled.

"Indeed. You two possess the ability to synchronize the will of others with your own, while others can't. It's a shame I'm not skilled in music. Even if I were, I probably couldn't reach that level. Cai Yan's mastery of the zither is truly terrifying," Guo Jia sighed.

"So, this is the true nature of battle formations?" Chen Chi said with a bitter smile. "The so-called formation changes are just the manipulation of Qi, producing desired effects. Elites, through certain training, naturally imbue their Qi with specific effects, while some commanders can't have a legion talent simply because their leadership doesn't reach the level required for such changes. To think it's all so simple once you explain it."

"Exactly. It's all simple once you understand it. Who knows, maybe after some time, I'll develop a grand formation like the 'One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten' Ultimate Formation," Chen Xi shrugged.

Guo Jia burst out laughing, then waved it off. "Don't kid yourself. That's impossible. It may sound simple, but achieving it is probably something only a handful of people in the world can do. The Xuanxiang-level formation meets all the requirements, but the demand on leadership is too high. And Zichuan, creating such a formation isn't as easy as you think. It would take years of experimentation."

“Oh, I forgot to mention, there’s something called the scientific method. When I have time, I’ll work with Zilong to develop a formation for the White Horse Cavalry. They’re perfect for my concept. With such high speed, if they also have immense attack power... Tsk tsk tsk, they’ll be unstoppable,” Chen Xi confidently declared.

In reality, both Guo Jia and Chen Xi had avoided a crucial topic—military souls. However, both had their suspicions.

If legion talents were the combination of will and Qi, and formations were the manipulation of Qi—Xuanxiang being the ultimate form of this—then Guo Jia and Chen Xi vaguely suspected that military souls might be the ultimate manifestation of will.

This could explain why troops with military souls were often remarkably resilient in the face of death.

Chapter 628: Yan Liang and Guan Yu

Many things are easier said than done. Chen Xi was well aware that a military soul was the ultimate transformation of willpower, just as he knew that the Eight Trigrams Formation was likely the ultimate transformation of cloud energy. However, Chen Xi also understood that even though he knew what to do, he lacked the means to push these transformations to their extremes. This was Chen Xi’s most frustrating realization. Despite having knowledge from the future, which allowed him to summarize many mystical concepts using scientific methods, he understood that knowing something doesn’t equate to being able to accomplish it. This is what truly drove home the meaning of the phrase “easier said than done” for Chen Xi. However, if he didn’t attempt it, there would be no result, so Chen Xi still decided to create a military formation—one with a single attribute, purely focused on enhancing attack, and pushing the transformation of cloud energy to its limits.

Just as Chen Xi was leading his army across the river, Yan Liang received the news. Tian Feng had instructed Yan Liang to strictly guard the camp and keep a close eye on Lu Bu’s encampment. Yan Liang indeed followed the instructions, but he did not reinforce the two outposts along the river. As a result, Chen Xi’s forces, covered by archers and led by Xu Chu, swiftly overran the positions.

“Hmph, so they really came! Relay my orders: Zhu Han, Zhou Ang, Jiang Gu, and Wang Mo, defend the four sides of the main camp. Zhu Ling, Ji Yong, follow me into battle!” Yan Liang commanded immediately after receiving the new intelligence report from the scouts.

"Yes, sir!" Zhu Han, Zhou Ang, Jiang Gu, and Wang Mo responded in unison before heading out, each leading their respective troops to defend the four sides of the camp.

"Jiang Qi, you will hold the main camp. Liu Xian and Liu Yu, each of you will lead your troops as backup," Yan Liang continued to issue commands.

"Very well," Jiang Qi agreed after a brief consideration. "But please be cautious, General."

"Don't worry, I'm aware. I'm not a monster like Lu Bu; I won't be fighting against multiple enemies at once. Guan Yunchang may be brave, but he's only on par with me. As for Zhao Zilong, he may not be as strong as rumors suggest," Yan Liang said dismissively, having planned for this scenario since Tian Feng had hurriedly left.

"General Yan, I wish to see the battlefield myself," said Yuan Tan, speaking up for the first time. This was his first time leading troops in battle, and although Yuan Shao had repeatedly instructed him to follow Tian Feng's command, with Tian Feng now absent, Yuan Tan believed he had found a good opportunity.

"Master Yuan, this situation is quite dangerous. It would be best if you stayed in the central command tent. Your presence here is of great morale to our troops. As the saying goes, 'A noble son does not sit beneath a dangling roof,'" Jiang Qi quickly intervened, worried that Yuan Tan's presence on the battlefield might lead to disaster.

"Master Yuan, you mustn't go. This battle is dangerous. The scouts reported earlier that Liu Bei's army has mobilized entirely. My intent in leading troops into battle is merely to dull Guan Yu's edge and boost our morale for the upcoming defense. I cannot afford to bring too many soldiers, so it will be perilous," Yan Liang outright rejected the idea, his tone much more forceful than Jiang Qi's. Unlike Jiang Qi's soft persuasion, Yan Liang's firm refusal made it clear that the situation was grave.

Yuan Tan, intimidated by Yan Liang's demeanor, relented. Yan Liang was not only a beloved general under Yuan Shao but also a loyal officer who would readily die for him. Yuan Tan quickly realized that the situation was more dire than he had anticipated.

"Very well, I shall remain in the central command tent and await your triumphant return, General Yan," Yuan Tan replied with a deep bow, demonstrating his awareness of the situation. Despite his ambitions,

Yuan Tan still had the sense to retreat in the face of overwhelming danger, particularly when his authority could be questioned.

“Rest assured, Master Yuan,” Yan Liang said, standing up and cupping his fists. “Do not worry; we will not be defeated. Junyi has not gone far. After the military adviser left, I sent someone to notify Zhang He to bring reinforcements. We just need to hold out for an hour.”

“That’s good to hear,” Yuan Tan nodded repeatedly. Victory was the primary concern for any commander, and Yuan Tan was no different.

As Chen Xi’s forces slowly crossed the river, Yan Liang had already assembled two thousand sword and shield soldiers, along with archers, to await them outside the camp. Seeing Guan Yu leading the cavalry at the forefront, Yan Liang rode out to meet him. “Guan Yunchang! Why have you led your army to our Hebei lands? What gives you the right to invade?”

“This is the land of the Han Dynasty! My lord Liu Xuande is a scion of the Han imperial family. We march upon Han soil; what’s wrong with that? On the contrary, your lord Yuan Benchu is merely a governor of Jizhou. What gives him the right to send troops into Yanzhou?” Guan Yu retorted, firmly repeating the rhetoric that Chen Xi had prepared. The identity of a royal family member, while not providing tangible benefits, gave them the moral high ground and strong legitimacy.

Yan Liang was momentarily stunned, then became furious. “Guan Yu, do not rely on the power of words. If you have the guts, face me in battle and see whose blade is sharper!” Yan Liang roared as he brandished his long-handled sword, a wave of fierce bloodthirsty energy surging toward Guan Yu.

“I have no time for your games. Soldiers, charge!” Guan Yu bellowed.

At his command, the cavalry under Guan Yu split to the left and right, charging towards the flanks. Guan Yu himself led the Broadsword Unit to the front of the army. With a loud shout, a blue light burst from him, enveloping the seven or eight thousand soldiers under Chen Chi's command. Guan Yu then led his unit straight toward Yan Liang, aiming to create an opportunity for Chen Chi.

“Kill!” Chen Chi swiftly relayed the order with flags, forming the army into rows of fish-scale formations that charged toward Tian Feng's central camp.

At the moment Chen Chi issued his order, the left and right wings of Chen Xi's army charged towards the flanks of Tian Feng's camp. As Chen Xi had stated earlier, this was to be an all-out attack. There would be no time-wasting duels; they would directly crush Yuan Shao's forces head-on!

"Clang!" Yan Liang was baffled by Chen Xi's side, refusing to engage in verbal sparring or single combat and instead launching a full-scale assault. He swung his sword, deflecting a crossbow bolt fired from the opposing side, and then led his guards into a clash with Guan Yu. Retreating without a fight was not in Yan Liang's nature; he had long wanted to test his skills against Guan Yu and see whose blade was superior.

"Guan Yu, today I will show you the fruits of my years of hard training!" Yan Liang shouted, as his great sword flared with a blood-red glow and slashed toward Guan Yu. After countless hours of practice with the spear, Yan Liang could now wield his sword with precise and unyielding power.

"Boom!" The two clashed with a tremendous noise, both taking several steps back. A radiant blue aura shone from Guan Yu's body, while a phantom of a green dragon appeared behind him, exuding an aura of authority and cold pride. Meanwhile, a blood-red dragon emerged behind Yan Liang, radiating domineering power.

Chapter 629: The Power of Will

"Come on, if I kill you and take your power, I'll have the confidence to face Lu Bu!" Yan Liang laughed loudly.

"I already have the strength to fight Lu Bu!" Guan Yu retorted coldly.

"Defeated, more like," Yan Liang sneered as he swung his massive Dragon-Slaying Blade towards Guan Yu's head.

"At least I dared to fight him, unlike you!" Guan Yu blocked Yan Liang's fierce blow with his Green Dragon Crescent Blade and counterattacked with a mighty strike of his own.

"I have self-awareness. Arrogant as you are, you're still not invincible," Yan Liang replied, as a blue aura of internal energy emerged from his horse, merging with his blood-red internal energy. The two forces burned intensely, intertwined in a fiery glow.

Similarly, a blazing red aura of internal energy surged from Guan Yu's curly-maned Red Hare horse, merging with his own blue internal energy. Both fighters were bathed in a mix of blue and red light as their strength surged, to the point where even the surrounding cloud energy couldn't fully suppress their power.

"Enough talk! Today, let's decide who is stronger!" Guan Yu's eyes narrowed, a cold glint flashing through them. He despised those who were similar to him, and Yan Liang was just such a person—an adversary who matched him in nearly every way.

"Come!" Yan Liang roared as he swung his blade horizontally towards Guan Yu. His internal energy concentrated on the blade, making it even more lethal. Likewise, his entire being channeled his energy, attacking Guan Yu with brutal force.

Guan Yu looked at Yan Liang with cold disdain, a faint glow of blue light surrounding him. Unlike Yan Liang, who retracted his internal energy into his body, Guan Yu's power manifested as a tangible aura, exuding an overpowering presence.

"Bang!" The two clashed fiercely, both realizing that the other was a formidable opponent. Neither held back, pouring all their strength into the battle. However, Guan Yu found himself unable to fully unleash his full power in such a situation, and Yan Liang, though surpassing his limits, also couldn't exert his full strength. Thus, the battle became a contest of raw, unrestrained power.

With one powerful strike, Guan Yu shattered Yan Liang's blade stance, but at the same time, Yan Liang broke through Guan Yu's accumulated momentum, surprising Guan Yu.

Enraged, Yan Liang's strikes grew even fiercer, while Guan Yu's presence became even more imposing. The two battled fiercely, eventually moving away from the center of the battlefield, where the suppression of cloud energy diminished. With nothing holding them back, they fought with everything they had.

Yan Liang's strikes became increasingly powerful, fueled by his willpower, each blow building upon the last. His focus sharpened, and the power of his mind neared perfection. His Dragon-Slaying Blade clashed violently with Guan Yu's Green Dragon Crescent Blade.

Guan Yu's presence grew heavier and more intense, as the power of his will pushed him beyond his limits. His blade left trails of blue light with every swing, and his nearly perfect willpower allowed him to unleash almost 120% of his full strength.

"Clang!" The two warriors collided again, pulling their horses back as their aura infused their weapons. Both had nearly perfected their willpower, allowing them to push their power to its absolute peak.

"Green Dragon Crescent Slash!" "Dragon-Slaying Slash!" Almost simultaneously, Guan Yu and Yan Liang unleashed their ultimate attacks. Unlike others who might falter due to weakened willpower, both of them wielded their beliefs as weapons, striking with immense force.

"Boom!" A massive explosion followed their clash, and a cross-shaped scar extended for hundreds of meters from where they had stood. Both Guan Yu and Yan Liang floated in the air, their energy fluctuating.

"As expected, the Red Hare," Yan Liang muttered after the dust settled, standing atop his Azure Horse, his cold gaze fixed on Guan Yu. That last strike shouldn't have missed.

"Yuan Benchu's Azure Horse!" Guan Yu, riding his curly-maned Red Hare, remained unshaken. Yan Liang shouldn't have survived that last strike either.

"But as long as I've kept you occupied, it's enough. Without you commanding your troops, let's see how they capture my camp!" Yan Liang taunted, lowering his Dragon-Slaying Blade as he stared at Guan Yu.

"Hmph, I wouldn't make such a mistake. But you, without your command, let's see how your camp defends itself!" Guan Yu retorted, holding his Green Dragon Crescent Blade, his words provoking Yan Liang.

Guan Yu had realized that, while Yan Liang's internal energy was inferior to his own, his body was slightly stronger. Most importantly, Yan Liang's willpower was nearly perfect, allowing him to unleash 120% of his full strength with unshakable consistency.

Similarly, Yan Liang found himself with no easy solution against Guan Yu. Their physical and internal energy levels were comparable, leaving it to who could better utilize their abilities. Both had nearly perfected their willpower, making it a battle of equals.

Yan Liang had always believed that his near-perfect willpower, which allowed him to exert 120% of his strength, was fearsome—only slightly inferior to the monstrous Lu Bu. However, facing Guan Yu, he realized he had underestimated the heroes of the world.

Of course, Yan Liang didn't know that after Lu Bu broke through the "Spirit" realm, he could unleash twice his normal strength. With internal energy comparable to Guan Yu's, yet a stronger body capable of containing even more energy, Lu Bu could now overpower even three opponents at once.

In fact, Dian Wei's training method was the most correct—first forging a body as strong as a demon's, then using it to contain vast amounts of internal energy. However, even with his exceptional talent, Dian Wei had only just begun perfecting his body, and his internal energy couldn't keep up.

After some thought, Yan Liang decisively charged at Guan Yu on his Azure Horse. He wasn't skilled at commanding troops, but he was a master at fighting!

"That's Yan Liang..." Zhao Yun, several miles away, glanced at the battlefield where Guan Yu and Yan Liang clashed. Realizing that Guan Yu's battlefield would never allow anyone to intervene, Zhao Yun decided not to assist.

After Lu Bu's breakthrough, Zhao Yun clearly understood what he lacked—his willpower wavered too much.

Even though Zhao Yun's internal energy had nearly reached the pinnacle of its potential, his unstable willpower prevented him from wielding it as effectively as Lu Bu, who could unleash 150% of his strength. At best, Zhao Yun could exert 90% of his power, with his usual output closer to 70%.

Chapter 630: Zhao Yun's Troubles

Because Zhao Yun could only unleash 70% of his full potential under normal circumstances, he often didn't appear as strong as others. However, this also allowed him to handle any dangerous situations with ease.

Whenever Zhao Yun encountered danger, his instincts would naturally stabilize his mind. As long as he could tap into 90% of his strength, Zhao Yun could effortlessly suppress most of the top warriors in the world.

If Zhao Yun could consistently exert 120% of his combat power like Guan Yu, then even facing Lu Bu, who had broken through the "Spirit" realm, Zhao Yun wouldn't be at a disadvantage. After seven rounds of refining his internal energy, Zhao Yun's internal energy had already begun to surpass the level of other internal energy masters.

Of course, this was all wishful thinking. Zhao Yun had never truly felt in danger. Even when fighting Lu Bu, Zhao Yun was confident he could withdraw safely.

Zhao Yun had never encountered a situation that could push him to exceed his limits. If a battle was going poorly, he could always retreat. Even if Lu Bu chased him down, Zhao Yun could simply flee while fighting, and Lu Bu wouldn't stoop to the level of pursuing him over long distances.

As for others, they simply weren't capable of chasing Zhao Yun down. Unlike Lu Bu, Guan Yu, or Zhang Fei, who had faced countless life-and-death battles from a young age, Zhao Yun had reached the internal energy master level from the moment he stepped into the martial world. By the time he arrived at Hulao Pass, he had already undergone five rounds of internal energy refinement, placing him among the top fighters in the world.

Every advantage has its drawbacks. Zhao Yun's path had been too smooth. When someone never experiences the world's malice or danger, how can they tap into their full potential? Especially when Zhao Yun's strength was continuously improving—there was no need for him to explore his potential when he was already capable of defeating most opponents. Why would he waste time on such a pointless endeavor?

After Lu Bu's breakthrough, Zhao Yun had already become aware of his own limitations. It was clear that while Lu Bu's physical strength and internal energy hadn't increased, his overall power had surged. If Zhao Yun, with his nearly perfect martial understanding, couldn't grasp this, he wouldn't deserve to master every secret technique and forbidden move with just one look.

With his wisdom, Zhao Yun also understood how he could unlock his potential: by pushing himself into a desperate situation and surviving a life-or-death battle. If he survived, he would likely reach Lu Bu's level.

The problem was that Zhao Yun couldn't think of a way to truly push himself to the brink. Facing Lu Bu in a duel? If the fight went south, he could always retreat. Why wouldn't he flee if he had the chance? That simply wasn't possible.

To break through in a desperate situation, there must be no escape routes—a situation where survival hinges on a single, decisive effort. In a duel with Lu Bu, there were too many escape options. Zhao Yun never worried about being killed in a one-on-one fight. In fact, he was confident that no matter the outcome of the duel, he would walk away unscathed.

As for fighting three internal energy masters at once, like Lu Bu did, that also wouldn't work. Even if blocked, Zhao Yun knew that he could escape with his superior speed. In terms of sheer speed, even Lu Bu couldn't match him. If he decided to retreat, no warrior could stop him.

Leading an assault on an enemy formation was also not an option. As a commander, if Zhao Yun charged in, his personal guards would follow, and then the entire army would advance. This would not achieve the desired effect.

As Zhao Yun absentmindedly continued his duties, leading the Baima Yicong in a sweeping maneuver, countless arrows rained down on the enemy forces, pushing back those who attempted to come to the left camp's aid.

Even as he fought, Zhao Yun's mind was preoccupied. He had thought of hundreds of ways to push himself beyond his limits, but upon closer analysis, each method was revealed to lack any real danger. None posed a genuine threat to his life, and without that peril, there was no way to break through his limits.

Before Lu Bu surpassed the "Spirit" realm, if Zhao Yun could unleash his full potential, he might have been able to match Lu Bu blow for blow. But now that Lu Bu had entered a new realm, Zhao Yun realized that to fight him on equal footing, he would need nearly perfect mental strength, allowing him to exert 120% of his power.

Zhao Yun shot down a Yuan Shao officer attempting to retreat, feeling a sense of frustration.

Zhao Yun was irked by this realization. He disliked failure intensely.

If everyone's abilities were capped at 100%, Zhao Yun would undoubtedly be the strongest. Lu Bu, on the other hand, would likely rank only fifth or lower.

In terms of pure raw power, warriors like Dian Wei, Xu Chu, and Zhang Fei were all physically stronger than Lu Bu. But Lu Bu's mind was so strong that it overwhelmed these warriors, allowing him to turn one unit of internal energy into the equivalent of two—a 200% increase that left his opponents with no chance.

Meanwhile, Guan Yu and Yan Liang, though their raw power was behind Lu Bu's and didn't even make the top ten, were among the most formidable fighters due to their mental strength.

Lu Bu's mind was forged from countless battles and an undefeated spirit, while Guan Yu had unshakable confidence, and Yan Liang fought to prove that Yuan Shao's trust in him was not misplaced—a heart filled with gratitude and loyalty. These three warriors typically wielded power beyond their limits as a matter of course.

Zhao Yun's current strategy was to enhance his base strength, then use 90% of his power to crush those who had to push beyond their limits to compete with him!