

Mythical 641

Chapter 641: The Strengths of Yuan and Liu's Forces

After a victorious battle followed by a grand feast of meat and wine, it was a joyous occasion for all the soldiers. It meant they had survived.

However, for commanders, every great victory came with the need for extreme caution. A victory followed by carelessness and defeat would be a disaster. After all, there had been many cases where early success turned into failure due to lack of vigilance, sometimes even costing lives. Therefore, after a significant victory, extra care was needed to secure that hard-earned triumph.

Once the officers left, only Chen Xi, Guo Jia, and a few high-ranking generals remained in the tent. There were still matters that needed to be discussed. As for Xu Chu, he had already gone ahead to patrol the camp, and in the latter half of the night, it would be Zhao Yun's turn. It was only after such a major victory that high-ranking generals needed to be this vigilant.

"Bringing up old matters again, Yuan Shao's army doesn't seem any weaker than ours. Both sides' will to fight appears to be about the same," Chen Xi sighed. "Our soldiers have been rallied with both kindness and authority, especially the Qingzhou troops. Besides some issues with discipline, they're among the best."

"We've been working on discipline, but after all, they came from the Yellow Turbans. It's hard to completely change a decade-long habit overnight. Still, it's not a major problem. The biggest strength of the Qingzhou troops is that we've given them everything they wanted, and they're willing to repay us with their lives," Guo Jia waved his hand dismissively.

Guo Jia wasn't too concerned about military discipline. The more egregious behaviors like killing and pillaging had already been purged. What remained were things like turning over seized goods. To Guo Jia, as long as they won battles, whether or not the soldiers turned in their loot was a minor issue. Victory was far more important than those material spoils.

Besides, the Qingzhou troops had developed a habit of grabbing anything useful after a battle simply because they had been so impoverished in the past. Without that desperation, they wouldn't be doing it.

"Alright, as long as they're not killing or robbing civilians, we can overlook those minor issues. After all, the fighting spirit of the Qingzhou troops is among the strongest," Chen Xi waved his hand, not bothered by it. After being Yellow Turbans for ten years and living in poverty, hoarding anything useful was just a habit. Winning was all that mattered.

"The Xuzhou soldiers don't have much fighting spirit. They seem hesitant even before battle," Zhao Yun sighed.

"That can't be helped. The leaders of the Yellow Turbans in both regions swore blood oaths to break away from the bandit label. They all know how precious this chance is, and we've given them good land and homes, so they fight to the death," Chen Xi explained helplessly. This was the biggest advantage of the plan he had devised back then.

"As for the Xuzhou troops, they haven't seen war for years, and they need a lot more training," Guo Jia added with a shrug. If they hadn't suffered hardship or experienced battle, no amount of training could make up for that.

"Yuan Shao's army has too many cavalry," Guan Yu said slowly.

"Indeed. Our forces in the Central Plains lack a source of cavalry. Even though we have Jia Wenhe's horse policy, that's primarily for the eventual campaign to subdue the northern tribes. When it comes to cavalry, we're at a disadvantage," Chen Xi said with a sigh.

"Jia Wenhe's horse policy is being implemented now mainly to prepare for the future pacification of Jizhou and Bingzhou. When the time comes, it will be unstoppable, and it's also intended to counter the northern nomads. But for now, it offers no immediate value," Guo Jia said with a sigh. "And Yuan Shao has already restricted the movement of horses."

"That's another problem," Zhao Yun frowned. "What about maritime trade routes to transport horses from Liaodong?"

"That route is also effectively blocked. I don't know what Yuan Shao offered Gongsun Du, but it's become very difficult to get good horses from him now," Chen Xi said, waving his hand. Having stayed in Yanzhou, he was well aware of the situation.

"Overall, from my perspective, there's no real military advantage between our forces and those of Hebei. We do have an edge in troop numbers, but when it comes to cavalry, we're at a disadvantage. How many crossbows and arrows have you stockpiled over the years, Zichuan?" Guo Jia asked, feeling a bit helpless.

After all those endless skirmishes with Jizhou, Guo Jia had gained a deep understanding of Hebei's forces. With the large-scale battle that had just occurred, he had only further solidified his understanding.

"I've stocked up on crossbow bolts, powerful crossbows, and arrows. Though we only started preparing a couple of years ago, we now have close to four hundred thousand sets ready," Chen Xi said calmly.

Over the years, Chen Xi hadn't been idle. Every year, during public works projects, it wasn't just about building infrastructure. They had also been producing spear shafts, arrow shafts, sword handles, and even inner linings for large shields. With the goal of becoming the strongest in the land and facing off against all the other warlords, Taishan had been steadily accumulating resources.

"Don't worry about the weapons of war. We have well-maintained armor, shields, and an abundance of swords and spears. For years, we've been preparing for this, and we absolutely hold the advantage in terms of armaments," Chen Xi said with a smile. "You just need to focus on the war itself."

"Then there's nothing more to say. If we don't play dirty, we're evenly matched with the north, each with our own strengths. The biggest advantage the north had—its well-integrated civil and military families—has already been countered by us," Guo Jia said confidently.

"Exactly. On the civil side, we've produced tens of thousands of our own scholars, making it easy to promote thousands of low-level officials. On the military side, we have millions of Yellow Turban soldiers who owe us a debt of gratitude. Whether in civil or military matters, we hold a definite advantage," Chen Xi nodded in agreement. This was something they had built up gradually.

Previously, Chen Xi and Liu Bei had cast a wide net, directly cultivating tens of thousands of scholars. Though they hadn't studied for long, some of them had impressive talent. Even if their education was incomplete, they were more than capable of serving as minor officials.

The elite education provided by noble families was formidable, with their extensive traditions producing geniuses. However, Liu Bei and Chen Xi's broad recruitment strategy had brought in a much larger pool of talent. Over time, a few thousand capable individuals had emerged from the tens of thousands of students.

Given the one-to-seven thousand ratio of officials to civilians in this era, the talents produced over three to five years were enough to govern millions. Those who didn't enter the civil service contributed to other industries, which was the key to Taishan's prosperity. Moreover, most of these people were grateful to Liu Bei, making them far more reliable than the offspring of noble families.

"Even so, it's still going to be a tough fight," Zhao Yun sighed. He had served as a civil official in Taishan for quite some time and had a clear understanding of Yuan Shao's strength. Yuan Shao ruled over a population of tens of millions, with a thriving economy, and his lands had seen few natural disasters in recent years.

"It was never going to be easy, but don't worry. As long as there are no major changes, we'll win," Guo Jia said with a smirk, casting his gaze toward Jizhou. The seeds of discord he had sown there were already starting to take root and grow.

Chapter 642: The Wisdom of Chen Gong

"Indeed, we will win." Chen Xi smiled and said, turning to look at Guo Jia with a hint of coldness in his eyes. Considering Guo Jia's previous plan and the current appearance of Yuan Shao having completely subdued the families of Ji Province, Chen Xi knew that Guo Jia's plan had also succeeded.

"Zichuan, I will draft the next military report. Inform the lord as soon as possible. The quicker we annex Yanzhou, the greater our advantage will be, though some will inevitably be taken by Yuan Shao since Ji Province borders Yanzhou completely, and we can only move troops from Mount Tai," Guo Jia said, exchanging a smile with Chen Xi.

"Before that, we need to create some momentum. However, I hope the words I wish to convey can come from the other side's mouth," Chen Xi nodded.

"Trust me, Chen Gongtai will not give up this amulet of protection," Guo Jia said confidently.

Chen Xi rolled his eyes. Chen Gong was considered a top strategist by division, and although he was often rather dull, his abilities were still at a strategic and tactical level.

"Let's see what we can gain," Chen Xi sighed.

"Probably only goodwill or future benefits. It's unlikely to gain much now. They are too poor; aside from the civil and military officials we might find useful, the rest is quite average," Guo Jia sighed. "But this is something that must be done. Only national righteousness can wash away other colors, and only national righteousness can protect them in such a place."

"Indeed," Guo Jia nodded. "So we just need to wait for Chen Gongtai to come over."

The next day, at the Chen hour, Chen Gong personally came to Chen Xi's location for a meeting. Some matters needed to be addressed directly.

"Greetings, Lord Chen. Military Advisor Guo," Chen Gong greeted warmly. "First, congratulations to both of you for repelling Yuan Benchu's southern forces from the north."

"Gongtai, please sit. Although this is our first meeting, since we both share the Chen surname, we must be kin from five hundred years ago. Let's dispense with formalities and discuss the matters directly; it will benefit us both," Chen Xi said with a smile, instructing someone to serve tea to Chen Gong.

To be honest, this was Chen Xi's first time meeting Chen Gong. Chen Gong was dressed in a green robe, slender, with slightly dark skin, and his eyes were not as attention-grabbing as Guo Jia's. Without the green robe, he looked like an ordinary farmer.

"I am flattered by Lord Chen's high regard. Perhaps we were indeed one family five hundred years ago," Chen Gong said with a smile. "Since Lord Chen managed to launch a strong attack on Tian Feng's camp yesterday, you must already know why I am here today."

"Indeed, I nearly got killed by Wen Hou yesterday," Chen Xi said unhappily.

“Then let me apologize for yesterday’s events and offer Yanzhou as compensation. How does that sound?” Chen Gong, seeing Chen Xi mention yesterday’s events, quickly changed the subject back to Yanzhou.

“Enough of the pretense,” Chen Xi waved his hand. “Chen Gong, although you are quite clever, your manners are too meticulous. I don’t believe you don’t understand the current situation. Discussing this point is a waste of time and effort.”

Chen Gong felt awkward. Noticing that Chen Xi seemed uninterested in small talk, he took a deep breath and went straight to the point. “Lord Chen, my friend Lu Fengxian plans to withdraw from Yanzhou, return to Bingzhou, retake the five commanderies of Bingzhou for the Han Dynasty, recover the Hexi region, and defeat the Hu people. How does Lord Chen plan to handle the Yanzhou region?”

Chen Xi and Guo Jia exchanged glances, then Chen Xi sighed and said, “Retaking the five commanderies of Bingzhou is a matter of great righteousness. There is nothing more to say about it. State your demands directly; we will not wait beyond the deadline.”

“Righteousness, resources, and rear support!” Chen Gong stated succinctly.

“No problem. I can offer you righteousness and we have accepted the resources. You can also write to Yuan Benchu; under the banner of righteousness, he will also assist you. As for rear support, that’s Yuan Benchu’s concern, but he won’t obstruct it. With your wisdom, the rest should be no issue,” Chen Xi nodded.

“How long will it take to prepare?” Chen Gong asked.

“Within fifteen days, the resources and righteousness will certainly meet your satisfaction. The condition is that you must open up Jibei and Dongping. Frankly, this is merely a precaution,” Chen Xi said calmly.

“Not a problem,” Chen Gong replied calmly, without even furrowing his brow.

Leaving Yanzhou, a place fraught with trouble, was highly desirable for Chen Gong. As for fighting in Hexi and against the Hu people, Chen Gong felt he had a three out of ten chance of winning, five out of ten to hold his ground, and only two out of ten to be defeated.

In the Central Plains, Chen Gong felt he had a fifty-fifty chance of survival; the other half was a game over. It was simply not a place for ordinary people to stay!

“I will give you the collected information on Hexi, including the power comparisons between Qiang, Hu, Xianbei, Han people, and Xiongnu, as well as the strength of various tribes and their conflicts. However, you must ensure that the information is destroyed after review,” Chen Xi said with a serious expression.

Chen Gong furrowed his brows, slightly puzzled. He thought about it for a while but couldn't figure out the intricacies. However, he sensed there might be deeper meanings and thus activated his positive spiritual talent.

After a long while, Chen Gong picked up his teacup, his hand trembling slightly. “The Zhen family is Liu Xuande's pawn. Liu Xuande's faction has essentially ended Yuan Shao's plans for the north and has entered the planning phase for unifying the Central Plains.”

“No wonder I always felt something was off. It turns out that Liu Xuande has the strength to annex any warlord. What he is doing now is merely reducing losses for the Han Dynasty and preserving its vitality,” Chen Gong's hands shook uncontrollably. At this moment, he realized that Liu Bei of Ji Province was powerful enough to conquer the world on his own.

Once Chen Gong activated his positive spiritual talent, he immediately understood the implications of Chen Xi's earlier words. If such a detailed investigation into the Hu people was conducted, it indicated that Liu Xuande intended to deal with the northern Hu people.

The glaring issue was that if Liu Xuande could think of dealing with the northern Hu people, what about Yuan Shao in between? Yuan Shao had to be defeated before dealing with the northern Hu people.

If Liu Bei could undertake this investigation, there were only two possibilities: either Liu Bei had secured victory and dealing with the Hu people was inevitable, or Liu Xuande had enough strength left after dealing with Yuan Shao, indicating Liu Bei's strength far surpassed Yuan Shao's.

Chen Gong, having understood Chen Zichuan, Jia Wen, and these individuals, knew they were not merely boastful. Therefore, Liu Bei must have a solid chance of defeating Yuan Shao.

With this conclusion, Chen Gong reviewed all the nodes and determined that the only force capable of delivering a fatal blow to Yuan Shao was the Zhen family. Although it seemed extremely unlikely, it was the most reasonable scenario.

Having reached this conclusion, Chen Gong's hands shook as he held the teacup. Everyone was being manipulated by Chen Xi. This was not about seeing three steps ahead but seeing the final outcome directly with every step taken.

Chapter 643: The Heaven-Made Chessboard, All Life as Pieces

Chen Gong's hands trembled uncontrollably. Upon realizing that everything had already been meticulously prepared by Taishan, Chen Gong could no longer suppress his inner shivers. It turned out that the whole world had been manipulated; the world indeed had an owner, but the master only took a step back to make the world better.

At this moment, Chen Gong felt an icy chill all over. After carefully analyzing everything that had happened from the beginning until now, he couldn't help but sigh deeply, realizing that the other party had prepared everything in advance.

Chen Gong's thoughts became increasingly detailed, connecting many previously unnoticed details. The more he thought, the more shocked he became. The saying, "Great sound is silent; great form is formless," proved to be true.

Reflecting on the past few years, Chen Gong discovered a crucial situation: the Liu family rulers of the world. The only one thriving was Liu Bei; the others had either died or were no longer able to uphold the Han dynasty's banner. Liu Bei was the only one left who could be considered the legitimate heir of the Han.

Consider the situation five or six years ago at Hulao Pass. Liu Bei was valued because there were four major regional governors of the Liu family, and the Han dynasty had not yet declined. Liu Bei, being of Han bloodline and coming in person, was tacitly accepted by various lords. At that time, the Han dynasty's banner bearers were Liu Yu, Liu Shao, Liu Biao, and Liu Yan!

Now, Liu Yu, who had the highest prestige, was defeated and saved by Liu Bei, then sent to Chang'an under Kong Rong, which benefited Liu Bei's reputation.

Liu Yan, who was the first to propose the regional governor system, had already died of old age. His son Liu Zhang occupied Shu but couldn't even take Han Zhong, leaving Shu's loyal officials waiting for a capable ruler. Another one gone.

Liu Biao, who once ruled Jingzhou, despite his heroic past, had lost Jingbei and after being defeated at Xiangyang, had regained his former stature. Unfortunately, he was helpless under Yuan Shu's pressure, lacking not just strong leaders but basic resources, with only 700,000 people and an equal number of Five Streams tribes causing trouble. Facing Yuan Shu, who had been fattened by Liu Bei to a population of ten million, it was a miracle to hold on.

As for Liu Shao, his unfortunate faction had already become part of Yuan Shu's near ten-million-strong force.

Comparing this horizontally, it was strange if Chen Gong didn't realize the issue. Liu Bei might not have been aware, but his subordinates clearly allowed Yuan Shu to deal with these rulers, and their methods were subtle and unnoticeable. One would not understand the entire situation without seeing this as a trap set by Liu Bei.

The more Chen Gong thought, the more frightened he became. From this grand perspective, the world situation was deliberately created by Liu Bei's side.

A lightning bolt of realization struck Chen Gong's mind. He immediately guessed everything. Liu Xie, having endured years of coercion, would naturally act to stabilize the situation by bestowing more power to Cao Cao. The first thing he would do was undoubtedly to reclaim military power.

This was in direct conflict with Cao Cao's goal of pacifying the world. The outcome was predictable. Chen Gong firmly believed that Liu Xie could never successfully reclaim power.

To be honest, no matter who was in Cao Cao's position, it would be challenging to surrender military power under the emperor's and officials' strong demands. After all, this not only concerned his fate but also the fate of his entire lineage.

In fact, this is not irreconcilable. As long as the emperor is patient and the subjects loyal, power can gradually be reclaimed. Chen Gong wasn't very certain about Cao Cao's loyalty, but he knew that Cao

Cao had not completely decayed. His ability to issue proclamations and admit mistakes indicated many things.

Unfortunately, Chen Gong knew that Liu Xie, having experienced so many times of losing control of his fate, would never trust or dare to trust Cao Cao. Perhaps at the beginning, when Liu Xie was in extreme distress, a bowl of Cao Cao's porridge might have earned Liu Xie's recognition.

But what about afterward? After the initial relief? Chen Gong had seen Liu Xie's cold nature once before. The result was already determined. All the brilliance of the Han dynasty would inevitably fall on Liu Bei, and Cao Cao would strip Liu Xie of all his glory, leaving only his life as a puppet.

Chen Gong finally understood. Even if Liu Xie became emperor, it would not change much. Throughout history, emperors were not lacking, and even achieving greatness would only place one behind Qin Shi Huang, who was the first and thus unsurpassable.

Since that's the case, it would be better to excel as a minister, so much so that the emperors of all dynasties look up to one. Not as an emperor, but to achieve a level that makes emperors look up to you, reaching the utmost pinnacle!

Chen Xi couldn't hear Chen Gong's thoughts, but if he did, he would be deeply alarmed and would spare no effort to retain Chen Gong. After all, this was a matter of great importance. Though not entirely the same, the difference was minimal; indeed, the world was a chessboard.

Chapter 644: Chen Gong's Choice

Chen Xi and Guo Jia both noticed that Chen Gong's hands were trembling and could not help but frown. They had not paid attention to what Chen Xi had said earlier, as they had overlooked certain details. Sometimes, habit is a powerful force, and even Guo Jia, with his extraordinary intelligence, was blinded by it.

In such a situation, the only person likely to notice the slip of the tongue would be someone like Jia Xu, who was never blinded by habit. His logical abilities were so meticulous that it was hard for him to make mistakes. However, if Jia Xu were here, he would probably be so ruthless that he would forcefully keep Chen Gong around to prevent any potential risks. After all, the scheme of using the world as a chessboard and all beings as pieces was their grand plan, and any mistake could not be tolerated, especially with the plan about to be executed this year. It couldn't be altered now.

This scheme could be said to be a super strategy created from Chen Xi's initial framework, filled in by others. It was on a completely different level from the small skirmishes of Xun Yu, Zhou Yu, and Tian Feng. Both Xun Yu's plunder and Zhou Yu's borrowing of power had considerable risks, while Tian Feng's steady and methodical approach, despite a solid foundation, was too slow compared to the grand plan that Chen Xi and his team had devised.

The weakest among them were strategic geniuses at the national level. The entire grand plan began with Chen Xi's schemes and was later complemented by Jia Xu's manipulative tactics, Li You's borrowing of power, and Guo Jia's sabotage. Fa Zheng's strategy of "desire to capture but letting go" allowed everyone to acknowledge his wisdom, which was why Fa Zheng, at only nineteen, could be appointed to a prominent position.

Then came Liu Ye and Lu Su, who continually refined the plan, erasing all traces of Mount Tai from the grand scheme and making all events appear perfectly reasonable. Each stage of their work was done with great care. Had Chen Xi not proposed the idea of controlling a region, the prepared Mount Tai might have already begun a world-shaking war with Yuan Shao.

Among the various lords, Liu Bei was undoubtedly the one with the most far-reaching plans. Mount Tai's strategy was always about a hundred-year plan, never worried that it might not be implemented. Defeating Yuan Shao and pacifying the world was not just confidence or mere talk; it was a concrete victory. Any suggestion of unexpected events in the war was irrelevant—Yuan Shao was destined to lose.

Yuan Shao's foundation, whether the prosperous Ji Province or the balanced aristocratic relations, was all a facade. Ji Province's prosperity was part of Chen Xi's elaborate plan, and the aristocracy's stability was the result of Guo Jia's manipulations. Without these two advantages, Yuan Shao had nothing.

On the other hand, among the lords, Yuan Shao was the only one who had been schemed against twice; others, including Cao Cao, had merely been led into traps. This demonstrates Yuan Shao's strength. Chen Xi also knew that to activate these strategies, enough strength must be demonstrated. Otherwise, even if Zhang and Liu Bei were closely allied, it would be meaningless.

Aristocratic families would sacrifice anyone, including the head of the family, for their interests. This is why Chen Xi did not want to reside in the Chen family estate—he did not want to be swayed by family intentions.

The pieces on the northern board were arranged by Chen Xi and Guo Jia, and they were confident they could be activated. If the pieces turned against them, it would be tragic. Therefore, they had prepared other measures, though they had not mentioned them explicitly. Liu Bei's side was also prepared.

"Gongtai, why are your hands trembling?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"I am trembling with excitement at the thought of my friend Fengxian returning to Bingzhou and achieving more victories for the Han Dynasty," Chen Gong replied with composure.

"Then I wish you success, and perhaps one day we may serve in the same court," Chen Xi said with a smile.

"Indeed, I look forward to that day," Chen Gong replied with a smile. "Now that the important matters are discussed and Yuan Shao's army has withdrawn, we have no more grievances between our armies. Let's talk about more pleasant things."

"Haha, Gongtai has a good spirit," Chen Xi laughed. "Since we've cleared things up, our two armies have no major conflicts. Moreover, with Wen Hou willing to campaign against the Hu people and reclaim the He Tao, it's only reasonable and just that we are not hostile. I'll have refreshments and a banquet prepared. Let's eat and chat."

Chen Xi, upon receiving Chen Gong's gesture of defection, instantly understood its meaning, and Guo Jia also appeared pleased.

During the banquet, the atmosphere was lively and enjoyable. After discerning the situation, Chen Gong had no more reservations and focused on pleasing his hosts.

"Lord Chen, it's a pity that I need to go to Bingzhou; otherwise, I would definitely visit Mount Tai. I've been stationed in Yanzhou for years, and I often hear that Mount Tai changes three times a month. Unfortunately, I haven't had the chance to see it. What a pity," Chen Gong said with regret.

"That's not difficult. Gongtai, you can accompany me to Mount Tai," Chen Xi said with a smile. "The splendor of Mount Tai will surely astonish you."

"I believe that, but unfortunately, Fengxian cannot leave me," Chen Gong shook his head and said. "Once my friend Fengxian has pacified He Tao, I believe I will be able to fulfill my wish. Please remember today's banquet at that time."

"Gongtai, don't say that," Chen Xi said sternly, sensing the ominous tone. "Come, let's raise our glasses. Here's to Wen Hou's success in pacifying He Tao and expanding the Han Dynasty's territory!"

After a round of toasts, Guo Jia and Chen Xi had no doubts about Chen Gong's intentions. He truly wanted to join Liu Bei's side, which was good news. As for Lu Bu, returning to Bingzhou was indeed a good choice. The righteousness of the nation could cleanse any impurities, covering up other discordant aspects.

As they were about to part ways, Chen Xi and Guo Jia escorted Chen Gong out of the camp. After bowing, Chen Xi said, "Gongtai, if you need anything, remember to ask. Mount Tai can generally fulfill your needs. When you arrive in the north, think carefully about your future path with Wen Hou."

"Lord Chen, rest assured. Before I and Fengxian leave, I will give you a satisfactory response," Chen Gong said, standing by his carriage.

"No, you have plenty of time. Take your time to think," Chen Xi smiled. "Don't rush."

Chen Gong smiled, did not respond, and after a long time said, "I'm leaving. Thank you for your care. I believe the day we serve in the same court is not far off."

"This guy is even more confident than us," Chen Xi muttered as Chen Gong left.

"I'm also quite puzzled," Guo Jia said, taking a sip of wine.

Chapter 645: Looking South from the North

No matter how puzzled Chen Xi and Guo Jia might have been, they had nonetheless resolved a significant matter. If nothing unexpected happened, after subduing Yuan Shao in the north, Chen Gong, Lu Bu, and others would likely join Liu Bei, further strengthening an already formidable force.

"One problem solved. As we said before, the righteousness of national loyalty is enough to wash away all past stains," Chen Xi said with a hearty laugh. If Lu Bu could indeed conquer the Hetao region in the north while the Central Plains warlords were fighting amongst themselves, all his previous wrongdoings would be overshadowed.

This phenomenon could be likened to "a virtuous act covering a hundred faults." It's human nature to be more impressed by someone who has been underestimated suddenly achieving something remarkable, compared to someone who has always been highly regarded doing the same. This effect is akin to the saying, "A prodigal son's return is worth more than gold."

In short, Lu Bu's past could be forgiven. Being labeled a traitor, or having committed patricide, would no longer matter. The national cause would cleanse all blemishes. This was Chen Xi's firm belief, supported by historical precedent. Righteousness might just be a slogan, but the people would distinguish for themselves.

This is similar to the story of Ran Min, who had many black marks against his name, but who, by doing one great deed for the nation, managed to overshadow all his faults. No matter how much one criticizes, it is impossible to ignore the immense halo that surrounded Ran Min, and this is the power of righteousness. It doesn't matter if the blame was deserved or not—this one act of righteousness is enough to turn any blame into glory. Thus, righteousness may lose or be defeated, but history will speak for itself, and people are not blind.

"Once the deed is done, even someone like Zhang Fei won't have much to say. He might be unhappy, but he understands the importance of righteousness," Guo Jia said, resigned.

"So, it's best if they don't interact much. If he's willing to fight, let him go north or west, to distant lands where his feats can be recorded," Chen Xi said nonchalantly. "The world is big; surely, there are places where two war-hungry men can find peace."

"By the way, Gongtai mentioned that Wei Shuo escaped. Shouldn't we have Wei Shuo deal with it?" Guo Jia asked, tilting his head.

"Under the banner of righteousness, it's easy to manage. Wei Shuo won't miss this opportunity. We just need to find him. As for whether it causes trouble for Chen Gong, that's not our concern," Chen Xi said indifferently. He had seen through Chen Gong's character—despite appearing naive and gentle, he was quite capable.

Chen Xi and Guo Jia were unaware of the large-scale propaganda orchestrated by Liu Yan, which had a significant impact on the Han Dynasty. Since Emperor Ling's ascension, Tan Shihuai's rise, and the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the Han had effectively abandoned the northern part of Bingzhou.

In truth, abandoning such territory was unprecedented since Emperor Wu. From Emperor Wu onward, the Han's territory had continuously expanded. Even though the Eastern Han produced a series of incompetent emperors and was controlled by regents, the empire's territory continued to grow until Emperor Huan. The northern Bingzhou region, after being lost, was never reclaimed, not even during the Three Kingdoms period. It wasn't until the Sui Dynasty that it was regained.

Though the northern regions had strategic value, and every powerful force that emerged in the north sought to reclaim it, the area was continually occupied by different nomadic groups—first the Xiongnu, then the Xianbei, and later the Turks. When the news spread that Lu Bu was returning to Bingzhou to reclaim this land for the empire, it garnered widespread support from scholars across the country.

In their eyes, the internal conflicts in the Central Plains were a family matter, but the occupation of the north by nomadic groups was a national disgrace. Ignoring this national disgrace to wage civil war was unacceptable to these scholars.

This is why, even when the population dropped below ten million during the Three Kingdoms period, whenever there was talk of fighting foreign invaders, the three kingdoms rarely lost. It was during these external battles that the true unity of the people shone through. Although the Han dynasty fell, the martial spirit embedded in the people over four centuries had not faded. Who wouldn't want to inherit the title of a strong Han?

In essence, this was akin to the sentiment that while brothers may fight amongst themselves, if an outsider attacks, they will band together to defend each other.

With this mentality, Chen Gong, who had not expected much support for his proposal to move north and reclaim Bingzhou, found himself supported by many, including some top figures who were willing to join him. Sometimes, the key to success is not the complexity of the task but the presence of the right leader. When the time is right, true heroes emerge.

Chen Xi and Guo Jia were unaware of these developments. They were still quietly contemplating how to support Lu Bu's northern campaign and how to build up Yanzhou. They had little time left, and the sparks ignited in the clashes with Yuan Shao would soon set off an explosion.

In Yangzhou, at Shouchun, Zhou Yu was released from house arrest for the first time in months. Waiting for him were Yuan Shu and Sun Ce. However, seeing the deep gloom on their faces, Zhou Yu immediately knew what had happened—Yuan Yao was likely beyond saving.

"Come with me. Yao'er wants to see you and Bofu," Yuan Shu said, his expression dark and grim. This was his only son, now lying on a bed, inching closer to death.

Zhou Yu said nothing, following silently behind the departing Yuan Shu. Sun Ce's dark expression did not escape Zhou Yu's notice, and he sighed inwardly. At a time like this, Sun Ce should not be wallowing in guilt. This wasn't his fault—Yuan Yao was simply unlucky.

Zhou Yu sighed again. He had been placed under house arrest for so long, even missing the opportunity to attack Cao Cao, all in the hopes that Sun Ce would understand his intentions. But now it was clear that Sun Ce had only sunk deeper into self-blame.

As Zhou Yu silently cursed Sun Ce for his foolishness—blaming himself for something that wasn't his fault—he also felt a sense of pity. After all, it was Sun Ce's sense of loyalty and righteousness that had drawn Zhou Yu to follow him. With Zhou Yu's intelligence, he could have found success anywhere; why go through so much trouble to help build Sun Ce's cause?

Chapter 646: The Final Test

Yuan Shu led Sun Ce and Zhou Yu to his inner courtyard. In the past, Sun Ce often played here, but ever since Yuan Yao was gravely injured, Yuan Shu couldn't help but feel a surge of anger whenever he saw Sun Ce. Although he knew he shouldn't blame Sun Ce, the sight of him only stirred up his rage, so he confined Sun Ce to his residence.

As for Zhou Yu's house arrest, it was due to the task Chen Xi had entrusted to Zhuge Liang. A series of rumors had made Yuan Shu extremely wary of Zhou Yu, leading him to also sideline Sun Ce's close confidants such as Zhou Tai, Jiang Qin, Ling Cao, Gu Yong, and Liao Li.

“Father...” Yuan Yao, in a daze, noticed Yuan Shu’s arrival and barely opened his eyes to see Sun Ce and Zhou Yu standing behind him.

“Brother Bofu, don’t be sad. Life and death are fated, and wealth is in the hands of the heavens. I, Yuan Yao, have had my father and elder brother in this life, so it has been a good one. My frail body could experience the thrill of riding a horse in battle—this was already my fortune,” Yuan Yao said with a faint smile as he comforted Sun Ce.

“Yao, don’t say that,” Sun Ce said, his eyes stinging. He had a feeling that Yuan Yao’s life was slipping away, and that it would soon be over.

“Brother Bofu, it’s alright. I know my own condition,” Yuan Yao said calmly. He had been in and out of consciousness for a year, and when he suddenly regained clarity, he knew his end was near—perhaps today was his final day.

Yuan Shu suddenly felt his heart tighten, and tears began to flow uncontrollably. He reached out, gently stroking Yuan Yao, his hands trembling.

“Father, don’t cry. I’ve been unfilial,” Yuan Yao, who had been calm, could no longer hold back his tears when he saw Yuan Shu’s tearful eyes. He tried to lift his hand to wipe away Yuan Shu’s tears, but it fell back down.

“Yao’er, you’ll get better. There must be someone in this world who can cure you. I’ll go plead with Liu Bei—Hua Yuanhua can surely save you,” Yuan Shu said hoarsely. He had thought this countless times before, but he had never lowered himself to ask for help, thinking that the doctors in Yuzhou could handle it. But now, Yuan Shu suddenly realized that time was running out—his pride meant nothing compared to his son’s life!

“Father, it’s not necessary. I know my own situation,” Yuan Yao said, closing his eyes. “You’ve never bowed to anyone in your life. There’s no need to do so for me. You can fail, you can die, but don’t bow to anyone.”

Yuan Shu’s face was filled with sorrow. He had failed countless times but had never bowed to anyone. Call it arrogance, call it foolhardiness—he had never bowed to anyone. He could lose, he could fail, but

whether you called him a fool or praised his loyalty, he would stubbornly follow his chosen path to the end!

“Brother Bofu, I know your loyalty. Can you promise me one thing?” Yuan Yao said, his eyes closed. He was so tired, his eyes could no longer stay open.

“Yao, don’t speak,” Sun Ce said, holding Yuan Yao’s hand and channeling his hard-earned internal energy into him.

“It’s no use, Brother Bofu. I’m done for. Let me say one last unfilial thing: My father is very stubborn, very loyal. Once he decides on a path, he’ll follow it to the end. I used to think my father was lucky to control three provinces, but now that I think about it, he deserves it,” Yuan Yao said calmly.

Sun Ce didn’t understand what Yuan Yao meant, but Zhou Yu had a sudden realization.

“The power of the great families is immense, Brother Bofu. You and my father are very alike. My father likes you very much. After I die, promise me you’ll listen to him,” Yuan Yao suddenly opened his eyes and looked at Sun Ce.

Sun Ce was stunned, and so was Yuan Shu. Yuan Shu then turned and hoarsely said, “Bofu, become my adopted son.”

Yuan Shu’s words were a clear acknowledgment of Yuan Yao’s suggestion. Yuan Shu knew his health was failing, which is why he only had Yuan Yao as a son. Now, with this request, he was not only feeling disheartened but also considering the continuation of the Yuan family line. He was too weak, his son was dying, and choosing an outstanding successor was the right path.

In truth, the proper course after Yuan Yao’s death would have been to adopt a successor from Yuan Shao’s branch of the family. But Yuan Shu’s peculiar personality meant he would never bow to Yuan Shao, not unless he had absolutely no other choice—even if it meant his own death.

Indeed, except for the sake of Yuan Yao, Yuan Shu would never bow to anyone. He was a stubborn warlord, with his own set of principles, and would never be swayed.

For this reason, when Yuan Yao asked Yuan Shu to adopt Sun Ce as his son after his death, Yuan Shu agreed without hesitation. After all, Yuan Shu had been working towards this, though without much progress.

For Yuan Shu, since he would need to adopt a son to inherit the Yuan family's legacy, it made sense to choose someone he liked. And Sun Ce was someone he liked very much.

As for informing Yuan Shao's branch, Yuan Shu would at most give them a heads-up. But if they wanted one of Yuan Tan, Yuan Xi, or Yuan Shang to inherit, Yuan Shu would rather squander the wealth of his family, which was the second or third most powerful in the land!

Sun Ce was suddenly at a loss. Why was he being adopted as Yuan Shu's son? Although he didn't dislike Yuan Shu, he couldn't shake the feeling that he would be taking advantage of Yuan Shu by accepting.

Meanwhile, Zhou Yu's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He suddenly realized that all his previous plans were nothing compared to what was happening now. Sun Ce, without even trying, had acquired everything he had planned for. Was this the luck of a fool?

Zhou Yu screamed inwardly. He suddenly realized that this was the best possible opportunity. Once Yuan Yao died, Sun Ce, as Yuan Shu's adopted son, would be the legitimate heir. He would inherit three provinces, hold power over five million people in Yuzhou, three million in Jingxiang, and two million in Yangzhou.

With ten million people under his command, along with civil and military officials like Zhou Yu, Pang Tong, Liao Li, Gu Yong, Jiang Qin, Ling Cao, Cheng Pu, Han Dang, and Huang Gai, Zhou Yu realized that with a little consolidation, they would be strong enough to contend with any warlord in the land!

"I..." Sun Ce hesitated for a long time, unable to speak. He felt guilty because he believed Yuan Yao's current condition was his fault. And as he held Yuan Yao's hand, he could feel that Yuan Yao wouldn't survive the day. "I'm sorry..."

"Brother Bofu, it seems we are not destined to be brothers in name. Father..." Yuan Yao suddenly opened his eyes and looked at Yuan Shu with deep longing. Yuan Shu understood a great deal from that one look.

"Bofu, become my adopted son. You can keep your surname, but just inherit the Yuan family. Our family has produced three generations of high-ranking officials—how could we let that be stolen by a son of a concubine? You're the only one I trust," Yuan Shu said, his voice filled with sorrow.

Yuan Yao's glance did not escape Zhou Yu's notice, but he said nothing. He couldn't help but feel a pang of admiration—this was the spirit of a noble family member. Even though Yuan Yao had accepted Sun Ce, he still conducted one last test before his death.

Chapter 647: Repaying a Foot with a Yard

Sun Ce's lips moved slightly, but no words came out. After a long silence, Yuan Shu sighed, "Bofu, you should think it over. I know you have great ambitions, but your foundation is too weak, and you don't have the power to suppress the local aristocracy. Whether you march south or north, you won't be able to subdue them."

This wasn't Yuan Shu possessing Guo Jia's wisdom, predicting that Sun Ce's approach of confronting the aristocracy head-on would lead to his downfall at their hands, but rather because Yuan Shu, coming from a powerful family himself, understood the strength of the aristocracy all too well.

This was also why Yuan Yao had said that his father's success was not a matter of luck but inevitability. It wasn't just due to Yuan Shu's own strength but also the suppression provided by the aristocracy backing him. This was why there were many uprisings in Yangzhou, but few openly rebelled against Yuan Shu.

Zhou Yu signaled with his eyes, but Sun Ce silently turned his head to look at Yuan Yao. "The Yuan family has been kind to me. As long as I, Sun Ce, am alive, the Yuan family will not fall. The path I must take is my own."

In truth, Sun Ce's words were already bordering on defiance, but at that moment, no one cared. Although Yuan Shu often acted rashly, his eyes weren't blind. Sun Ce had already come into his own, and Yuan Shu even had the feeling that Sun Ce might surpass him if he were to take his place.

"Brother Bofu, it seems we are not destined to be brothers in name. My father has his unreliable moments—please help me keep him in check," Yuan Yao said with a smile, his condition worsening despite the appearance of improvement, a sign of the fleeting strength before death. His grip on Sun Ce's hand tightened.

"I will do my best to keep him in check," Sun Ce nodded, promising.

"Father, I have something to say to you," Yuan Yao said slowly, withdrawing his hand from Sun Ce's grasp. The implication was clear. Sun Ce, looking pained, left with Zhou Yu.

"Father..." After Sun Ce left, Yuan Yao's spirit suddenly waned, his complexion turning ashen.

"My son..." Yuan Shu rasped, his voice hoarse.

"Father, I fear I won't survive the day," Yuan Yao said bitterly. "I have failed your expectations. You found the best tutors for me since I was a child, but your son is as useless as rotten wood, unable to be carved. I have neither Brother Bofu's martial prowess nor Brother Gongjin's wisdom. I can't carry the burden of the Yuan family..."

"If you can't carry it, then don't. The legacy I built was for you to enjoy. If you squander it and live a carefree life, that's fine too. I've always wanted to make Bofu and Gongjin my adopted sons to help you, but it seems fate has other plans." At this moment, Yuan Shu seemed to age visibly, tears streaming down his face.

"Father, I really wanted to acknowledge Brother Bofu as my elder brother. After I die, if you can, please make him your adopted son. If not, treat him as you would your legitimate son. He and you are alike—'If others respect me a foot, I shall return a yard.' You've always treated him well. The Yuan family will prosper." Yuan Yao's eyes slowly closed.

These words drained nearly all of Yuan Yao's remaining strength. Being a scion of a noble family, the continuation of the family lineage was deeply ingrained in him. For this reason, he urged his doting father with his final breaths.

"I will. I will treat him as a legitimate son. I will..." Yuan Shu sobbed, the grief of losing his son overwhelming him.

"Thank you, Father..." A faint smile appeared on Yuan Yao's ashen face. "After I die, don't hold a grand funeral. Father, if you want your son to be remembered, distribute the surplus grain to the common people each year on this day. That will be remembered more than any grand funeral..."

"I will. I will," Yuan Shu wept, tears flowing freely.

At that moment, Yuan Shu agreed to everything Yuan Yao asked, unaware of the changes in his son's expression. After giving his final instructions, Yuan Yao's lingering attachment faded, and he closed his eyes, never to wake again.

"Yao'er!" Yuan Shu cried out in anguish, collapsing to the ground. Sun Ce, Zhou Yu, Ji Ling, and Yuan Shu's wife, Madam Feng, immediately burst in, working together to revive Yuan Shu. Eventually, they managed to bring him back to consciousness.

"Yao'er..." The moment Yuan Shu awoke, he broke into sobs, his demeanor that of a grieving father, utterly devoid of any lordly bearing.

"My lord, please compose yourself. We must arrange the young master's funeral and inform the northern Yuan family to adopt a son to inherit your lineage," Ji Ling, one of Yuan Shu's loyal followers, spoke up, knowing what needed to be done.

"Prepare the funeral. He will be buried with the rites of the Nine Ministers. Open the granaries and distribute the grain. Inform Yuzhou, Yangzhou, and Jingzhou that all under my command are to open the granaries and distribute the grain. Anyone who withholds will have their clan exterminated by my hand!" Yuan Shu's eyes were swollen, his voice hoarse and filled with sorrow.

"Understood!" Ji Ling, a die-hard loyalist of Yuan Shu, did not question why the funeral was not being held with the rites of a noble lord. He simply obeyed and left to carry out the orders.

"From now on, every year on this day, distribute any surplus grain to the people," Yuan Shu said, glancing at Yuan Yao's body as tears continued to flow.

"Uncle, please restrain your grief. I'm sure Yao would not want to see you like this," Sun Ce said, doing his best to remain calm. Having experienced the pain of losing his own father and bearing the responsibility of his family's survival, he had matured greatly.

"Cao Cao! I will never forgive you!" Yuan Shu roared towards the heavens in fury.

Yuan Shu's expression was filled with despair. After a long pause, he grabbed Sun Ce's shoulders and broke down in tears, no longer possessing the demeanor of a lord but simply a father who had lost his son.

"Bofu, Bofu, the Yuan family depends on you now..." Yuan Shu wept uncontrollably. He had lost all will to vie for supremacy. With his son gone, everything was over.

"I will. I will..." Sun Ce nodded solemnly. In that moment, the weight on his shoulders grew even heavier. Besides carrying the burden of the Sun family, he now carried the Yuan family as well—a weight so heavy it nearly crushed him, but he willingly bore it.

Sun Ce silently resolved to shoulder this responsibility.

In the spring of 194 AD, Yuan Shu's only son passed away. To ensure his son would be remembered, Yuan Shu began the tradition of opening the granaries and distributing grain each year on the anniversary of his death—a tradition that continued into Sun Ce's era and beyond.

Some aristocrats may have mocked Yuan Shu for doting on his son excessively, but they failed to realize that Yuan Shu's actions gave the common people under his rule a glimmer of hope for survival. And that tiny bit of gratitude would be enough to provide a lifeline when the Yuan family faced its demise.

After Yuan Yao's death, Yuan Shu did not formally adopt Sun Ce, but he treated him with the honors due to a legitimate son, granting him full authority. Zhou Yu was also personally recommended by Yuan Shu and was bestowed the title of General of the Building Bravery, while others like Gu Yong and Liao Li, who had been sidelined, were reinstated with honors. Sun Ce, feeling deeply indebted, resolved never to neglect the Yuan family.

Chapter 648: Yuan Shu, Yuan Shao, and the Yuan Family

In the spring of 194 AD, Yuan Shu held the funeral for Yuan Yao. Although Yuan Yao had requested that his funeral not be overly grand, Yuan Shu still silently buried him with the honors of the Nine Ministers. Had Yuan Yao not made such a request, Yuan Shu would undoubtedly have given him the burial rites befitting a prince.

Although the honors of the Nine Ministers still exceeded the usual norms, with the world in chaos, there was no one to enforce such rules. Moreover, Yuan Shu's act of opening the granaries to distribute food to the people, along with his promise to continue doing so annually, earned the gratitude of the people in Yuzhou, Yangzhou, and Jingzhou. They voluntarily offered incense in Yuan Yao's memory, a symbolic gesture of thanks.

Holding the funeral for Yuan Yao was not in itself a major event. However, the real issue that emerged afterward was that Yuan Shu now had no heir. Regardless of the circumstances, Yuan Shu was one of the top three warlords in the land, and he was also backed by the powerful Yuan family. With Yuan Shu's line seemingly at an end, the Yuan family needed to find a solution to this problem.

The concept of lineage extinction was something ancient people could not tolerate. Typically, in such situations, a close relative with many sons would immediately offer one of his sons to be adopted and carry on the lineage. In the eyes of the ancients, as long as the adopted son paid homage to the ancestors and acknowledged the lineage, he would be recognized as the legitimate heir. Adopted sons enjoyed the same rights as biological sons, the only difference being that they did not have inheritance rights—unless there was no direct heir. In such cases, an adopted son would inherit everything, including power, duties, and status.

This is why Yuan Shao, the son of a concubine, held the same status as Yuan Shu—because Yuan Feng had adopted him into the main branch of the Yuan family, giving him the position of a legitimate heir. From that point on, he referred to Yuan Feng as his uncle and Yuan Cheng as his father, while treating Yuan Shu as his cousin.

Similarly, Yuan Shu's proposal to adopt Sun Ce as his son meant, in essence, that Sun Ce would inherit Yuan Shu's lineage. After Yuan Shu's death, Sun Ce would ensure that the family's rituals and offerings were maintained, preventing Yuan Shu's lineage from fading into obscurity.

"Adopt my cousin's son?" Yuan Shu coldly glanced at the elders of the Yuan family. "If I'm adopting a son, why should I choose someone I find detestable? I don't need your interference in my affairs!"

"Our Yuan family is not lacking in heirs. When Wen Kai's branch thrived due to the adoption of Benchu, it was because of the support of the Zhouyang branch. Now that the Zhouyang branch is in need, it is only right for Wen Kai's branch to reciprocate by providing an heir," one of the Yuan family elders responded helplessly.

In truth, the elder was not only dissatisfied with Yuan Shu's open declaration to treat Sun Ce as his legitimate son but also harbored some personal motives. The Yuan family was currently flourishing, far more comfortably than the Yang family, which was confined to Chang'an and dared not make any rash moves.

Whether it was Yuan Shao's branch or Yuan Shu's branch, both were considered powerful enough by the Yuan family to contend for control of the realm. This shared strength allowed the factions supporting Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu within the family to sit down and discuss matters, considering anything that lesser warlords like Cao Cao might strive for as trivial.

Their focus had shifted from conquering individual cities to controlling the entire nation. They had even considered uniting their forces, but the problem was, with both Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu being so strong, the issue of who would lead the unified force was insurmountable—much like the struggles of the Han, Zhao, and Wei states when they tried to reunify Jin during the Warring States period.

As a result, the first attempt at unification ended in a stalemate. However, Yuan Yao's death gave the more rational elders of the Yuan family a glimmer of hope. After Yuan Yao's passing, the two branches of the Yuan family quickly exchanged opinions. Though the idea of unification seemed impossible, Yuan Shao ultimately played his trump card—his strategists.

With the involvement of Xun Chen and Xu You, the initially hostile negotiations quickly progressed to constructive discussions. Eventually, under their mediation, the two sides reached an agreement: first, clear the playing field by eliminating other warlords, turning the internal strife of the Han dynasty into a contest between the Yuan family branches. As for who would ultimately lead, that could be decided later.

Although Yuan Shao had a strained relationship with Yuan Shu, he was not as stubborn as Yuan Shu. When he learned of Yuan Yao's death, he hesitated briefly before deciding to offer his favorite son, Yuan Shang, as an adopted son to Yuan Shu.

This proposal was actually suggested by Ju Shou, who had noticed Yuan Shao's growing favoritism toward Yuan Shang. Ju Shou feared that such favoritism could lead to unrest if it resulted in Yuan Shang being chosen over the elder Yuan Tan. Without much deliberation, Yuan Shao agreed to the plan. He genuinely loved Yuan Shang, but he was not yet willing to disrupt the established order by replacing Yuan Tan. However, Ju Shou's proposal planted a seed in his mind: the Yuan family needed the strongest member to lead.

Yuan Shao's intention was purely out of goodwill; he had no desire to take over Yuan Shu's territory through this adoption. He would rather host a grand feast to secure an alliance than resort to such tactics.

Thus, Yuan Shao instructed Yuan Shang that, after being adopted, he should focus solely on benefiting Yuan Shu's branch, even if it meant sacrificing his ties to Yuan Shao.

However, as current events showed, Yuan Shu completely disregarded Yuan Shao's offer. The increasingly paranoid Yuan Shu rejected the Yuan family's elder's suggestion outright, insisting on taking his own path.

Sometimes, when a person becomes fixated, the more you push them to do something, the more they resist. Yuan Shu was in such a state—though he no longer held hope of formally adopting Sun Ce, he was absolutely confident that Sun Ce would eventually inherit his lineage.

Just as the Yuan family elder was about to continue lecturing Yuan Shu, a messenger burst into the hall.

"Report! General, Liu Biao's forces have crossed the northern Jingzhou border and seized Nan Commandery. His troops are now advancing on Dangyang!" the messenger shouted.

"Liu Biao, you dare! As one of the Eight Stallions, do you not know that attacking during mourning is forbidden?!" Yuan Shu roared in fury.

Chapter 649: The Two Lius Invade Yuan Shu

In truth, Liu Biao had no intention of exploiting Yuan Shu's bereavement to launch an attack. However, the moment Liu Biao crossed the Yangtze River and advanced into Northern Jingzhou, Yuan Yao died shortly afterward. By that time, Liu Biao had already captured Nan Commandery. Could he really retreat after that?

Because of this, Liu Biao decided to proceed without hesitation, planning a counteroffensive against Xiangyang. After waiting for so long, he finally had a good opportunity. To forgo this chance just because Yuan Shu lost a son would not be virtuous—it would be foolish!

Liu Biao was not that naive. He immediately branded Yuan Shu as a national traitor who had stolen the Imperial Seal and thrown the realm into chaos, continuing his campaign against him.

Previously, Liu Biao had been heavily suppressed by the likes of Liao Li, Gu Yong, Jiang Qin, and Yu Fan—figures who would later become prominent ministers of Wu. Moreover, Zhou Yu had ordered the Yangtze River to be blockaded. If it weren't for Liu Biao's fear of Yuan Shu's power, Zhou Yu would have easily taught Liu Biao a lesson.

However, after Zhou Yu and Sun Ce were placed under house arrest last year, with Liao Li, Gu Yong, Jiang Qin, and Yu Fan subsequently sidelined, Liu Xun, Li Feng, and Ji Ling replaced them in Jiangxia and Xiangyang. Later, Yuan Shu, seeking to stabilize Yangzhou, recalled Ji Ling to Shouchun. Under such circumstances, this became Liu Biao's only chance to turn the tide. Liu Biao couldn't rely on Liu Bei to create an opening for him forever—who knew if he would get another chance like this?

Kuai Yue, Liu Biao's strategist, advised him to march on Nan Commandery. It was known that Liu Biao was arguably the weakest warlord in the land. This weakness didn't stem from a lack of capable generals or ministers but from a weak foundation.

At this point in time, the Central Plains should have been experiencing the devastating effects of the epidemic that would continue until the population was reduced to about ten million. It was only then that Zhang Zhongjing would create Qinghao Tang, a treatment that would eradicate the epidemic. However, in this timeline, the first outbreak was swiftly dealt with thanks to Chen Xi's extraordinary interventions and Hua Tuo's medicine.

Moreover, the herb *Artemisia annua* was distributed across the country, from the north to the south and from east to west. After Hua Tuo publicized the formula, the plague, which historically would have decimated the population alongside famine, was effectively eradicated.

As for famine, in historical times, famine typically resulted from large-scale migrations of the population fleeing the plague. However, as long as the government existed, even if the officials were incompetent, widespread starvation was unlikely to occur during non-disaster years.

Currently, whether it was Yuan Shao in the north, Liu Bei in Taishan, or Cao Cao in Chenliu, all were regarded as heroic leaders by the standards of the time. Even though Cao Cao was known to be ruthless, he didn't harm his own people. While his 50% tax rate might seem outrageous, at least it allowed the other 50% of the population to survive.

As for Yuan Shu, he was an oddity. His expenditures were large, but it must be acknowledged that as long as tax revenue exceeded his expenses, he wouldn't raise taxes. He didn't concern himself with the common folk, treating them like bees that only needed to produce enough honey for him—he didn't care about anything beyond that.

Originally, after the great plague, when the population decreased and Yuan Shu's expenditures exceeded tax revenue, his treatment of the populace as insignificant would have effectively increased taxes on individuals. However, since the plague hadn't occurred in Yuzhou, the population under Yuan Shu's rule had actually increased, thanks to his control of parts of Yangzhou and Jingzhou. As a result, his tax burden, spread out over a larger population, actually decreased.

It's worth mentioning that Yuan Shu's soldier-to-civilian ratio was on par with Liu Bei's, with Yuan Shu maintaining an army of 200,000. Of course, these troops were well-equipped, but their combat effectiveness was another matter. Unlike Cao Cao or Yuan Shao, Yuan Shu didn't have self-sustaining military colonies, nor did he have Liu Bei's construction corps...

To Yuan Shu, such things were unnecessary, and since no advisor had suggested otherwise, he saw no need for military colonies. He had plenty of money and food, so he didn't bother with things like that. This is why, despite controlling so much valuable territory, he could only bully minor warlords.

In short, Liu Biao was incredibly weak compared to the three major warlords in the Central Plains, so his only hope for victory lay in seizing opportunities. This time, he had been handed a golden opportunity. The dangerous figures that Kuai Yue feared had either been placed under house arrest or sidelined, and Liu Zhang, who had inherited his father's official position, was eager to make a name for himself!

Liu Zhang, who had only recently inherited the wealth left behind by his father, Liu Yan, had spent a year consolidating power in Yizhou with the help of Wang Lei, Huang Quan, Wu Yi, Zhang Ren, and Yan Yan. However, Hanzhong was still occupied by Zhang Lu.

Originally, Zhang Lu was just a pawn deployed by Liu Yan to block orders from the central government and the Qiang tribes in Yong and Liang, allowing Liu Yan to become a local tyrant. But after Liu Yan's death, while Liu Zhang was busy consolidating Yizhou, Zhang Lu successfully turned Hanzhong into a theocratic utopia.

In simple terms, Zhang Lu had seized the inheritance that Liu Yan left for Liu Zhang. Now, with Liu Zhang newly installed as Governor of Yizhou, he was filled with a sense of responsibility—how could he allow what his father left him to be taken by someone else?

The current situation was that the usually timid Liu Zhang had found some courage, and the civil and military officials of Yizhou, who had been idle for too long, were eager to show the world the might of Yizhou. This led to the formation of two large armies.

One was led by Zhang Ren, who spearheaded a northern campaign against Hanzhong, while the other was commanded by Yan Yan, who led an army downriver from Yizhou to Jingzhou, planning to attack Hanzhong from Shangyong. This campaign also served to test the strength of the Central Plains warlords.

It was clear that the strategists of Yizhou—Zhang Song, Liu Ba, Huang Quan, and Zheng Du—didn't consider Yuan Shu a significant threat. In their view, if they were defeated, they could always retreat to Yizhou, where no one could reach them. Even so, they informed Liu Biao, intending to use him as a shield, under the pretext of supporting a fellow member of the imperial clan.

Although Kuai Yue saw through their plot, it was an open scheme. After Kuai Yue revealed the intentions of Zhang Song and the others, Liu Biao hesitated only briefly before mobilizing his troops, promising to return Jingzhou to Yizhou once it was captured.

Thus, with both sides harboring their own agendas, Liu Biao and Liu Zhang launched their campaigns. Compared to Liu Zhang's grand army, Liu Biao's forces seemed paltry, but in terms of results, they were evenly matched.

Yan Yan, determined to prove himself, swiftly captured Baidi, which significantly boosted the morale of the civil and military officials of Yizhou. Initially, they had feared they might be unprepared as they ventured out of their remote region, but after seeing their success, they were filled with confidence. The so-called "Three Great Warlords of the Central Plains"? They were nothing!

With their confidence soaring, Yan Yan, under the direction of Zhang Song, Wang Lei, Qin Mi, and Liu Ba, advanced rapidly. By the time they reached Shangyong, Yuan Shu's side finally responded. However, at that point, Yuan Shu's pathetic intelligence network still mistakenly believed that Liu Biao had merely retaken Northern Jingzhou.

Chapter 650: Open Schemes Fall Short of the Human Heart

When Chen Xi received the news of Yuan Yao's death, it came alongside several other significant updates: Liu Zhang's campaign into Hanzhong, Liu Biao's invasion of Jingzhou, unrest in Xiliang, Yuan Shu's plan to adopt Sun Ce as his heir, Gan Ning's successful return to Taishan after completing his mission, and various reports from internal spies about the Yuan family's and the Guanzhong Yang family's conspiracies.

In addition to these major events, there were other developments, such as Zang Hong's plan to join Chen Gong in attacking the Hu people in Bingzhou, Hu Zhao sending Chen Gong a detailed map of the Hetao region, Wei Yan and Guan Ping's mixed results in a conflict in the southern part of Bohai, which culminated in a major battle between Wei Yan and Gao Lan at the Le Ling front, where both broke through to the Inner Qi stage.

Speaking of Wei Yan, it's worth noting that his progress had been somewhat slow, akin to Sun Ce's early days. Although Wei Yan had reached the Inner Qi stage, he still couldn't match Gao Lan, who had been at the peak of the Qi Refinement stage for a long time. Initially, the two were of similar strength, but after the breakthrough, Gao Lan was nearly on par with Zhang He, while Wei Yan was just entering the Inner Qi stage.

Eventually, Zang Ba led his well-prepared legion from Qingzhou, joining forces with Wei Yan and Guan Ping to engage in a fierce battle against Gao Lan, Jiang Yiqu, and Han Meng. They managed to confine the conflict to the Qingzhou-Jizhou border, narrowly averting what could have escalated into a full-scale war between the major powers.

Adding to the pile was a secret letter from Jia Xu, reports from Taishan's covert agents in Qingzhou, news of the Xu province's aristocracy planning a rebellion, and updates on Yanzhou's construction projects. With all these issues suddenly landing on Chen Xi's desk within a matter of days, he couldn't help but feel overwhelmed. It was as if the Han dynasty was on the brink of explosion.

"How did this happen? It feels like the sky is falling! How did all these issues pile up on my desk? I was sure I had everything sorted before I left!" Chen Xi exclaimed in frustration, staring at the alarming reports before him. The sheer volume of crises made his head spin.

"It's not that bad," Guo Jia remarked as he sorted through the documents. "Take the issue of Yanzhou's occupation, for instance. We planned for this a long time ago. We just need to adjust our original plan slightly. As for the new city in Yanzhou, we already prepared for the renovation of central cities across

the plains. It's just a matter of mobilizing materials now, and Gongyou, that will be your responsibility." Guo Jia turned to Sun Qian with a sigh.

"All these tasks were part of the original plans that Zijing and Zichuan had already set up. We just need to unseal the reserve supplies when the time comes. I've already completed the road plans for the northern regions; all that's left is manpower," Sun Qian replied, waving off the concern. He had grown used to the workload.

Sun Qian was currently overseeing the construction of the new city at Linyi. With Lu Bu and Yuan Shao no longer in the way, the construction pace had significantly increased, although completion was still a long way off.

"What's not bad about this? When I'm not in Taishan, Wenhe and Wenruo seem to go wild. They're using this opportunity to purge our internal factions, but they're being way too violent. How many people will have to die because of this?" Chen Xi said, exasperated. He realized that whenever he wasn't around, Jia Xu and Li You would start playing their dangerous games.

Their method involved deliberately leaving Xuzhou exposed, allowing the enemy to think they could rise up during Yuan Shao or Yuan Shu's ascension—essentially, a bait-and-trap tactic.

"Swift action to cut through the chaos—it's a good strategy. Now's the perfect time to purge our internal factions. As long as our core members remain untainted, we can absorb the remnants of other forces later without risking corruption," Guo Jia said lazily, lying on the table. He wasn't bothered by Jia Xu and Li You's ruthless methods. To him, Chen Xi was often too soft-hearted. When mercy doesn't work, a firmer approach is necessary. Thunder and rain are both tools in the same arsenal—why stick to just one?

"I just think it's a waste for those people to die. As long as they're still people, they have the potential to contribute. Losing them like this is such a pity," Chen Xi sighed. Guo Jia's eyebrow twitched at this, thinking, Zichuan, you really enjoy reforming people through labor, don't you?

"Let's not get sidetracked with pointless discussions. The matter of the Yuan family's southern and northern factions merging is irrelevant—Yuan Shu's stubborn nature means it will never work. But what's going on with Sun Bofu?" Guo Jia pointed to another report.

Since leaving his post as intelligence chief to serve as a military strategist for Guan Yu, Guo Jia had lost touch with much of the southern intelligence, and his knowledge of Sun Ce was now outdated. In his mind, Sun Ce was still an immature boy.

But now, after reviewing Sun Ce's latest intelligence, Guo Jia was shocked. Although Sun Ce's behavior was still somewhat immature, there were already signs of greatness in him—enough to establish his own domain. Guo Jia wondered how that had happened.

"I don't know either. I even deliberately suppressed Sun Bofu and Zhou Gongjin to give Yuan Shu a chance to grow peacefully and strengthen his power, hoping that Yuan Shu's integrity would ultimately block Sun Bofu's path!" Chen Xi was equally frustrated. He couldn't understand it either!

To be honest, Chen Xi had put in a lot of effort behind the scenes to help Yuan Shu become as strong as he was. Jia Xu and others had also lent a hand, all to fatten Yuan Shu up so that only Liu Bei could consume him, making Liu Bei's expansion less conspicuous.

Unlike Jia Xu and the others, who were mainly concerned with creating a strong rear base for Liu Bei, Chen Xi had an additional objective—to use Yuan Shu to restrain Sun Ce.

Frankly, this strategy might seem absurd to those who understood the vast difference in capability between Yuan Shu and Sun Ce, but Chen Xi chose this unlikely approach because he knew it was the only one that could fool Zhou Yu.

Every plot has a shelf life. Once Zhou Yu realized something was off and began to analyze it, he would unravel the scheme within a year or two. So Chen Xi didn't bother with more obvious tactics.

Sun Ce was most known for his loyalty and sense of justice, so Chen Xi decided to target that. In the previous timeline, Yuan Shu had lacked the strength to bind Sun Ce, leading to the deterioration of their relationship and eventual fallout.

Chen Xi had seen Yuan Shu's sense of honor firsthand, so he carefully built up Yuan Shu's power, giving him the ability to uphold his own sense of justice. The nature of human relationships is such that favors are never fully repaid, especially in Yuan Shu's situation. The more Sun Ce respected him, the better Yuan Shu treated the Sun family. Likewise, the more Yuan Shu treated him well, the more grateful Sun Ce felt. In Sun Ce's mind, he couldn't leave Yuan Shu until all debts were repaid—that was his loyalty.

This strategy theoretically should have resulted in the collapse of one of the tripods propping up the balance of power. But things weren't following the script at all. Somehow, Sun Ce had risen to prominence instead!