

Mythical 661

Chapter 661: The Battle Between the Iron-Blooded and the Civilizing Factions

By the time Zhou Yu, stationed in Yuzhou, learned about the situation in Xuzhou, Sun Ce had already led his troops to march on Jingzhou. Meanwhile, Liu Biao, leveraging Kuai Yue's strategic wisdom and Huang Zhong's bravery, had successfully captured most of Nan County. This marked Liu Biao's first successful counterattack since losing Jingbei.

Zhou Yu found himself in a dilemma upon hearing this news. However, given his clear sense of priorities, he decided, after some hesitation, to forgo what seemed like a golden opportunity to seize Xuzhou. He recognized that he hadn't yet fully consolidated the territories previously held by Yuan Shu.

As for the southern parts of Yangzhou, they were still too far out of reach. Consequently, Zhou Yu had no choice but to abandon this promising opportunity, focusing instead on stabilizing his base before making further moves.

"Ziyu, I'm leaving the Yuzhou aristocracy and the upcoming spring plowing to you. I need to find a way to stall those Yuan family elders," Zhou Yu sighed, giving instructions to Zhuge Jin.

Thanks to Zhuge Jin's efforts in persuading the local aristocrats, many had already pledged their support to Sun Ce. Even those who hadn't openly declared their loyalty were no longer as resistant to Sun Ce's rule. Meanwhile, Zhou Yu had also begun reorganizing the troops, aiming to maintain a force of 200,000 while enhancing the combat effectiveness of the Yuzhou army.

"I will take care of it, but Gongjin, sometimes you need to act decisively," Zhuge Jin nodded, then added with a light-hearted tone.

"Sigh, they are still Yuan Shu's clan and have done great favors for Bofu. I can't treat them harshly," Zhou Yu shook his head. He had indeed considered taking more drastic measures, but both Sun Ce and Yuan Shu were men of honor. Acting against the Yuan family would greatly damage their relationships.

"It's not about being harsh. Sometimes it's better to channel than to block. Gongjin, perhaps you could consider other approaches. The reason the Yuan elders can't work with us is clear to you. So, why not address the root cause?" Zhuge Jin said calmly. Since they couldn't eliminate the Yuan family, they might as well turn them into allies.

"That's true, but it won't be easy," Zhou Yu sighed.

"On the contrary, it's quite simple. Yuan Benchu can't reach Yuzhou. All we need to do is consolidate our power and let the Yuan family see our strength. By the time they realize it, it will be too late. Besides, it's uncertain whether Yuan Benchu in Jizhou will live up to the Yuan family's expectations," Zhuge Jin replied with a slight smile. He wasn't interested in suppressing others; he was more concerned with strengthening their own position.

"Very well. I'll go along with their plans for now, and let them realize things aren't as simple as they think," Zhou Yu said, inspired by Zhuge Jin's words. A complete plan began to take shape in his mind.

"These Yuan family elders always talk about the Yuan clan and Yuan Shao. In that case, it's time they learned the differences between their ideals and ours," Zhou Yu thought as he carefully considered the feasibility of his plan.

"Still, I need to be careful with the timing. I can't let the Yuan elders run amok," Zhou Yu mused as he headed outside to speak with the Yuan family elders. For now, they couldn't afford to provoke a conflict with Liu Bei—it wasn't in the interests of Sun Ce or Yuan Shu. The so-called interests of the Yuan family didn't align with theirs, so a clash was out of the question.

Though the Yuan elders were experienced and shrewd, they couldn't match the innate brilliance of Zhou Yu. While they disapproved of Yuan Shu handing over military and administrative powers to Sun Ce, Zhou Yu's argument, framed from the perspective of the Yuan family's overall interests, left them with no choice but to concede.

When Fazheng and Zhuge Liang arrived in Yanzhou, Liu Yan was busy drumming up support for Lu Bu's return to Bingzhou. He had already invited numerous scholars to discuss the threat of northern barbarians invading Bingzhou.

Before Liu Yan could even propose that Lu Bu was willing to march north to defeat the barbarians and secure the frontier, many scholars began to rally around the cause. A group of idle scholars even started advocating for the various warlords to set aside their differences and focus on eliminating the barbarian threat.

But events quickly took a different turn from what Liu Yan had planned. First, Chen Lin stepped forward to praise Gongsun Zan for his heroic efforts in exterminating the Wuhuan and Xianbei tribes and securing the frontier. He argued that Yuan Shao should not have attacked Gongsun Zan.

It seems Chen Lin had also been angered by Yuan Shao's previous actions, and he lavishly praised Gongsun Zan's achievements in Youzhou, extolling his merits in defending the frontier. Although there was some exaggeration, Gongsun Zan's title as the White Horse General was indeed earned through bloody battles and undeniable achievements.

With Chen Lin leading the way, a wave of support for Gongsun Zan quickly followed, accompanied by harsh criticism of Yuan Shao. Even Han Fu's mysterious death in the latrine was pinned on Yuan Shao by some who harbored grudges.

Of course, where there is praise, there is also criticism. Liu Yu, who was still alive in Chang'an, began organizing people to denounce Gongsun Zan after hearing Chen Lin's commendations. After all, Gongsun Zan's methods had indeed been brutal, wiping out every barbarian he encountered, leaving no trace behind. Moreover, Gongsun Zan had once attacked a member of the imperial family, an act that was hard to justify.

The "kill every barbarian you see" approach, though favored by some scholars, clashed with the ideals of others who leaned toward cultural assimilation. Thus, a fierce debate erupted between the two sides. At this point, it was no longer a matter of who was right or wrong; it had become a full-blown factional struggle.

On one side was the Iron-Blooded Faction, led by Chen Lin and Xu Gan. On the other side was the Civilizing Faction, led by Liu Yu and Kong Rong. The Iron-Blooded Faction's strongest debater was naturally Chen Lin himself, while the Civilizing Faction's most formidable rhetorician was Mi Heng.

A glance at the lineup made it clear that the two sides were evenly matched. At this stage, neither would back down. One side staunchly supported Gongsun Zan, while the other vehemently denounced him. As a result, Lu Bu found himself sidelined, with Liu Yan dumbfounded by the turn of events. Chen Lin and Kong Rong even proposed a public debate, asking Liu Yan to provide the venue and serve as the arbitrator.

Naturally, Yuan Shao would have to be out of his mind to consider attacking Gongsun Zan now. If Gongsun Zan were killed at this point, both factions would surely turn their ire on Yuan Shao, and the

resulting vilification would be relentless. Among these scholars were historians, members of the Qingliu (Pure Stream) Faction, and practical statesmen—all fully capable of tarnishing Yuan Shao's legacy.

Moreover, the Iron-Blooded Faction and the Civilizing Faction weren't just about debating. Their disputes also had practical consequences, as seen in the earlier clashes between Gongsun Zan and Liu Yu. Now, among the scholars involved in the current debate, there were those who preferred to let their actions speak for themselves. Some even picked up their weapons, ready to settle the matter through direct confrontation, believing that victory would silence the opposition.

Chapter 662: The Ideology of Turning Enemies into Allies

While the practical faction was busy searching for a battleground, Liu Yan's quiet voice finally spread the word—Lu Bu was preparing to lead a northern campaign against the barbarian tribes, intending to reclaim the Hetao region.

"Hmph, turning enemies into allies is the true path of a grand enterprise. How could a mere brute understand the subtleties of such wisdom?" Hu Zhao sneered as he headed towards Yanzhou.

"Those who are not of our kind are bound to have different intentions. Slay them under the clear sky!" Zang Hong, after reading what Chen Lin had sent him, packed it away and made his way to Lu Bu's camp.

Both men had little interest in civil wars. Hu Zhao's ideal was to educate the world, and he was a man of action—someone who, regardless of others' opinions, would find a place within his means to educate the people.

Previously disillusioned with Liu Bei's grand yet seemingly empty ideals, Hu Zhao had left Yuzhou for Mount Tai, bringing along his half-disciple Sima Yi. They traveled across the land, using their feet to measure the central plains, and ventured north to understand the habits of the barbarian tribes.

Upon returning from the north before the new year, Hu Zhao felt that he had imparted everything he could to Sima Yi. So, he returned to the central plains with Sima Yi, planning to find a place to document his thoughts.

Upon his return, Hu Zhao noticed that Mount Tai had not only survived but was thriving. This made him reassess his earlier prejudices. Having traveled through the northern regions, where he observed the behavior of the barbarians, Hu Zhao began to form new ideas about education.

Hu Zhao was already a highly learned man, which was why he could become Sima Yi's teacher. Once he realized the potential of Mount Tai's educational system and combined it with his observations of the northern barbarians, Hu Zhao began to crystallize a new ideology.

Additionally, Hu Zhao had encountered some seemingly absurd ideas in the Mount Tai library, but after a year of traveling and contemplating, these ideas began to coalesce, forming a new educational philosophy. Hu Zhao couldn't help but admire the ancient scholars who had first proposed these ideas.

As these thoughts settled and matured, Hu Zhao became increasingly eager to put them into practice.

As for Zang Hong, he had little interest in internal conflicts. His father had served as a Commandant Against the Xiongnu (a high-ranking Han official responsible for countering the Xiongnu), so Zang Hong had grown up with a deep-seated animosity towards the barbarians. For him, killing them was a straightforward matter—swift and decisive.

Zang Hong had decided to pursue his own ideals after confirming that Yanzhou would fall under Liu Bei's control, ensuring the safety of his brothers Zhang Chao and Zhang Miao.

With this turn of events, Chen Gong, who had not expected any of the civil officials to join Lu Bu's campaign to Bingzhou, was suddenly surprised to find that many scholars were willing to accompany Lu Bu. However, they all made it clear that if Lu Bu did not commit to fighting the barbarians, they would leave as soon as they arrived.

When Hu Zhao and Zang Hong arrived one after the other, Chen Gong was even more astonished. Even he couldn't claim to easily best these two, especially Hu Zhao, whose insights left Chen Gong in awe. A figure of such caliber had remained obscure until now.

"Don't be so amazed, Gongtai. I've personally traveled to the Hetao region and have a fair understanding of the forces there. I've even created a map detailing the strength of each faction in the region," Hu Zhao said calmly. After some time spent understanding the situation, he was fully convinced that Lu Bu genuinely intended to march north.

"You have such a map?" Chen Gong was overjoyed. "This will greatly increase our chances of success in the northern campaign."

Hu Zhao pulled out a book wrapped in silk cloth from his robe, unwrapped it, and handed it to Chen Gong. "This is only a portion of it. The remaining four parts are still in Wuyuan, Bingzhou. I will present them to you once we arrive. I ask for your understanding."

"There's no need to apologize, Kongming. We are all preparing for the northern campaign. There's no need for formalities," Chen Gong replied with a smile. He understood that scholars like Hu Zhao were not forgetful—they simply wanted to ensure that their efforts to support the campaign were acknowledged.

While Chen Gong and Hu Zhao formed a good rapport, Zang Hong found common ground with Gao Shun, Zhang Liao, and others. For generals who had grown up in the north, the concept of education was foreign, but they knew well how to defeat the barbarians. Naturally, this shared understanding brought them closer.

When Zhuge Liang and others arrived in Yanzhou, Chen Xi and Guo Jia wasted no time in fully securing control of the land. At the same time, they began transferring supplies to Lu Bu's forces, including arrows, weapons, armor, grain, and various pieces of intelligence, all neatly packaged.

"What's this?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled as he looked at the thin book Guo Jia had handed him. He wondered why Guo Jia had given it to him.

"Someone gave this to me while we were handing over supplies, asking me to pass it on to our lord. But you know I won't be returning to Mount Tai anytime soon, so I thought I'd pass it to you instead," Guo Jia shrugged.

"What's written in it?" Chen Xi asked, curious.

"How would I know? The person said it was something they owed to our lord. Apparently, they were too blind to see his potential at the time and felt ashamed, so they asked me to deliver it," Guo Jia said indifferently. Normally, he wouldn't bother with such matters, but the person's demeanor had impressed him, so he agreed to help.

"Oh, let me take a look. I'll assess its importance before passing it on to Xuande. No point in wasting his time if it's trivial," Chen Xi said as he casually opened the book.

It didn't take long for Chen Xi to finish reading the few thousand words. Initially indifferent, his heart was suddenly filled with clarity about how to deal with the northern barbarians.

"So that's it...霸道 (Bàdào - Rule by Force), 王道 (Wángdào - Benevolent Rule), 仁道 (Réndào - Humane Governance), 百家 (Bǎijiā - Various Schools of Thought), 儒家 (Rújiā - Confucianism), 法礼 (Fǎlǐ - Law and Ritual), 大一统 (Dà yītǒng - Grand Unification). I see now," Chen Xi murmured.

"So, we center our internal governance on the ideology of grand unification, using law and ritual as the unchanging backbone, while drawing on the wisdom of the various schools of thought," Chen Xi continued to mutter to himself, thoroughly impressed by the author's insights.

[Thus, even if the Hundred Schools of Thought thrive, they won't break the structure of grand unification. Law and ritual are the unchanging foundation, while rule by force and benevolent rule are merely external manifestations,] Chen Xi reflected, utterly astonished by the author's brilliance.

[On the flip side, rule by force will break the barbarians' spirit, benevolent rule will conquer their minds, humane governance will earn their gratitude, the Hundred Schools of Thought will cleanse them, and then law and ritual will bind them. By the end of this process, there will be no more barbarians.] Chen Xi silently absorbed this philosophy, realizing that it was a deliberate strategy to transform enemies into allies through virtuous means.

Chapter 663: The Differences in Ruling Philosophies—Bàdào, Wángdào, and Réndào

Chen Xi's praise piqued Guo Jia's interest. With Chen Xi having taken the lead, Guo Jia also picked up the book and quickly read through its contents, immersing himself in thought. Soon enough, he comprehended the entire text.

"You've misunderstood," Guo Jia said as he handed the book back to Chen Xi.

"How is that possible? My comprehension isn't that poor," Chen Xi retorted, glaring at Guo Jia in irritation.

"You misunderstood the concept of education in this book. For internal matters, your understanding is correct, but for external affairs, you're mistaken. The depth of Bàdào (ruling by force) described in this

book is different from how you've interpreted it," Guo Jia said with a dismissive wave. This book was sent from Lu Bu's side, so the person behind it was clearly with Lu Bu. The concept of Bàoào here isn't just about beating the enemy into submission.

Chen Xi clearly didn't grasp what Guo Jia was implying.

"Sometimes, your thoughts tend to drift," Guo Jia remarked with a roll of his eyes. "This book came from Lu Bu's side, meaning the author is with him. Now, consider what Bàoào means to someone like Lu Bu when it comes to dealing with the barbarians."

In an instant, Chen Xi understood. Since the book was from Lu Bu's camp, the idea of Bàoào referred to the actions of someone like Lu Bu or Gongsun Zan, both of whom belonged to the most extreme factions of the iron-blooded approach.

Realizing this, Chen Xi was stunned. For figures like Gongsun Zan and Lu Bu, dealing with the barbarians wasn't just about fighting them—it was about cleansing entire areas of their presence. When the book spoke of Bàoào, Wángdào (benevolent rule), and Réndào (humane governance), it wasn't talking about ruling or educating the survivors, because there wouldn't be any left to rule.

"Exactly," Guo Jia said with a sly smile. "The idea is to leave nothing in their wake—true Bàoào is about ensuring that nothing remains standing, so that the survivors have no choice but to submit."

"This person truly understands the nature of the barbarians and knows how to educate them based on their nature," Guo Jia's smile turned unsettling, making Chen Xi feel a chill deep in his bones.

"Education is about standardizing behavior from the body to the mind. If they can't be standardized, then let them die. Once enough of them are dead, the living will naturally conform. After all, they believe in the survival of the fittest. We set the rules, and they follow them—that is Wángdào," Guo Jia's words were full of chilling logic, causing Chen Xi to feel an unsettling coldness within.

"Réndào? Under the blade, even a single breath is considered great mercy," Guo Jia stated, his voice taking on a calm, deliberate tone that left Chen Xi reeling. Could it really be interpreted this way? But somehow, it all made sense!

"Are you sure that's what the author meant?" Chen Xi asked, feeling a sudden surge of respect for Guo Jia's deep understanding.

"Absolutely. No matter what happens, Lu Bu's return north will inevitably lead to conflict with the barbarians. And with Chen Gongtai's intelligence, he would surely know that the best way to stop killing is through killing. After all, once that banner is raised, there are only two outcomes—death or glory. It's just the way things will play out," Guo Jia's cold gaze swept over Chen Xi as he spoke.

Guo Jia's words left Chen Xi speechless. Education, in this context, truly was about standardizing behavior, and it indeed needed to be tailored to the situation.

But this particular method of tailored education was something unprecedented in history, showing that the author of this book was no ordinary person.

"Zichuan, you're too merciful. Sometimes, you hesitate over trivial matters. I don't believe you haven't thought about how to deal with the barbarians, but your approach is too soft. For an unruly people, don't hold out hope. If you don't destroy them today, they'll cause trouble tomorrow," Guo Jia said sternly, clearly dissatisfied with Chen Xi's leniency.

Chen Xi smiled wryly. Although he harbored deep hatred for the barbarians, he couldn't bring himself to order the extermination of millions of people. Not everyone had the mentality of Gongsun Zan, who could wipe out hundreds of thousands of barbarians without batting an eye.

Chen Xi favored a more measured approach—subdue them first, then reeducate and assimilate them, slowly absorbing them into Han culture over three generations, thus avoiding a bloodbath.

"Zichuan, the barbarians are capricious and untrustworthy. When the empire is strong, they bow and scrape; when it is weak, they become insolent. Surely you've noticed this by now," Guo Jia continued calmly. "Even when the Xiongnu became Han Xiongnu, they remained Xiongnu in essence."

"Han's education had no effect on them. So why not try a different approach? Use their own methods to educate them—let the weak atone for their mistakes with their lives, while the strong will have the dignity to admit their wrongs!" Guo Jia's words carried a chilling pragmatism that left no room for sentimentality.

"'Reward virtue and punish vice.' It's acknowledged in both law and ritual that killing for one's brothers, friends, or sovereign is justified. So when it comes to national and personal vengeance, the laws should be washed in blood," Guo Jia's voice dripped with cold indifference as he laid out his reasoning.

Chen Xi couldn't argue. He suddenly realized that the problem lay not in the logic or the laws of the time, but in his own reluctance. He had misunderstood the legal and moral framework of this era.

"If they're treacherous and untrustworthy, why bother educating them? Just kill them. Not every member of a race will be brave enough to face death. Keep killing, and eventually, they will submit. We have the strength—why waste our energy on anything else? They aren't even our people," Guo Jia stated coldly, but realistically.

"I understand. After all, it's a matter of national and personal vengeance—it should be this way," Chen Xi sighed, realizing that his mindset was still out of sync with the times. Despite his growing understanding, he still couldn't be as indifferent to human life as Guo Jia or Jia Xu, even when it came to enemies.

"Zichuan, you need a new mindset—when it comes to foreign enemies, 'better to kill a thousand by mistake than let one slip away.' Sparing the people of the Central Plains is virtuous, but the barbarians deserve no such mercy. They must be eradicated," Guo Jia declared without hesitation, deeply dissatisfied with Chen Xi's mercy.

"A single order from you could result in tens of thousands of deaths," Chen Xi sighed.

"But those tens of thousands of deaths could bring ten years of peace to our Han Empire," Guo Jia replied with a carefree smile. Why show mercy to enemies?

"I see now. It seems I'm not cut out for this," Chen Xi sighed, recognizing his limitations. He knew his strengths and weaknesses, and this was something he couldn't do.

Chapter 664: The Variables

"Let's go, Mancheng. I'll take you away from Shanyang and lead you to follow Lord Cao. Although there were mistakes made, the willingness to admit them shows the mark of a wise leader. There's nothing more I can teach you," Li Jin said to his younger cousin.

After experiencing such a long period of turmoil, Li Dian had come to terms with the deaths of his father and elder brother. While the hatred still lingered in his heart, he had learned to suppress it and no longer outwardly displayed his emotions.

“Alright, let’s go to Lord Cao right away,” Li Dian agreed with a nod.

At this point, Li Dian wasn’t fully aware of the situation in Yanzhou. He knew that Yanzhou had been taken by Lu Bu, but the Li family wasn’t a prominent noble family, and the deaths of his father and brother had severed any remaining connections with Cao Cao.

Chen Gong hadn’t bothered to target such a minor family, which allowed Li Jin to continue living in Shanyang County with Li Dian. Li Jin, understanding the situation, wisely chose not to provoke Lu Bu, knowing that Lu Bu’s strength was greater than he had imagined.

“Sigh, you should study the military classics more,” Li Jin advised with a sigh. He didn’t have many solutions for Li Dian. While Li Dian was quite talented, despite reaching the peak of the Refining Qi into Steel stage, he couldn’t break through to the level of Inner Qi Manifestation, a barrier that had stopped countless others before him.

“Thank you, elder brother, for your year-long guidance,” Li Dian said, bowing deeply to Li Jin, still not fully comprehending just how powerful his elder cousin truly was.

“There’s no need to thank me. Our Shanyang Li family needs someone to represent us, and that person can’t be me. So, I’ve done my best to teach you. Unfortunately, I don’t have the miraculous techniques of Tong Yuan that could elevate you to the Inner Qi Manifestation level,” Li Jin lamented. Despite his own strength, his potential was severely limited.

“I’m already grateful to have come this far. I wouldn’t dare to ask for more,” Li Dian replied, content with his progress and harboring no complaints.

“Sigh, your talent in commanding troops is strong, but avenging your father and brother by killing Zhao Yun will still be an incredibly difficult task. I’ve taught you all I can,” Li Jin said with a helpless sigh, still troubled by the situation.

In Li Jin's view, although Li Dian's abilities in command and strategy were commendable and he was capable of leading an army, his opponents were becoming increasingly formidable. Over the past year, Zhao Yun's strength had steadily risen, both in military leadership and combat prowess. Though the increase was gradual, Zhao Yun's abilities had been consistently improving.

To be honest, after the deaths of Li Qian and Li Zheng, Li Jin had used special methods to assess the overall strength of Liu Bei's generals. He paid particular attention to those at the Inner Qi Manifestation level.

Compared to Guan Yu, whose strength increased after each battle, and Zhang Fei, whose power surged following defeats, Zhao Yun seemed particularly enigmatic. Zhao Yun's strength increased in a straight line, as if his abilities were steadily improving even during mundane activities like eating and sleeping.

At first, Li Jin didn't fully understand this phenomenon, but he eventually guessed that Zhao Yun might have a divine stone within his body, and that its power was gradually enhancing Zhao Yun's strength.

Speaking of this, one must mention Zhang Fei. In Li Jin's eyes, Zhang Fei was an incredibly unique case. While it seemed like Zhang Fei's strength increased steadily through training, Li Jin's observations revealed that the actual increases weren't as significant. Instead, Zhang Fei's strength surged substantially after intense battles.

For instance, after Zhang Fei's recent fight with Lu Bu, Li Jin, with his high level of perception, could clearly sense that after that defeat, Zhang Fei's strength had grown more than it had in the past three years of training.

According to Li Jin's estimates, if things continued like this, after fully absorbing the growth from this last battle, Zhang Fei would likely be able to withdraw unscathed even when facing Lu Bu.

Li Jin also understood that as Zhang Fei's strength grew, it would become increasingly difficult for him to suffer defeats, which would in turn slow down his growth. After a few more battles, Zhang Fei might even be able to fight Lu Bu to a draw. However, after that, Zhang Fei's progress might stagnate.

Although Li Jin had some doubts about his hypothesis, the facts seemed to support his conclusions.

At the Battle of Hulao Pass, the gap between Zhang Fei and Lu Bu was vast. However, the next time they met, Zhang Fei was already able to discern Lu Bu's weaknesses, though Lu Bu remained overwhelmingly strong. As for the third battle that should have taken place during the campaign for Xuzhou, it was disrupted by Chen Xi's influence, and never happened.

It's important to note that during that third encounter, Zhang Fei had clashed with Lu Bu for over a hundred rounds. Although he couldn't defeat Lu Bu, he managed to retreat unscathed, and Lu Bu didn't dare pursue him recklessly, as Zhang Fei had developed the ability to fight for his life if necessary.

By the time of the Xuzhou campaign, Zhang Fei already possessed the strength to challenge Lu Bu directly in single combat. While he still couldn't win, with the morale of his army behind him, he could now suppress Lu Bu in battle. In other words, Zhang Fei's strength had nearly reached Lu Bu's level, with only a slight difference remaining.

However, whether in this life or the previous one, Zhang Fei never had the chance for a final, decisive duel with Lu Bu. In the previous life, after their fourth encounter, Lu Bu was killed. In this life, after their second encounter, Lu Bu was already planning to return north to Bingzhou, and it's unlikely they'll have another opportunity for a death match.

Of course, this is all theoretical. In the previous life, Lu Bu never let go of his obsession, meaning his peak strength was likely around the time of his second encounter with Zhang Fei. By the time Ma Chao and others reached their prime, they would have matched Lu Bu's strength from his second duel with Zhang Fei.

But by then, Lu Bu's era had passed. At that level of strength, there would be many more warriors like Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Ma Chao, and Xu Chu who could rival Lu Bu's prowess at Hulao Pass. In such battles, who would emerge victorious would be uncertain.

The strength of the dead remains forever fixed at the moment of their death, while the living always have the potential to surpass it. It's as simple as that. Unfortunately, in this life, Lu Bu has lived longer, his obsession has shattered, and he now possesses a more balanced mindset, allowing him to fully harness his power. His level has fundamentally changed.

This is why Li Jin chose not to provoke Lu Bu—he simply couldn't afford to. Despite possessing Inner Qi Manifestation-level strength and formidable Daoist skills, Li Jin estimated that Lu Bu could defeat him within fifty moves.

"Let's go, Mancheng," Li Jin called to Li Dian, not informing him that Shanyang County was currently being taken over by Liu Bei's forces, led by none other than Zhao Yun. Zhao Yun's strength was such that he could kill Li Jin even faster than Lu Bu could. When it came to defeating weaker opponents, Zhao Yun had an even greater advantage over Lu Bu.

"Alright, elder brother. Should we head directly to Sili, or visit Minister Xun in Chenliu first?" Li Dian asked as they left the house.

Some readers have mentioned that I seem to be downplaying Zhang Fei and Guan Yu's abilities. Here's the thing: at their peak, Zhang Fei was indeed not inferior to Lu Bu. But for Zhang Fei to defeat an ultimate opponent like Lu Bu, he must also reach his own ultimate form. As for Guan Yu being unable to instantly kill Yan Liang, that's a topic for another time. In Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Yan Liang's death was portrayed as a bit of an accident. Considering Yan Liang's strength, it was indeed a bit unjust. But if we're talking about history, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were undeniably dominant forces.

Chapter 665: National Destiny

"Let's go directly to Sili. That's where Cao Cao's opportunity lies," Li Jin said with a smile, unaware of the white line of soldiers converging at the gates of Shanyang County.

"Hmm, those white horses..." Li Dian, with sharp eyes, noticed the White Horse Cavalry at the city gate. Upon seeing the large character "Zhao" on the banner, he immediately understood who the man was.

"Zhao Yun!" Li Dian muttered through gritted teeth, glaring at the handsome man on a white horse under that banner. Although Zhao Yun was nearly twice his age, he appeared just as young as Li Dian.

"Let's go." Li Jin also spotted Zhao Yun but remained completely composed. He knew that showing any sign of other intentions at this moment could doom the entire Li family if it affected Li Dian's mindset.

Zhao Yun glanced in Li Dian's direction and frowned slightly. He had sensed a fleeting killing intent from that area earlier, but now all he could see were merchants loading goods. If it were someone like Lu Bu, they might have investigated further, but Zhao Yun didn't possess that "better safe than sorry" mentality.

"I am Zhao Yun, under the command of the General Who Pacifies the East. I've come to take control of Shanyang. Where is the county magistrate?" Zhao Yun set aside his earlier suspicion and focused on his official duties. To him, securing Shanyang was far more important than pursuing an enemy who wouldn't show themselves. His confidence in his strength was unshakable.

Soon, Zhao Yu, the magistrate of Shanyang, appeared before Zhao Yun with the official seal in his hands. Zhao Yun merely ordered proclamations to be posted to reassure the people, sent personnel to survey the population, reassessed land allocations, and opened the granaries.

"Let's go," Li Jin instructed as he led Li Dian and the rest of the Li family out of the city. Chen Xi's consistent policy toward the local aristocrats was clear: if they wanted to leave, they could; if they chose to stay, they had to follow the new policies.

"What about that group?" Zhao Yun frowned as he watched the Li family's convoy, laden with wealth and possessions, leaving the city. He could tell that the group escorting the wealth were clearly trained soldiers.

"General, that is the Li family of Shanyang, one of the largest families in the county. They had close ties with Inspector Cao," Zhao Yu quickly explained when he saw Zhao Yun's puzzled expression.

"The Li family of Shanyang?" Zhao Yun tilted his head slightly. "Never heard of them. Let them go." To be honest, Zhao Yun couldn't be bothered to remember the names of minor soldiers he had casually killed in the past.

"Such strength..." Li Dian felt a cold sweat drench his back after leaving the city. Zhao Yun's casual glance had filled him with an overwhelming sense of inferiority.

"More than just strong. In today's world, only Lu Bu can certainly defeat him. I doubt anyone else could," Li Jin sighed, releasing a deep breath. "We should leave quickly. It seems Liu Bei's forces are surprisingly lax, not conducting thorough investigations."

"Perhaps they don't consider us a threat. What's important to us is merely a minor issue to them," Li Dian reasoned. He had a better understanding of human nature than Li Jin, who, without the burden of the Li family, wasn't much different from people like Zuo Ci.

"You're right," Li Jin nodded. "But Yanzhou is now firmly in Liu Bei's hands. We should hurry and leave. I can already see the dragon energy in the northwest."

Li Dian rolled his eyes. Over the past year, nothing had annoyed him more than Li Jin's frequent references to dragon energy, fate, and destiny. He didn't believe in any of it.

"Don't worry, we'll be back. Yuan Benchu's fate is far stronger than that of the Han Dynasty. He's destined to win. Liu Bei may be strong, but he's merely borrowing the remnants of the Han's dragon energy, far inferior to Yuan Benchu's fate," Li Jin said confidently, glancing toward the southern part of Jizhou.

Then he looked towards the direction of Mount Tai. Although there were signs of a rising dragon, they were far weaker compared to what he had observed at the border between Jizhou and Yanzhou—a dragon energy so potent it could almost rival that of a nation. Was this a sign that Yuan Shao was merely a dormant dragon waiting to emerge?

If Li You knew where Li Jin was looking, he would be astonished. That very spot was where Li You had buried the two counterfeit cauldrons of the mythical Emperor Xuanyuan. The dragon energy hovered over these cauldrons, embodying the saying "turning falsehood into truth." If Li You were to dig them up now, no one would believe him if he claimed they were fake.

This was partly due to Li You's lack of mastery in feng shui and destiny studies. Despite being well-versed in various arts, Li You had selected the burial site with care to create an illusion of authenticity. By sheer coincidence, he had chosen the very spot where the real Xuanyuan cauldrons had once vanished.

Though the cauldrons were gone, the dragon energy remained, suppressed beneath the earth. A divine stone that had fallen there became the new focus for the energy. If Li You didn't dig it up, in a few hundred years, that spot could produce a gem even more powerful than the He Shi Bi, capable of stabilizing a nation's fate.

The He Shi Bi could only stabilize a nation's fate for three hundred years, but this gem could potentially do so for six hundred. Unfortunately, there was no "if" in this situation—Li You had already unearthed the cauldrons and buried them again, leading to the current circumstances.

Li Jin had stumbled upon this by chance using techniques from the Taiping Qingling Dao. Even someone as skilled as Zuo Ci or Nan Hua would have difficulty detecting the dragon energy, as it was now sealed within the cauldrons.

In essence, the cauldrons might still be counterfeit, but they had acquired the same effect as the legendary Xuanyuan Cauldrons, capable of stabilizing a nation's fate for three hundred years—far more powerful than the Nine Cauldrons of Yu the Great, which could only stabilize for one hundred years each. When King Zhou of Shang gifted one cauldron to the state of Lu, his dynasty lost three hundred years of its fate.

If these cauldrons were unearthed, even if you claimed they were fake, many would argue otherwise. Daoists like Zuo Ci could easily distinguish between real and fake. Given that the counterfeit cauldrons had acquired the same effects as the originals, it would be impossible to prove they were not genuine.

It's worth noting that the three hundred years of national fate from the Han dynasty, following Emperor Wu of Han's "Yuanding" era, aligned perfectly with the Han dynasty's lifespan. From a mystical perspective, this could be attributed to the Xuanyuan Cauldrons, which carried three hundred years of national fate. After all, the latter part of Emperor Wu's reign was marked by decline.

Therefore, if these counterfeit cauldrons were unearthed and carried six hundred years of national fate, anyone seeking to challenge them would need to be truly formidable.

This is why Li Jin observed such flourishing national fate in that area. The reason was simple: the cauldrons carried six hundred years of national fate. How could an ordinary emperor match that? Typically, a founding emperor's fate, combined with that of his ministers and generals, would amount to no more than a few decades or a century.

It's also worth noting that Chen Xi himself carries one hundred years of national fate. For every year he lives, he brings another year of national fate, equivalent to having one of Yu the Great's Nine Cauldrons. If he's lucky, he might even extend it further.

This is why the dragon energy of Mount Tai sometimes takes different forms or even seems to wander, as it follows Chen Xi wherever he goes.

However, if Chen Xi doesn't stay away from Mount Tai for long, the dragon energy there remains relatively stable. But if he were to leave Liu Bei's side for an extended period, the dragon energy of Mount Tai might lose its shape entirely, reverting to a mere cloud of golden mist.

Speaking of this, I recall something someone once told me: the three cauldrons of Xuanyuan Yellow Emperor suppressed nine hundred years of the tribal era, nine hundred years of the slave era, and nine hundred years of the feudal era. The first nine hundred years were ended by Yu the Great, marking the beginning of the slave era. Yu the Great's Nine Cauldrons then suppressed nine hundred years of the slave era and nine hundred years of the feudal era, which ended with the rise of the Qin dynasty. The Jade Seal, on the other hand, could only stabilize national fate for three hundred years.

Here's the interesting part: Xuanyuan Yellow Emperor's era to the end of the tribal era was nine hundred years. Yu the Great's era to the end of the slave era was eighteen hundred years. The Qin dynasty's era to the end of the feudal era was twenty-one hundred years. When you add in the reigns of Fuxi and Shennong, you get the legendary five thousand years of Chinese civilization.

Chapter 666: The Battle for Guanzhong

In short, if Li You ever goes to dig up those things, he might be blinded by the radiance. He might even start doubting whether he was the one who buried them in the first place.

Meanwhile, Chen Xi was leading Zhuge Liang, commanding troops to build a new city in Linyi, Yanzhou. At this stage, they had no choice but to speed up construction.

Chen Xi wasn't foolish. After seizing the territory from Yuan Shao, the conflict between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei had been brought to the forefront. The decisive battle for control of the north was already in its final countdown. Both sides could clash at any moment, sparking a war that would determine the fate of the land.

"Kongming, go with Ziyi to select the able-bodied men from the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans. They've had more than half a month to rest, and those with injuries should have recovered by now. Select the strong ones to form military colonies and begin cultivating the land." Chen Xi estimated the construction timeline and then turned to Zhuge Liang. Honestly, by now, Zhuge Liang had learned everything Chen Xi could teach him, and there was no need for him to continue following Chen Xi around.

“Yes,” Zhuge Liang replied with a respectful bow. “I’ll go find Shuzhi. The construction of Linyi should be supervised by Shuzhi. You, Zichuan, should maintain your principle of not involving yourself in matters that aren’t your responsibility.”

“Alright, stop joking. I’m just here to check the progress and meet with Zhang Yan,” Chen Xi said with a smile.

If it weren’t for the fact that Chen Lan was coming here, Chen Xi wouldn’t have bothered with the construction in Linyi. As for meeting Zhang Yan, it was merely to have a look at the Yellow Turban leader who had managed to survive and make a name for himself in history.

“Many among the lower ranks of the Yellow Turbans are unruly, but the top leaders—whether it’s the two in Qingzhou or this one—are all men of integrity,” Zhuge Liang remarked, his tone filled with admiration. He had initially suspected that the situation with the great leader of the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans might have been a setup, but after several similar occurrences, even Zhuge Liang had to believe it.

“Those who stand up for righteousness often come from humble backgrounds. They aren’t accustomed to weighing the consequences of their actions,” Chen Xi sighed.

As they spoke, Zhang Yan and Wang Xiu appeared before Chen Xi. Zhang Yan had surrendered, demonstrated his loyalty, and proved his capabilities. Given the circumstances, Zhang Yan had been given the title of a miscellaneous colonel, though it was uncertain whether the position would be officially approved. In theory, there shouldn’t be any problems.

What Chen Xi didn’t know was that the issue wasn’t about whether it would be approved—it was that imperial orders couldn’t even leave Sili. Fan Chou and Guo Si were already in a standoff with Cao Cao and Liu Ye, while Zhang Ji and Yang Feng had already been defeated in the previous battle.

When Zhang Ji had faced Liu Ye earlier, they had exchanged only a few blows before discussing old times, as Zhang Ji and Hua Xiong were old acquaintances. Neither side had much animosity, and Liu Ye’s purpose was more about posturing, as coming to the aid of the emperor was a statement in itself. Therefore, Liu Ye was in no hurry and was content to drag things out, aiming to strengthen his claim to legitimacy. Thus, the conflict on Zhang Ji’s side was tepid at best.

The issue was that Zhang Ji's health was failing. One day, his old ailments flared up, so he sent a message to Hua Xiong, gifting him a thousand elite Xiliang cavalry as a token of goodwill.

When he departed, Zhang Ji didn't dismantle his camp or take any supplies, leaving everything behind. He simply led his troops back to Chang'an. With the Zhengguo Canal in hand, Sili and Guanzhong were not short of grain.

At Zhang Ji's stage in life, he wasn't living for himself but entirely for his nephew. During Dong Zhuo's reign, his schemes with Jia Xu were all for Zhang Xiu's sake. Even earlier, he had urged Zhang Xiu to go all out for his future. Now, even when making peace with Hua Xiong, he was thinking of Zhang Xiu's well-being.

Although Zhang Ji knew that the situation in Guanzhong was favorable, he always felt a sense of unease—namely, that they lacked a truly capable strategist. Even though Zhong Yao was intelligent, Zhang Ji felt it wasn't enough, as Zhong Yao wasn't fully aligned with them. In Zhang Ji's mind, a true ally was someone who had committed wrongdoing alongside him!

Hua Xiong was loyal, and he and Zhang Ji were comrades-in-arms, having shared hardships together. Thus, Zhang Ji could trust Hua Xiong.

This was why Zhang Ji, upon learning that Hua Xiong's personal guards had been wiped out, sent his own elite guards to Hua Xiong. He firmly believed that if he were to die one day, leaving his nephew without support, Hua Xiong would step in to help. And now that Hua Xiong was doing well under Liu Bei, he could provide protection for Zhang Xiu.

Although Zhang Ji understood that with Li Jue and others around, it was unlikely that Zhang Xiu would be left without support, he still made this choice out of caution.

Liu Ye, being astute, quickly deduced Zhang Ji's intentions but didn't speak out. He saw this as a great opportunity. Zhang Xiu was no weakling; even though Liu Ye couldn't see it himself, Hua Xiong had praised Zhang Xiu, saying he far surpassed many others.

After Zhang Ji's withdrawal, Yang Feng quickly found himself in deep trouble. Cao Cao, a master of warfare, seized the moment when Zhang Ji's retreat destabilized Yang Feng's defenses, launching a

surprise attack that dealt Yang Feng a crushing defeat. By the time Yang Feng stabilized his position, Cao Cao had already sent envoys to persuade Xu Huang to defect, securing a decisive victory.

Without Xu Huang, Yang Feng was unable to resist further and barely escaped with his life, though he lost most of his forces. Xu Huang, on the other hand, had been recruited by Cao Cao.

After Yang Feng and Zhang Ji retreated to Chang'an, Fan Chou and Guo Si immediately mobilized their troops to block Cao Cao and Liu Ye's advancing armies. However, unlike Zhang Ji, Fan Chou wasn't as amiable. He had no ties with Hua Xiong and went straight to battle.

Meanwhile, Guo Si's confrontation with Cao Cao was fierce, but Fan Chou, remembering old ties, wasn't as ruthless in his approach. Guo Si didn't mind this, much like how Li Jue had brought ginseng to visit Zhang Ji, even though it was Zhang Ji's retreat that had led to Yang Feng's collapse. Yang Feng, on the other hand, was harshly reprimanded.

The Xiliang troops may not have understood much, but they knew who was on their side. Uniting allies and suppressing enemies was key to long-term stability.

Yang Feng clearly didn't belong to the Xiliang faction; he was part of the Yang family's power base. So, when Zhang Ji's retreat led to the downfall of the Yang family, it was seen as a move that benefited Li Jue. And Zhang Ji's old illness? No one expected him to lead troops into battle in such a state.

And so, the Xiliang army clashed with Cao Cao's forces, marking the beginning of the battle to seal off Guanzhong, meticulously planned by Xun Yu and Xun You.

With Yang Feng's inadvertent gift of a top general, Cao Cao finally confirmed that the Yang family still retained a sliver of strength. Though not formidable, it was enough to tip the scales in a critical moment. The rest would depend on the actions of Sima Lang and Zhong Yao. With only Li Jue and Zhang Ji's forces left in Chang'an, the success of Xun Yu's strategy hinged on whether chaos could be instigated in the capital.

Cao Cao pondered each step of the plan carefully, no longer displaying the ease and confidence he had when he held Yanzhou and commanded a vast army of 100,000. Now, he approached each battle with utmost caution, striving to maximize the effectiveness of every ounce of strength. His prudence only

increased when Liu Bei's army appeared nearby, ready to support the emperor, making Cao Cao even more vigilant.

Chapter 667: The Loyalists of the Han Dynasty

In contrast to Cao Cao's caution, Liu Ye was much more carefree. Although he didn't realize it, a part of Cao's army had been overlooked—not just by him, but by everyone else as well. This was due to Xun You's special spiritual talent.

At this moment, in Chang'an, Emperor Liu Xie could barely contain his excitement. He felt that his day of escaping from Li Jue's clutches and becoming the supreme ruler of the land was drawing near.

Since the completion of the Zhengguo Canal last year, Li Jue had eased his oppressive hold on Liu Xie. However, Li Jue's restraint did not prevent Liu Xie from courting disaster. Discovering that his life was now less perilous and filled with bloodshed, Liu Xie once again began to entertain the idea of overthrowing the remnants of the Xiliang faction and started secretly allying himself with loyalists like Fu Wan and Dong Feng.

Despite warnings from Yang Biao and even subtle hints from Li Jue himself, who was trying to avoid further conflict with Liu Xie, Liu Xie persisted. Unfortunately, these loyalists were stubborn and foolish, convinced that as long as they acted righteously, the spirits of their ancestors would protect them.

Fearing association with these fanatical loyalists, smarter officials like Yang Biao and Liu Yu avoided contact with them, not wanting to have their reputations dragged down.

What made matters worse was that figures like Dong Feng and Wang Zifu, upon realizing that Yang Biao and Liu Yu did not support their actions, started verbally attacking them, accusing them of betraying the Han Dynasty and dishonoring their ancestors. This behavior even drove Liu Yu, one of the most loyal and capable Han officials, to the brink of rage, eventually leading him to abandon any involvement in these matters.

The situation in Chang'an had thus become a chaotic mess. Dong Feng and his followers, emboldened by their delusions of impending victory, rallied around Liu Xie, encouraging his reckless behavior while alienating those who might have been allies.

Their actions were so blatant that even Zhong Yao, despite his intelligence, refused to get involved. Helping such lowly individuals might mean being dragged down by their incompetence, especially when these fools treated even the most loyal and capable Han officials as enemies.

Given their tendency to alienate and attack their own allies, Zhong Yao wisely decided to distance himself from them. He understood that while his intelligence and quick decision-making might allow him to challenge formidable foes, having such foolish allies was more dangerous than facing any enemy.

However, Zhong Yao couldn't just let Li Jue crush these people entirely, as they served as useful pawns to keep Li Jue occupied. In one casual comment, Zhong Yao remarked, "A group of talentless, powerless fools who turn their comrades into enemies—how much trouble could they really cause?"

Unsurprisingly, this remark reached Li Jue, who, after thinking it over, realized the truth in Zhong Yao's words. So, Li Jue abandoned any plans to eliminate these loyalists, allowing them to remain close to Liu Xie. After all, having such obvious and incompetent enemies in plain sight was far better than facing cunning foes hidden in the shadows.

To further cement his control, Li Jue started openly befriending the loyal Han officials whom Dong Feng's group had alienated. However, many of these loyalists were not so easily won over by Li Jue's overtures. Nonetheless, seeing Li Jue's actions, Dong Feng and his followers went into a frenzy, targeting the officials whom Li Jue sought to win over.

As a result, the imperial court devolved into infighting, with one faction constantly undermining the other. Li Jue, finding the situation amusing, decided to let it be, enjoying the chaos that kept everyone else too busy to plot against him.

Meanwhile, Zhong Yao's strategy, though seemingly crafted to aid Li Jue, actually positioned the alienated Han loyalists for future influence. Once Li Jue and Dong Feng inevitably fell, these loyalists would naturally gravitate back towards Liu Xie, bringing with them their intelligence, capability, and influence—this was the gift Zhong Yao had quietly prepared for Liu Xie.

At this point, men like Xun Yu, Hua Xin, and Zhong Yao found themselves in a state of internal conflict. On the one hand, they were loyal to the Han Dynasty; on the other hand, they were beginning to realize that the dynasty was rotten to its core.

Xun Yu chose to find a like-minded lord, striving to restore the Han Dynasty's former glory before eventually returning power to the imperial house. Hua Xin, having wandered widely and observed the decay, opted to find a new and worthy leader. Zhong Yao, however, still hoped for the Han Dynasty's self-salvation.

In Zhong Yao's eyes, the Han Dynasty could still be saved, but only if the emperor, Liu Xie, demonstrated some capability—enough to maintain control over the empire, even if not particularly outstanding. Without such qualities, there would be no point in fighting for Liu Xie's cause. Why fight to hand over power to someone who would squander it and possibly kill you in the process?

Zhong Yao was practical and rational. His loyalty to the Han Dynasty was undeniable, but it had its limits. He wouldn't blindly serve an unworthy ruler. If Liu Xie couldn't prove himself, Zhong Yao would prioritize his own well-being.

Despite setting up a situation where Liu Xie would have competent officials ready to support him, Zhong Yao remained pessimistic. From what he had observed, Liu Xie lacked discernment, ability, and a strong moral character. Whether it was Cao Cao or Liu Bei who entered Guanzhong, they would likely find Liu Xie impatient and reckless, eager to seize control.

Zhong Yao's actions were, in essence, a last-ditch effort. If Liu Xie could somehow change, the Han Dynasty might yet rise again. But Zhong Yao wasn't holding his breath.

As for Yuan Shao, Zhong Yao had considered the possibility of Yuan Shao entering Guanzhong but deemed it unlikely. Liu Bei's troops were there to both support the emperor and prevent Liu Xie from falling into Yuan Shao's hands. Compared to allowing Liu Xie to fall under Yuan Shao's control, Liu Bei was more likely to act to stop him.

Chapter 668: Eradicating the Roots

"Xiaozhi, I hear you've gotten married," Guo Jia casually mentioned to Fa Zheng as they strolled around. Just as Fa Zheng was beginning to feel uneasy, Guo Jia suddenly asked the question.

"A man should marry when he comes of age, and a woman the same. Isn't that how it should be?" Fa Zheng replied, unsure of Guo Jia's intentions, so he responded with righteous conviction.

"Hmm, that makes sense," Guo Jia agreed, gazing into the distance at Lu Bu's camp before suddenly asking Fa Zheng a rather strange question, "That camp over there belongs to Chen Gongtai. Interested in seeing the prowess of the world's greatest warrior?"

"The world's greatest?" Fa Zheng scoffed. "Is there really someone daring enough to claim that title without fearing they'd be beaten to death?"

"Given the current state of affairs, it seems no one can defeat him," Guo Jia chuckled. "So, calling him the greatest isn't far off. Maybe in the future, Generals Guan, Zhao, and Zhang will achieve his level of power, but only he can truly be called the greatest."

Fa Zheng fell silent, finally understanding the underlying message in Guo Jia's words. Even if others had the same potential, it was crucial to demonstrate that potential as early as possible.

As things stood, Guan, Zhang, and Zhao might eventually reach the same peak as Lu Bu, and perhaps others would too. But by then, Lu Bu would already have stepped off the stage. In a future where so many could claim equal strength, the title of the greatest would be meaningless. At that point, people would look back and remember the warrior who had already left the stage because he was the one who had once defeated all these men. Even if they weren't at their peak at the time, no one would care—he won, they lost, and that's all that mattered.

"The world's greatest, huh?" Fa Zheng murmured, furrowing his brow. "Sometimes timing is more important than ability. I'm at least more fortunate than the geniuses of the previous generation, and I'm more fortunate than the next. I am confident that I will be part of the founding generation, and my footprints will be left in the lands that will be expanded."

Guo Jia chuckled lightly, then burst into unrestrained laughter, full of joy. After three years, Fa Zheng finally understood the point Guo Jia had been making all along.

"Xiaozhi, you're smart, but your vision is too narrow. Our era is the best in over three thousand years. I dare say our time is better than any that came before, and we hold more cards than they ever did," Guo Jia said, turning to face Fa Zheng.

"I will do better than you," Fa Zheng finally voiced what he had always wanted to say, openly declaring it before Guo Jia for the first time.

"I'll be watching," Guo Jia said, clapping Fa Zheng on the shoulder. "Since you'll do better than me, I'll leave the next task to you. I'm off to have a drink."

"..." A breeze swept past as Fa Zheng realized that once again, Guo Jia had tricked him. With a dark expression, he headed toward Lu Bu's camp.

"Strategist, the Chancellor of Qi, Fa Xiaozhi, requests an audience," Gao Shun said, entering Chen Gong's tent and saluting.

"Fa Xiaozhi? Invite him in," Chen Gong said after a brief moment of thought. Soon, Fa Zheng, escorted by Gao Shun, was brought into Chen Gong's tent.

"I've long heard that Chancellor Fa of Qi is a young hero who made Qi prosperous within a year. To meet you today is truly impressive," Chen Gong said as he stood to greet him.

Chen Gong wasn't exaggerating. When he first met Chen Xi, he was struck by how young he was. Now, seeing Fa Zheng, who was even younger than Chen Xi, he couldn't help but be amazed. After all, the story of Qi's prosperity had spread throughout Ji and Yan provinces, and seeing how young Fa Zheng was only deepened Chen Gong's astonishment.

"Strategist Chen flatters me. My success is merely due to good fortune. Without Chief Secretary Sun's passing through Linzi, Qi would not be as prosperous as it is today," Fa Zheng said modestly.

In truth, Fa Zheng felt a growing sense of admiration for Chen Gong. Everyone enjoys hearing praise, especially about something they take pride in. Fa Zheng was particularly proud of his achievements in Qi, and Chen Gong's words naturally made him more favorable toward him.

"Even with such opportunities, it takes someone with vision and courage to make it happen," Chen Gong said with a smile, leading Fa Zheng to sit down. By now, all the warlords were envious of Sun Qian's ability to construct infrastructure. Within just a month, the framework of a county-level city had already been completed.

After some small talk, they quickly got down to business.

"Strategist Chen, I've come today with a great gift for your army," Fa Zheng said with a smile.

"Xiaozhi, do tell," Chen Gong replied, his expression unchanged. But inside, he was weighing the possibilities. After all, Liu Bei's support for Lu Bu's northern campaign had already been considerable. Hearing about a "great gift" naturally piqued Chen Gong's interest.

"There are many wealthy and unscrupulous families in Yan Province. You're aware of our army's policies, so you know these people need to be dealt with. However, when our army entered Yan Province, many of these families fled to Chenliu and Guanzhong. Currently, our forces are stretched too thin, so we request Strategist Chen's assistance," Fa Zheng said with a smile.

It was certain that these fleeing families were the ones who disliked Liu Bei's policies—the wealthy and unscrupulous. While some of them might not be too corrupt, who cared at this point? Let Lu Bu take the blame, and Yan Province would quickly stabilize. As for causing trouble for Lu Bu, with him soon off to Bingzhou on a righteous mission, who would dare?

"All seized goods will belong to us, and I'll handle this task," Chen Gong said without hesitation.

"..." Fa Zheng was momentarily stunned. His biggest concern was that Chen Gong might suspect Liu Bei's forces of using this as a ploy to divide and conquer Lu Bu's army. He hadn't expected Chen Gong to show no such concern.

This was a conclusion Fa Zheng had reached using his spiritual abilities. If it were that simple, he wouldn't have had to go back and forth with Guo Jia.

"I trust that Lord Xuande's forces wouldn't use this to deceive us. And even if we are deceived, we'll accept it as our misfortune," Chen Gong said with a hearty laugh when he noticed Fa Zheng's hesitation.

"Alright, it's settled then. All the seized goods will be yours, and the matter is in your hands," Fa Zheng said, deciding not to overthink it. If it could be resolved this easily, all the better.

"Rest assured, no one will suspect your side. I'll make it clear that we're the ones taking action, so you can be at ease," Chen Gong's words left Fa Zheng even more surprised. Chen Gong had anticipated Fa

Zheng's concerns and addressed them before he could even voice them, causing Fa Zheng to feel a bit wary of the seemingly straightforward middle-aged man before him.

"Aren't you worried that by plundering the wealth of these families, you'll be targeted by the aristocracy later?" Fa Zheng asked, puzzled.

"That's why I need you to provide me with all the incriminating evidence you have on these families," Chen Gong laughed. "I'm sure you've been gathering such information as part of your governance in Yan Province."

"No problem. I'll leave everything in your capable hands," Fa Zheng said, still feeling a bit uneasy but deciding not to press further. He realized that Chen Gong seemed to understand their side's situation very well.

Chapter 669: Kicking the Iron Plate

Fa Zheng handed over all the relevant documents to Chen Gong, and soon after, Lu Bu's entire army mobilized.

In this situation, with benefits that were easily obtained and justified by a righteous cause, there was no psychological burden in taking action. Even Gao Shun, who was usually strict and by-the-book, felt no hesitation after reading through the incriminating evidence. Leading half of the Camp of the Elite, he began ruthlessly targeting the fleeing noble families heading south, thanks to the remarkable mobility of his forces.

Zhang Liao, on the other hand, focused on dealing with those families fleeing north, while Lu Bu handled those heading west.

Initially, Lu Bu would confront these fleeing families, giving them a chance to surrender half of their wealth in exchange for sparing their lives, but after reading their misdeeds, his fury got the better of him. He discovered that nearly every noble family was guilty of something, none of them clean. Eventually, Lu Bu grew tired of asking and decided to execute them outright, seizing their possessions without wasting time.

As for Zhang Liao and Gao Shun, they at least recognized that large families would inevitably have some questionable dealings. So, unless the family was particularly heinous, they refrained from total

extermination. However, given their subjective standards, very few families were spared, and those that were had to have a stellar reputation.

Naturally, this caused the noble families to be outraged. In response, they began banding together, uniting several families' forces into groups of several thousand armed retainers, heading south.

As a result, Gao Shun, despite leading only about a thousand men, easily crushed these ill-prepared private armies, looting their wealth and leaving no room for negotiation.

Meanwhile, Lu Bu and Zhang Liao also faced initial resistance when some families managed to scatter their scouting parties. However, once Lu Bu and Zhang Liao regrouped and organized their forces, they effortlessly cut through the opposition.

Realizing this, the noble families changed tactics, having their core members travel alone while grouping their wealth and retainers together. Though they might lose their fortunes, at least the core family members would survive, allowing for a possible resurgence in the future.

Unfortunately for them, this plan was quickly discovered by Lu Bu and his forces. They spread out widely, with sub-commanders intercepting the larger family groups while Lu Bu and his top generals hunted down the core members.

With the borders of Yan Province fully sealed, and with few horses capable of outpacing Red Hare, Lu Bu found it easy to intercept his targets.

"General," Guan Yu, who had just captured Ji County, encountered Lu Bu on the main road. Lu Bu, accompanied by only about thirty men, reinforced Guan Yu's understanding of Lu Bu's straightforward nature. For him to approach an army led by Guan Yu with such a small force indicated not only confidence in his own strength but also a lack of guile, trusting that Guan Yu wouldn't attack him.

"I'm looking for a group of suspicious nobles who might have passed through here, probably numbering around a thousand men," Lu Bu said with a grim expression as he reined in his horse.

"General, what's this about?" Guan Yu asked, confused. Lu Bu had rushed over just to ask about something like this?

"A noble family ambushed my Wolf Cavalry scouts, killing several of them. I intend to take their heads," Lu Bu replied, his anger palpable.

"Let me gather my scouts to see if they've spotted anything and report back to you," Guan Yu offered, shaking his head at the absurdity of the situation, though he was also surprised that anyone would dare provoke Lu Bu.

Soon enough, despite Lu Bu's impatience, Guan Yu's scouts reported back. Indeed, they had seen a group of about a thousand private soldiers on a deserted road heading towards Chenliu County.

Guan Yu hadn't paid much attention to the fleeing nobles, so he hadn't considered intercepting them.

"I'm going to kill those bastards," Lu Bu said as he pulled his reins, saluted Guan Yu, and departed without waiting for a response.

As Lu Bu prepared to return to Bing Province, he became increasingly protective of his Wolf Cavalry. The loss of even six or seven of them, along with their horses, fueled his rage, leading him to personally pursue the perpetrators.

Guan Yu was left somewhat stunned. Lu Bu's abrupt appearance and departure were just too hasty. He considered offering assistance, but knowing Lu Bu's capability, he decided against it, reasoning that his involvement might only arouse Lu Bu's suspicion. What Guan Yu didn't realize was that this time, Lu Bu was about to run into an unexpected obstacle.

"Prepare the troops, Mancheng. Lu Bu has caught up to us. You handle the formations; I'll lead the charge," Li Jin said, pulling on his reins, halting the advancing Li family.

"Lu Bu?" Li Dian's face paled. "How could he have caught up so quickly?"

"Probably because we killed his soldiers. But that's irrelevant now. Prepare the defensive formation. Lu Bu's forces aren't large. If we can hold out this time, we'll be in Chenliu County next, and Lu Bu won't be able to pursue us further," Li Jin said calmly, his demeanor helping to settle the nervous Li Dian.

"Alright, brother, be careful," Li Dian replied, quickly instructing the Li family's private soldiers to form a diamond-shaped defensive formation, protecting the core family members in the center, while Li Jin led the elite forces at the front.

"Wu!" Lu Bu arrived first, halting his horse within a hundred paces of Li Jin. He stared coldly at him. "Did you kill my soldiers?"

"Those who kill must be prepared to be killed. Isn't that the way of the world?" Li Jin replied calmly.

"Nice sharp tongue. But do you really think these ragtag soldiers can stop me?" Lu Bu sneered, scanning the Li family's troops. With his sharp eyes, he could tell that the Li family's private soldiers were on par with ordinary commanders' guards. But that didn't matter—since they had killed his men, none of them would be left alive.

"Whether I can stop you or not isn't important. What matters is whether you have the ability to carry out your threats," Li Jin said as he drew his three-foot sword, a faint yellow aura emanating from his body. "Maybe today will be the day Lu Bu loses his head."

Chapter 670: Lu Bu's Trouble

When Lu Bu saw the internal energy radiating from Li Jin, he knew that it would be impossible to wipe out this group today. As for the other things Li Jin was saying, Lu Bu didn't bother to listen—leaving his head behind? There was no one in this world who could do that.

However, there was no way Lu Bu would retreat so easily. Even if he couldn't kill them all, he was determined to take down as many as he could.

Without another word, Lu Bu spurred his horse, and the Red Hare, understanding his intent, surged forward. Lu Bu's Sky Piercer spear swung towards Li Jin, splitting into eight shadowy figures learned from Huang Zhong's technique, spinning toward the surrounding soldiers.

At the same time, Lu Bu fully unleashed his army's aura, compressing the power meant to cover three thousand men into just the thirty Wolf Cavalry members under his command. This was the first time since leaving Bing Province that Lu Bu had successfully condensed his army's aura. His divine

breakthrough not only enhanced his martial prowess but also significantly improved his leadership abilities.

The aura, originally meant to cover three thousand soldiers, now enveloped the thirty Wolf Cavalry, causing them to glow with a golden light. Above them, a golden cloud began to form, floating above the thirty riders led by Lu Bu.

"Clang!" Lu Bu's spear clashed with Li Jin's scholar's sword, which deflected the mighty strike. In response, Li Jin used the back of his sword to knock Lu Bu's Sky Piercer off course, then summoned a flurry of sword shadows to intercept Lu Bu's spear attacks.

In their first exchange, the two were evenly matched, leaving Li Dian in shock. The opponent was Lu Bu, yet his elder brother could fight him to a draw—this level of strength was simply unbelievable.

Unlike Li Dian, who was shocked, Li Jin quickly realized the situation was dire. In that initial exchange, he had used nearly every trick in his book—spells, secret arts, sword techniques—yet only managed to fight Lu Bu to a draw. If this continued, he'd be dead within fifty moves.

"Attack with everything! We need to take down Lu Bu's Wolf Cavalry quickly. This guy is a monster," Li Jin said calmly, his voice reaching Li Dian, who was still in disbelief. They were no match for Lu Bu.

Lu Bu sneered, gripping the Sky Piercer with both hands as his fiery inner energy merged with Red Hare's. Their combined blood energy surged as one, and Lu Bu charged at Li Jin, transforming into a blur of golden-red light.

Li Jin, knowing he had no choice, met Lu Bu head-on. He understood that he had to show enough strength to make Lu Bu hesitate, or else the entire Li family would likely die here today.

"Break!" Li Jin shouted, and his yellow aura split into two, creating a second Li Jin who lunged at Lu Bu with a sword.

"A mere shadow technique!" Lu Bu said with disdain, though he remained cautious. He had realized that while Li Jin's inner energy was on par with Zhao Yun's, his techniques were astonishingly intricate. Every time Lu Bu was about to overpower him, Li Jin would use another secret technique to turn the tide.

But relying on secret techniques could only temporarily level the playing field. The difference in strength was clear, and after about ten moves, Lu Bu would again suppress Li Jin. However, Li Jin seemed to have an endless supply of tricks, repeatedly pulling himself back into the fight.

Lu Bu destroyed the shadow attack with a single blow and turned to strike Li Jin, but Li Jin, using the brief respite, countered with his own attack.

As the fight dragged on, both men fought more ferociously. Li Jin's ultimate shadow technique was no joke; at one point, he managed to send five simultaneous attacks at Lu Bu. But the immense difference in strength meant that even five simultaneous attacks, each equal to a standard inner energy user, only managed to make Lu Bu slightly flustered.

Lu Bu, a warrior without any secret techniques or forbidden moves, had still earned the title of the strongest warrior under heaven. He relied solely on his overwhelming martial strength, tearing through each of Li Jin's techniques with brute force.

Although he had never faced five inner energy fighters attacking at once before, even this was not enough to defeat Lu Bu.

Li Jin grew increasingly alarmed as the fight continued. Although his body showed no visible wounds, he knew that if any of Lu Bu's attacks landed, it would cost him dearly—two blows would be fatal. The gap in strength was simply too great.

While Lu Bu and Li Jin's battle raged on, Lu Bu's Wolf Cavalry had already slaughtered over three hundred of the Li family's elite soldiers. The fight had evolved into a one-on-one duel, with the rest of the battlefield almost irrelevant.

"Clang!" A deafening crash rang out as both Lu Bu and Li Jin were sent flying back several dozen paces. Li Jin's horse collapsed from the shock, and he quickly steadied himself in mid-air, his expression cold as he stared down Lu Bu. His eyes flashed with an unhidden murderous intent.

"Ugh," Lu Bu spat out a mouthful of blood, while Li Dian's long-prepared archers aimed their arrows at Lu Bu.

"Lu Bu, if this fight continues, I guarantee you won't fare better than me. You've lost nearly all your Wolf Cavalry, and your golden cloud is gone," Li Jin said coldly, his voice laced with a chilling resolve. "I still have six hundred men. Even if the cloud barely affects you, it's enough to ensure your death here!"

Lu Bu spat out another mouthful of blood, his aura significantly weakened. He glared at Li Jin, "You're not doing any better. Your internal organs must be shattered. I don't believe you can hold out. If you can't last, all I've lost is a bit of blood, but your entire family will be slaughtered!"

"Try me," Li Jin replied, hovering in the air, his sword in hand. His left hand caressed the blade, concealing the fact that his sword was beginning to crumble. His strength was waning fast. "Let's see if today ends with your death or the annihilation of my family."

Lu Bu hesitated. If Li Jin were easy to kill, he would've done it already. But Li Jin, despite only being at the same level as Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, fought with terrifying tenacity. Even though his own internal organs were shattered, he had still managed to inflict a minor wound on Lu Bu and even injured Red Hare slightly.

While neither Lu Bu nor Red Hare was seriously hurt, the injuries were enough to impair their combat effectiveness. If Li Jin truly held out, Lu Bu might end up being worn down by the remaining soldiers.