

Mythical 671

Chapter 671: Another Veteran

"Retreat!" After hesitating for a moment and seeing that the remaining nine Wolf Cavalry members were all injured, Lu Bu no longer hesitated and ordered a retreat. He had come for revenge, not to throw away his life. Lu Bu carefully memorized Li Jin's appearance in his mind—this was his most embarrassing defeat yet. He had failed to take down his opponent in a duel and had even been forced into a retreat.

After Lu Bu left with his Wolf Cavalry and their fallen comrades, Li Jin immediately mounted a warhorse, signaled to Li Dian, and ordered the Li family to quickly clear the battlefield and leave this dangerous place at full speed.

"Brother, are you okay?" Li Dian asked with concern after they had traveled some distance.

"Do I look like someone who's okay?" Li Jin replied, spitting out blood clots. His sword crumbled into powder in his hand, and he fell backward off his horse.

"Brother!" Li Dian cried out in panic, quickly ordering his men to place Li Jin on a cart and have a doctor tend to his wounds. Fortunately, inner energy masters like Li Jin were notoriously hard to kill. Despite being on the brink of death, he soon regained consciousness.

"Mancheng, hurry to Chenliu. Don't worry about my injuries—I'll be fine in half a year at most. Your priority is to ensure the survival of the Li family," Li Jin said with a wry smile. His final attack had nearly exhausted all his strength, a technique that inflicted great damage on himself in exchange for wounding the enemy. But without it, he would never have been able to injure Lu Bu.

"Brother, are you really okay?" Li Dian asked, still worried. After the deaths of his father and elder brother, this previously low-profile cousin had become his only support. Now, discovering that his cousin could hold his own against Lu Bu and even force him to retreat, Li Dian regarded him as his greatest pillar of strength.

"As long as an inner energy master has even a breath left, they'll recover on their own. So don't worry—I won't die. If it takes me six months to recover, it means my injuries are already quite severe," Li Jin said, waving his hand dismissively.

"Let's go quickly. If that bastard Lu Bu catches up again, I really won't be able to deal with him. I can only help you once more. Luckily, I managed to wound Lu Bu, so the consequences won't be too severe," Li Jin added. This time, Li Dian took his cousin's words seriously, no longer dismissing them as nonsense.

After confirming that Li Jin was indeed on the mend, Li Dian immediately ordered the abandonment of their belongings and urged the group to head for Chenliu at full speed. The earlier brutal battle had silenced any dissent within the Li family ranks.

Before long, Li Dian's group encountered another fleeing noble family on their path. It was clear that they, too, had fought a hard battle, though they were in better shape than Li Dian's group.

"Master Cai, how are you?" Li Dian asked, looking at the older man with a deep wound on his chest. They had encountered the Qin family's retreating group, which included Cai Yang—the same Qin Qi from Romance of the Three Kingdoms, who was famously beheaded by Guan Yu in three strokes.

Cai Yang, also known as the "Blade Ancestor," was not just boasting. He was in a similar situation as Huang Zhong but had worse luck. At least Huang Zhong had Zhang Zhongjing in his city to help treat his son, allowing Huang Xu to survive with the aid of inner energy. However, Cai Yang's son had died despite his efforts to sustain him with inner energy, leading him to place all his paternal love on his nephew, Qin Qi.

Originally, the Qin family had planned to head north to seek refuge with Yuan Shao. However, they encountered Zhang Liao on the way, leading to a fierce battle in which Cai Yang managed to hold his own. But realizing that Zhang Liao had withdrawn without injury, Cai Yang reconsidered heading north, fearing a larger confrontation with Zhang Liao's forces. So, they turned west instead.

As they traveled west, they unfortunately ran into the enraged Lu Bu, who had been infuriated by his earlier encounter with Li Jin. Without warning, Lu Bu began slaughtering the fleeing nobles. Cai Yang, still unsure of what was happening, found himself embroiled in another battle.

Fortunately, Cai Yang's skills were still formidable, and although Lu Bu was slightly injured, he managed to hold his ground. However, the Qin family's soldiers were no match for Lu Bu's nine Wolf Cavalry members, who were still bolstered by the army's aura. Qin Qi was wounded, pushing Cai Yang into a rage. He managed to land a blow on Lu Bu, but not without taking a strike from him in return.

In the end, Lu Bu, realizing this old man was a formidable opponent—entirely different from the one who relied on secret techniques—decided that even if he killed Cai Yang, he would suffer heavy injuries. Unlike Li Jin, this was a true warrior, and Lu Bu knew it wasn't worth the risk. After killing a few more members of the Qin family, Lu Bu withdrew with his remaining nine men.

After encountering Lu Bu, Cai Yang realized that the world had changed. It was no longer the same as it had been twenty years ago. Although he had only been out of the scene for a decade or so, the world had now produced such monstrous warriors.

Cai Yang could tell that Lu Bu was slightly injured, yet he was still able to overpower him. Lu Bu was indeed a monster, and even more frightening was the fact that someone had managed to wound this monster.

This experience rekindled Cai Yang's interest in this new era. A warrior's habit is to constantly seek new challenges and ascend new peaks.

After encountering Lu Bu, Cai Yang couldn't help but recall how his nephew had once told him about the formidable strength of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. At the time, Cai Yang had dismissed it as naïveté. But now, he realized the world had changed, and it was no longer dominated by just a few inner energy masters. Cai Yang, who had once been the most skilled blade master of his time, now found himself eager to test his skills against Guan Yu, who was rumored to be an exceptional swordsman.

After forcing Lu Bu to retreat, Cai Yang immediately escorted the Qin family to Chenliu as quickly as possible. He didn't want to encounter Lu Bu again. Without the burden of the Qin family, he wouldn't have been afraid, but protecting them while fighting Lu Bu was a task too daunting for anyone.

Although Cai Yang also understood the art of training soldiers, he had neglected to train the Qin family's private troops due to his immersion in past sorrows. After facing Lu Bu, most of the Qin family's soldiers were too terrified to advance, with some even deserting upon hearing Lu Bu's name.

With this realization, Cai Yang decided to escort the Qin family's core members to Chenliu by himself. Along the way, they encountered Li Dian's group. Unlike Cai Yang, who couldn't sense Li Jin's weakened state, Li Jin, with his almost supernatural perception, detected Cai Yang as soon as he came within a dozen miles.

Li Dian quickly organized his troops and prepared to confront Cai Yang. Despite his injuries, Li Jin also prepared to face Cai Yang directly. Both sides initially mistook each other for Lu Bu's forces, leading to a tense standoff.

However, Li Dian, feeling uneasy and recognizing some differences, soon asked for clarification, averting what could have been a disastrous battle. Otherwise, Li Jin might have ended up in a coffin.

Chapter 672: The Northern Return

With the addition of Cai Yang to their group, Li Dian felt much more at ease. Upon learning that it was Li Jin who had injured Lu Bu, Cai Yang was filled with admiration. Having witnessed Lu Bu's ferocity firsthand, Cai Yang knew just how formidable he was. Although Li Jin was now essentially incapacitated, the fact that he had forced Lu Bu to retreat was a testament to his immense strength.

Similarly, Li Jin was astonished to hear that Cai Yang had fought Lu Bu to a standstill. Even though Lu Bu had been wounded, his power was still nothing to scoff at. Without the hardiness equivalent to that of Guan Yu or Zhang Fei, it would have been impossible to drive Lu Bu back. With mutual respect, the Li and Qin families quickly merged their forces and continued their journey towards Chenliu.

Meanwhile, Liu Bei's forces were completely unaware of the events that had transpired. Lu Bu, due to his pride, was unwilling to share the details of his frustrating day with anyone. Though his defeat could be rationalized, it didn't make it any easier for him to accept.

So, when Lu Bu rallied his army, preparing to intercept Li Jin and Cai Yang's forces in order to settle the score, he discovered that the Li and Qin families had already reached the safety of Chenliu.

As Lu Bu contemplated whether or not to attack Chenliu to vent his anger, Chen Gong sent a message instructing him to prepare for a northern retreat because Yuan Shao had already made his move. Troops from Wei Commandery in Ji Province, Qinghe Commandery, and other areas were beginning a large-scale invasion of Eastern Commandery, Dongping Commandery, and even northern parts of Jiyin.

This was the best time for Lu Bu to extricate himself from the chaos in Yanzhou and head north to fight the Hu people. By fully abandoning Yanzhou and leading his troops north, Lu Bu could leave Yanzhou to Yuan Shao and Liu Bei. Moreover, with the justification of his noble cause, Lu Bu could potentially secure some benefits from Yuan Shao without any resistance.

If they waited any longer, until Yuan Shao had fully occupied the northern parts of Yanzhou with his overwhelming strength, they would lose any leverage they had in negotiating with him. At that point, whether or not Yuan Shao allowed them to leave would be entirely up to him.

Though the possibility of Yuan Shao refusing was nearly zero, Chen Gong couldn't bear to let the imminent benefits slip away. So, while negotiating with Feng Ji, he began gathering Lu Bu and his generals to prepare for the northern retreat. At the same time, he issued one final proclamation, calling on like-minded scholars and warriors in the Central Plains to join him in the northern expedition against the Hu people.

"Brother Feng, what do you think of this?" Chen Gong asked with a smile as he conversed casually with Feng Ji. When Feng Ji had arrived in Yanzhou recently, Chen Gong knew that Liu Bei's large-scale takeover had finally prompted Yuan Shao to react.

"This won't do, this won't do. Our army has supplied your forces with grain for tens of thousands of soldiers for a year, and yet you repay us with such insincerity," Feng Ji replied with a dramatic wave of his sleeve, as if about to leave, though it was clear he had no intention of actually doing so.

"Brother Feng, let's discuss this calmly," Chen Gong said, grabbing Feng Ji's sleeve and smiling amiably. "We can negotiate further. Look at the fertile land in Eastern Commandery. Our forces will withdraw, and your army can take control of it without any resistance within three days."

Had it not been for the need to rely on Yuan Shao in the north, Chen Gong would have been far less accommodating to Feng Ji. He knew that Yuan Shao would lose in the end, but for now, he had to offer Eastern Commandery and Dongping Commandery to Yuan Shao. Otherwise, the northern campaign would face unnecessary complications.

"Strategist Gong, your difficulties are not unknown to my lord, Yuan Shao. However, a bride marrying two families will surely have a poor outcome. Lord Yuan Shao is a significant backer of your army, while Liu Bei is limited to the Central Plains. After you head north, it will be hard for you to gain support. Weighing the two, I hope you'll consider carefully," Feng Ji advised solemnly.

"The issue is that your army was previously defeated by the Taishan forces. We had no choice but to cooperate with Taishan. I'm sure you understand that we had no voice in the matter and could only follow their lead. Otherwise, why would General Lu abandon this prosperous land in the Central Plains

for the bitter cold of the north?" Chen Gong sighed deeply, wiping a tear from his eye with a bitter smile.

Feng Ji stole a glance at Chen Gong, convinced that he was being sincere. He had done his homework before coming and knew that Taishan had indeed heavily supported Lu Bu's northern campaign.

In fact, the entire northern retreat had been orchestrated by Liu Bei. However, after analyzing the situation, Xu You and Ju Shou had concluded that, even if Lu Bu's northern campaign had been planned by Liu Bei, it was ultimately more beneficial than harmful for Yuan Shao.

After all, the noble cause not only bound all the warlords but also restricted Lu Bu. If Lu Bu were to betray this great cause, he would be doomed. Even Liu Bei, with all his charisma, could not accommodate a general who defied such a profound national duty. This effectively eliminated the possibility of Lu Bu aiding Liu Bei.

Moreover, according to Xu You's analysis, with Lu Bu's strength, it was likely that he could at least reclaim a few counties in the Hetao region, if not the entire area.

The key issue was that Lu Bu lacked the administrative talent to manage these territories. Though he had Chen Gong, the northern regions were not like the Central Plains; they lacked the influential families and capable mid-level civil servants needed for effective governance.

As a result, the administration of these reclaimed territories would eventually fall to Yuan Shao. Over time, as Yuan Shao defeated Liu Bei and completed the campaign against the Hu people, he could easily win Lu Bu over.

Given Lu Bu's military prowess, every warlord coveted his abilities, both as a commander and as a warrior.

After much persuasion, Chen Gong finally convinced Feng Ji. Apart from Linyi, Yuan Shao's army quickly took control of the rest of Eastern Commandery within a day, as it bordered Ji Province. They also split Dongping Commandery with Taishi Ci after a brief skirmish and seized the northern part of Jiyin.

Although Liu Bei's forces were prepared, they couldn't compete with Yuan Shao's extensive border with Yanzhou. In the end, they managed to secure Jibei, Rencheng, all of Shanyang Commandery, the southern counties of Jiyin, and half of Dongping.

After both sides had secured their territories, they refrained from provoking each other further. Instead, they focused on quickly cultivating the land in Yanzhou in preparation for spring planting. Both sides could sense the looming clouds of war hanging over their heads, knowing that a major battle was inevitable come autumn, once the summer harvest was complete.

Meanwhile, Lu Bu's army had packed up and was officially beginning its northern return. Their campaign against the Hu people had officially begun.

"We're finally returning to Bingzhou," Lu Bu said, gripping his Sky Piercer halberd with trembling hands. His horse, Red Hare, seemed to sense Lu Bu's excitement and galloped joyfully.

"Yanmen..." Zhang Liao's expression hardened, his inner energy visibly rising, transforming before their very eyes. Though Zhang Liao's obsession was subtle, so faint that even he hadn't noticed it, standing on the border of Bingzhou made him feel a deep, unspoken excitement.

"Jiuyuan..." High Commander Gao Shun's white glow was tinged with bitter laughter. Finally, they were returning home.

Chapter 673: The Troublesome Gongsun Zan

Lu Bu's northern return began on a positive note. Upon receiving intelligence about Lu Bu's move north, Shen Pei, who was stationed in Youbeiping, made a surprising decision.

After being driven out of southern Youzhou by Ju Yi and then blocked by Shen Pei, making it impossible to advance south from Youbeiping, Gongsun Zan had no choice but to occupy the Liaodong Commandery and station his troops in Changli, gathering forces in preparation to retake Youzhou.

Thanks to Shen Pei's formidable defensive capabilities, Gongsun Zan found himself with no effective strategy. However, Shen Pei did not go out of his way to attack Gongsun Zan either. Despite the harsh conditions in Changli, Gongsun Zan gradually stabilized the situation by plundering the Hu people.

Youzhou and Bingzhou were quite similar in many ways. The size of a territory largely depended on how one drew the borders on the map, and the extent of the territory was determined by military strength. After being forced to retreat northeast by Shen Pei, Gongsun Zan discovered that he still had territory behind him. As for the border issue, Gongsun Zan's approach had always been simple: "Wherever I conquer, that's where the map's boundary will be. If you disagree, come and take it back."

Of course, the current Gongsun Zan could no longer maintain the same swagger as before, but his stance on dealing with foreign tribes remained as unyielding as ever. As a hardliner within the iron-blooded faction, Gongsun Zan had never compromised on the issue of foreign enemies.

Losing to Yuan Shao had been an unfortunate event, but if he were to lose to the Hu people, Gongsun Zan felt he might as well kill himself. Even without his elite Baima cavalry, which had once been able to pursue and annihilate enemies with ease, as long as he had soldiers, he remained the invincible General of the Baima, Gongsun Zan.

However, while Gongsun Zan could defeat the Hu people, Youzhou's population problem severely hampered his ability to restore his strength. He had to resort to extreme militarism to gather more than 30,000 infantry and cavalry. As for Tian Yu, who was stationed on the border, Gongsun Zan never counted him among his subordinates; Tian Yu represented Gongsun Zan's last shred of dignity and mission, and he would not waver in that regard.

With Shen Pei's blockade effectively cutting off information, Gongsun Zan was largely unaware of the political developments in the Central Plains over the past two years. He didn't even know about Lu Bu's return to Bingzhou, an event that had stirred up quite a commotion.

In this respect, the widespread support for Gongsun Zan, particularly from Chen Lin and others, had little to do with Gongsun Zan himself. By the time the dust had settled, Gongsun Zan, residing in Changli, was completely unaware that such an event had even taken place.

This highlights just how isolated Gongsun Zan had become, as well as the slow transmission of information in this era without a professional intelligence network.

In short, things had reached a point where Gongsun Zan, a central figure in the discussions of the time, was entirely oblivious to the events involving him. At present, Gongsun Zan was still pondering how to counterattack and retake Youzhou.

That Gongsun Zan was able to maintain his extreme militarism without facing significant food shortages was largely due to the generous support of Chen Xi.

Although communication between Taishan and Gongsun Zan had lessened over the past two years, the maritime transport route had remained intact, and Liu Bei had never ceased supplying Gongsun Zan with grain.

Of course, Yuan Shao was no fool and had sent troops to intercept these shipments at sea. Unfortunately, the warriors of Ji Province were formidable on land but terrible in water, and Yuan Shao's army lacked experienced naval commanders. The sea raids turned out to be a disaster, costing Yuan Shao men without yielding any significant results. After suffering several defeats, Yuan Shao decided to let it be.

According to reliable intelligence from Gongsun Zan, Liu Bei had only provided material support and had not sent any troops. For Yuan Shao, this material support alone did not threaten his control over Youzhou. With Gongsun Zan's limited forces, Yuan Shao believed he could crush him anytime he wanted.

If Yuan Shao hadn't been struggling with how to deal with Gongsun Zan, he would have long ago sent troops to crush him.

In history, after Gongsun Zan's defeat at the Battle of Jieqiao, he had killed Liu Yu to eliminate any future threats. Following this, Liu Yu's supporters among the people and military of Youzhou rebelled against Gongsun Zan. Desperate for food, Gongsun Zan had unleashed his soldiers to plunder, utterly destroying his reputation in Youzhou.

In this timeline, although Liu Yu had been attacked, he was still alive. After cooling down, Gongsun Zan didn't kill Liu Yu's family and, instead, sent them to Taishan, who then transferred them to Chang'an, reuniting them with Liu Yu. By that time, Li Jue's regime had started to stabilize, and Liu Yu didn't suffer much hardship.

In other words, Gongsun Zan and Liu Yu in this timeline were merely political opponents who had clashed, rather than bitter enemies. Gongsun Zan hadn't committed the reckless act of killing a member of the imperial family.

Throughout the Han Dynasty, it wasn't unusual for military commanders and border officials to clash over the handling of foreign tribes. This was no different, and most saw it as just another instance of the central government mishandling personnel appointments, blaming it for the country's current troubles.

As for plundering for food, thanks to Liu Bei's substantial support, Gongsun Zan hadn't sunk to that level. Therefore, for the people of Youzhou, life was largely unchanged, with only a new inspector in charge. This allowed Gongsun Zan to retain his prestige in Youzhou.

This is why, despite being much stronger than Gongsun Zan, Yuan Shao was still hesitant to move against him. Killing Gongsun Zan was not an option, but leaving him be was problematic due to his enduring popularity among the people of Youzhou. Many still fondly remembered Gongsun Zan.

If Yuan Shao continued to press Gongsun Zan, knowing his character, Gongsun Zan would likely choose to commit suicide rather than be captured, denying Yuan Shao the opportunity to parade him as a prisoner. If that happened, Yuan Shao would be left to bear the blame for his death.

For these reasons, Yuan Shao refrained from further attacks on Gongsun Zan, instead pondering how he could capture him alive or eliminate him without inciting widespread public outrage. Of course, if push came to shove, Yuan Shao was prepared to deal with the public outcry if it meant eliminating Gongsun Zan.

At present, however, the situation hadn't escalated to the point where Yuan Shao was ready to make such a drastic move, although he had already steeled himself for the possibility.

Shen Pei was fully aware of these complexities. He had considered various ways to eliminate Gongsun Zan, such as using Liu Yu's subordinates to avenge their leader or inciting the Hu people to attack Gongsun Zan. However, none of these plans were truly feasible.

Liu Yu's subordinates indeed wished to avenge him, but since Liu Yu wasn't dead and had effectively stepped down from his position in Youzhou after being relocated to Chang'an, he had no interest in seeking vengeance. In fact, he had issued a declaration, at Liu Yan's urging, to prevent his former subordinates from being manipulated by the Hu people.

The declaration essentially said, "I'm still alive and well. You don't need to avenge me. Gongsun Zan will protect the Han people in our lands. As for the Hu people, I appreciate your concern, but you can't defeat Gongsun Zan. Without me in Youzhou, Gongsun Zan might unleash his wrath at any moment."

Chapter 674: Shackles of the Heart

After the declaration was issued, many scholars praised Liu Yu for his benevolence. They admired that he bore no grudges against Gongsun Zan and even advised his subordinates and the Hu people, further enhancing Liu Yu's already excellent reputation.

This brought great joy to Liu Yu, who valued his reputation above all else. His previous resentment toward Gongsun Zan began to dissipate as he focused on boosting his own prestige. When Liu Bei and Chen Xi learned of this, they were also relieved, as it meant fewer troubles involving Gongsun Zan.

This turn of events left Shen Pei with even fewer options to diminish Gongsun Zan's influence, making it increasingly difficult for him to end Gongsun Zan's reign from his position in Youbeiping.

Lu Bu's return to the north, however, offered a glimmer of hope to Shen Pei, who was caught in a difficult situation. Although the odds were slim, after careful analysis, Shen Pei decided to take the risk and attempt to resolve the issue.

Shen Pei was decisive by nature. Once he saw even the slightest chance, he didn't hesitate. Driven by his loyalty to Yuan Shao, he handed over the military affairs of Youbeiping to Gao Gan and set out on his journey.

In the city of Changli, Gongsun Zan stared at the figure before him, a mysterious man cloaked in black, with his face concealed. Gongsun Zan was perplexed; it wasn't yet time for Taishan to send their grain shipments. What was this all about? He thought, puzzled.

When Taishi Ci and Gan Ning had taken Liu Yu away, Gongsun Zan's anger toward Liu Bei had reached its peak. But after a few days, when his mind cleared, he realized that Liu Bei's actions had actually saved him!

However, Gongsun Zan's stubbornness wouldn't allow him to admit his mistake. Even though he knew he was wrong, admitting it was out of the question.

Because of this, Gongsun Zan believed that his relationship with Liu Bei was over. After all, he had written a letter rebuking Liu Bei, which could be seen as a slap in the face. But later, Gongsun Zan was surprised to find that Liu Bei had explained his actions and demonstrated through his deeds that Gongsun Zan's trust in him had not been misplaced.

It's easy to offer help when things are going well, but it's much harder to do so in times of need. This was why Gongsun Zan felt he owed Liu Bei a great debt, especially when he received the regular shipments of grain that Liu Bei sent him. Gongsun Zan often pondered how he could repay Liu Bei.

Gongsun Zan was a man of contradictions. He had all the qualities and temperament of a great general but lacked the duplicity often required of a warlord.

In both history and legend, Gongsun Zan had lent soldiers to Liu Bei and had never asked for them back. Although in this world, Gongsun Zan had lent only two thousand troops when his power was not at its peak, it was still a testament to his deep sense of camaraderie.

This was what made Gongsun Zan so admirable—his deep sense of loyalty. However, like many generals, he was prone to anger, and once enraged, he was reckless and unyielding. He might stubbornly refuse to admit when he was wrong, but he never forgot a debt, and he always found a way to repay it.

These qualities combined to form a deeply conflicted man. Because of his loyalty, Gongsun Zan felt compelled to repay Liu Bei. He understood that the greatest support he could offer Liu Bei was not troops but resources—money, food, and supplies. As for soldiers, unless Liu Bei was ready for a decisive battle with Yuan Shao, Gongsun Zan knew he couldn't offer much help.

Yet, when Gongsun Zan thought it over, he realized that he had no way to repay Liu Bei. Once, he had been Liu Bei's elder brother, offering him protection. But now, Liu Bei had grown stronger—stronger even than Gongsun Zan had been at his peak.

Gongsun Zan wasn't the kind of person to leave things to the next life; he believed in repaying his debts in this lifetime. This was also the source of his greatest torment—he could see a way to repay Liu Bei, but it would go against the principles he had always upheld.

As Gongsun Zan sat in Changli, reflecting on his life, he recalled his past victories over the Wuhuan in the northern frontier, the founding of the Baima cavalry, and the bloodshed beyond the Great Wall. His life had been one of recklessness and revenge. Even though he regretted the decisions that led to the deaths of many in the Baima cavalry, he knew he owed them nothing.

The Baima cavalry were men of honor who had pledged their loyalty to Gongsun Zan because of his victories over the Hu people and the peace he had brought to Youzhou. They had entrusted their lives to him, believing that as long as Gongsun Zan stood, Youzhou would be safe.

The oath, "Let Heaven and the Baima bear witness," was a bond of brotherhood and a testament to his valor. The men of the Baima cavalry had followed him willingly, trusting him to protect Youzhou and keep their families safe.

So, while Gongsun Zan mourned the loss of the Baima cavalry, he knew he owed them nothing. He had fulfilled their oath by securing Youzhou, and in return, they had given their lives to him.

He owed a debt to only one person—Liu Bei. Gongsun Zan was no fool; he was just easily angered, and in his rage, he often lost sight of many things. But that didn't mean he didn't recognize his mistakes when his anger subsided.

Repaying Liu Bei would be both simple and difficult for Gongsun Zan. It would be simple because, in the northern frontier and west of Youbeiping, he had three thousand elite troops of Youzhou under the command of Tian Yu. These troops were his last resort, his final line of defense against the Hu people. Yuan Shao had almost no chance of discovering them unless Tian Yu revealed their existence. These troops would only be deployed if the Hu people broke through the layers of defense and invaded Youzhou.

This final defense, entrusted to Tian Yu, was Gongsun Zan's pledge to the people of Youzhou and the Baima cavalry. If he could abandon this oath, he could easily repay Liu Bei with those troops.

But this was also Gongsun Zan's greatest struggle—he couldn't break his oath. The Baima cavalry was gone, but Gongsun Zan couldn't forget the promise he had made to his comrades, to the people of Youzhou. He couldn't free himself from the shackles of his own heart.

Gongsun Zan knew that if he ordered Tian Yu to march south during the fiercest part of the Yuan-Liu war, it would be enough to repay all his debts.

By that time, he would likely be dead, and the oaths he had sworn would be nothing more than dust in the annals of history. Who would remember that he had once stood on the walls of Ji City and vowed, "If the Hu people dare to invade Youzhou, they shall die!"

Thinking back, he regretted listening to Liu Yu's advice about showing mercy. Perhaps it would have been better if he had just killed them all back then.

Chapter 675: Dare to Ask Your Ambition

Gongsun Zan, upon seeing the figure in black, once again found himself in a state of confusion. Even now, he still didn't know what he should do. He couldn't manage the thick-skinned strategies of a warlord, nor could he be deceitful. From a certain perspective, Gongsun Zan was simply a straightforward military commander.

Shen Pei stood calmly before Gongsun Zan, having disguised himself as an emissary from Liu Bei. The guards, including Tian Kai, had confirmed that Shen Pei was alone and unarmed, and upon hearing that he had urgent matters to discuss with Gongsun Zan, allowed him to enter and speak privately.

Shen Pei had seen Gongsun Zan several times before, whether during his prime when he was sweeping across the land on horseback or after his defeat at Jieqiao when he was filled with rage. Now, however, the Gongsun Zan standing before Shen Pei exhibited a sense of inner struggle.

It was a struggle that Shen Pei couldn't quite pinpoint. It was different from the impulsive anger he had expected, and it lacked the melancholy of a hero in decline. Instead, it was the kind of confusion and struggle one feels when standing at a crossroads in life, unsure whether to step forward with the left foot or the right.

"Greetings, General Gongsun," Shen Pei said, offering a respectful bow that was neither servile nor arrogant.

Although Shen Pei was a subordinate of Yuan Shao, the Han dynasty had not yet fallen. While the imperial power had waned, the Liu clan still held significant influence. Even if Yuan Shao had other

ambitions, he remained, in name, a servant of the Han. Thus, Shen Pei could not afford to be disrespectful. In fact, Shen Pei even admired Gongsun Zan for his principles.

"Sit. What brings you here on behalf of Xuande? And why are you alone?" Gongsun Zan asked after taking a long look at Shen Pei, his curiosity piqued.

"I am not here on Xuande's behalf, but for you, General," Shen Pei replied, taking a deep breath and getting straight to the point.

"And you are?" Gongsun Zan frowned. He didn't recall any of Liu Bei's men speaking to him in such a manner.

Shen Pei slowly removed his hat and pulled back the black cloak, revealing his face as he slightly bowed. "I am Shen Zhengnan of Jizhou, here to see you, General."

"Shen Zhengnan of Jizhou? Hahaha, so Yuan Benchu dares to send someone to Changli!" Gongsun Zan was momentarily surprised, then laughed aloud as he stood up, drawing his sword and thrusting it toward Shen Pei.

"Why wouldn't he dare?" Shen Pei remained composed, meeting Gongsun Zan's gaze steadily. If he dared to speak, he was confident he could leave unscathed. And if Gongsun Zan truly attacked, Shen Pei was prepared to retaliate, even if it meant sacrificing himself to eliminate this threat to Yuan Shao.

Gongsun Zan's fierce thrust missed as he hesitated upon seeing Shen Pei's calm demeanor.

"Hmph." Gongsun Zan sheathed his sword with a sneer. "If you had made a move earlier, you would have died by my sword."

"If I were to die by your sword, General, you would not emerge unscathed," Shen Pei retorted sharply.

"Bold words!" Gongsun Zan glared at Shen Pei. "No wonder Yuan Benchu can hold Jizhou."

"Jizhou has many men like me. Otherwise, I wouldn't risk my life just to advance my position," Shen Pei replied calmly, downplaying his importance as a mere foot soldier in Yuan Shao's vast army—at least in Gongsun Zan's eyes, Shen Pei was indeed a minor figure.

"You all, leave. Do not enter without my command," Gongsun Zan ordered, sheathing his sword with a sharp "clang" as his officers burst into the room. They had rushed in after hearing the commotion, but Gongsun Zan promptly sent them away.

"Out of respect for your courage, I'll spare your life. Leave now, and you might still live," Gongsun Zan said with a cold smile after dismissing his guards.

"My mission is not yet complete. If I return now, having risked my life to come here, it would be laughable. If that were the case, I might as well have not come at all," Shen Pei replied, determined to play the role of a minor official seeking to advance his position.

Gongsun Zan looked at Shen Pei, realizing the difference between himself and Yuan Shao. Even a minor figure under Yuan Shao's command was willing to risk death for his cause, while his own subordinates...

"Speak, though it won't change anything," Gongsun Zan said, deciding not to bother with a minor character. He and Yuan Shao were on the same level, and he wouldn't stoop to dealing with someone like this.

"What is your ambition, General?" Shen Pei asked, ignoring Gongsun Zan's dismissive words and beginning his attempt to sway him.

"Of course, to defeat the Xianbei, annihilate the Wuhuan, restore peace to the northern frontier, and proclaim the might of the Han, so that the Hu people dare not look south! To end the tradition of the Hu people plundering the Central Plains, which has persisted since the Shang and Zhou dynasties," Gongsun Zan replied with unwavering conviction, his voice strong and resolute.

"In other words, something like the achievements of Marquis Champion, who reached the northern frontiers, or the words of Chen Tang, who declared, 'Let their heads be hung on the streets of the foreign tribes, as a warning to all. Those who dare to offend the great Han, no matter how far, must be punished'?" Shen Pei, reassured by Gongsun Zan's immediate response, carefully phrased his next words.

"Exactly," Gongsun Zan agreed. He had always felt his description of his ambition was somewhat lacking, but Shen Pei's words struck a chord with him. This was how his ambition should be articulated—bold and grand.

"Chen Tang's words are perfect. That's exactly how it should be. If the Hu people dare to challenge the Han, they should be annihilated, and their heads should be shown to every tribe," Gongsun Zan said, expressing his admiration without hesitation.

In the past, Gongsun Zan hadn't paid much attention to Chen Tang, but after hearing Shen Pei's words, he realized that Chen Tang's statement resonated deeply with him. This was how things should be—righteousness should be backed by strength, and weakness was always a sin!

"If this is your ambition, General, have you ever wavered? In the harshness of the northern frontier, have you ever doubted?" Shen Pei continued, not attempting to persuade Gongsun Zan directly but instead engaging him in a discussion of his goals, as if they shared the same vision.

Gongsun Zan fell silent. Had he wavered? After a long pause, he finally looked up at Shen Pei with renewed determination. "From the beginning, my belief has never changed. What I thought was hesitation was nothing more than my delusions."

Seeing Gongsun Zan's resolve, Shen Pei felt completely at ease. This man was undoubtedly a staunch nationalist with an unyielding resolve.

"Then let me ask you this: If you could proclaim the might of the Han, what would you be willing to sacrifice?" Shen Pei asked seriously, knowing it was time to get to the heart of the matter.

"Proclaim the might of the Han..." Gongsun Zan muttered to himself before looking up at Shen Pei. "Tell me, what do you require? If it will let me fulfill that ambition, I, Gongsun Zan, will offer you my head to help Yuan Benchu advance his cause!"

Chapter 676: I Don't Trust Yuan Benchu

Shen Pei was momentarily stunned as he silently observed Gongsun Zan. He could feel the sincerity in Gongsun Zan's words, and because of this sincerity, Shen Pei realized that, despite Gongsun Zan's stubbornness, narrow-mindedness, and arrogance, there was a certain admirable quality in him.

"Perhaps Gongsun Zan indeed made countless mistakes, but as a frontier general, he has no reason to be ashamed before the people. His only mistake was choosing the wrong opponent; in terms of righteousness, he has never faltered!" Shen Pei thought to himself.

Looking at Gongsun Zan at this moment, Shen Pei couldn't help but feel a sense of respect, no longer treating him with the previous disdain.

Internally, Shen Pei and Gongsun Zan were enemies, but externally, Gongsun Zan was a hero. And when dealing with heroes, especially those on one's own side, differences in political views should not negate their achievements or insult their character.

"This is a proclamation written for you by Chen Gongzhang," Shen Pei said as he took out the document that had so infuriated Yuan Shao and handed it to Gongsun Zan.

Gongsun Zan frowned as he took the paper from Shen Pei and quickly scanned it. After reading it, he laughed heartily, "Hahaha, as expected of Chen Gongzhang, known for his eloquence. This speaks to my heart—what a fine denunciation."

"I'm not here to show you this proclamation," Shen Pei said, shaking his head. "This document had a significant impact on my lord. I wouldn't have brought it to you unless it was necessary. Do you know under what circumstances Chen Gongzhang wrote this proclamation?"

"What else could it be?" Gongsun Zan sneered. "These scholars only know how to play with words, without thinking of the country. Surely, Yuan Benchu must have offended him, and I'm just the weapon he's using to attack Yuan Benchu."

Gongsun Zan wasn't foolish. He had no connection with Chen Lin, so it was clear that Chen Lin wasn't speaking for him out of some admiration for his sense of righteousness.

"That's not the case. It was because of a major event in the Central Plains that I saw an opportunity, which is why I came here," Shen Pei said with a smile. He had decided to approach Gongsun Zan after learning about Lu Bu's northern expedition.

"A major event in the Central Plains?" Gongsun Zan was taken aback and then sighed, "Here in Liaodong, I am so cut off that I can't even keep up with the affairs of the Central Plains."

Shen Pei watched Gongsun Zan's expression and sighed inwardly. Then, without any personal bias, he recounted the entire situation.

Gongsun Zan listened quietly as Shen Pei narrated the events. When he heard that Lu Bu had returned to Bingzhou and vowed to recover the Hetao region, he let out a deep sigh.

"General, you now understand why I came. My lord, Yuan Benchu, can tolerate Lu Bu's return to Bingzhou. As long as you swear to the world to defend the northern frontier, I believe my lord can accept it," Shen Pei said, bowing respectfully to Gongsun Zan.

"Lu Fengxian returned to Bingzhou, and Yuan Benchu showed such magnanimity. Then again, he is Yuan Benchu. Although he didn't perform well at Hulao Pass, he was still the one who faced Dong Zhuo directly," Gongsun Zan muttered to himself.

"General, my lord bears no deep grudge against you. On the contrary, he admires those frontier generals who protect the Central Plains during times of turmoil in the heartland. Your conflict with my lord is akin to a dispute among brothers over family inheritance. The real enemy is the foreign tribes," Shen Pei continued, seeing that Gongsun Zan was considering his words and decided to strike while the iron was hot.

"What was the original reason for my conflict with Yuan Benchu?" Gongsun Zan began to reexamine his battle with Yuan Shao from a different perspective, trying to recall the root cause of their dispute.

"I don't trust Yuan Benchu!" Gongsun Zan's eyes suddenly flashed with cold light as he spoke. "The reason for our battle was simply because he deceived me. There was no other reason—just because he lied to me!"

Shen Pei was left speechless. Gongsun Zan, who had seemed so close to agreeing, had suddenly rejected his proposal, and the reason was a deep mistrust of Yuan Shao.

"Perhaps you hadn't yet joined Yuan Shao's ranks at the time, so you might not know this. But believe it or not, he once asked for my help to drive out Han Fu, promising to split Jizhou with me afterward. I saw that he had the demeanor of a leader, so I helped him," Gongsun Zan explained as he noticed the confusion in Shen Pei's eyes.

"At that time, I had no ulterior motives in helping Yuan Shao. As for dividing Jizhou, I never seriously considered it. I was in northern Youzhou, and between us was Liu Bo'an. As long as Liu Bo'an was alive, I couldn't even take all of Youzhou, let alone Jizhou. So why would I want a piece of Jizhou as my territory?" Gongsun Zan continued, looking as if he had been greatly wronged and finally had someone to confide in.

Shen Pei felt a chill run down his spine. He finally understood that Gongsun Zan's envoy, Gongsun Yue, had not gone to Jizhou to demand territory. Instead, he had gone to congratulate Yuan Shao and sought an alliance, hoping to use the promised half of Jizhou to secure the grain needed for Gongsun Zan's future campaigns against the Wuhuan and Xianbei.

Gongsun Yue was Gongsun Zan's own brother. If he had truly intended to demand Jizhou, how could he not have known the danger? And why would he not have brought the White Horse Volunteers, the fastest cavalry in the land? Even if they couldn't win a fight, they could at least escape unharmed.

Now it all makes sense. Many things that seemed irrational back then are clear now. At that time, Gongsun Zan was already the only hardline commander against foreign tribes in the north. He genuinely needed support, and Jizhou was indeed a remote territory for him. He simply didn't want to be constrained by Liu Bo'an, Shen Pei thought to himself.

Gongsun Zan wasn't like the Central Plains aristocrats, full of schemes and plots. At that time, he was simply a lone general in need of support. After Gongsun Yue's death, Gongsun Zan's war against my lord was driven purely by rage. He hadn't even secured his logistics, which explains why, despite reaching Wei Commandery, he showed no signs of consolidating his gains in the northern regions.

Shen Pei finally understood that Gongsun Zan had never prepared to manage Jizhou. He had only wanted to vent his anger. However, the battle-hardened troops of Youzhou were so formidable that even without proper logistics, they nearly defeated Yuan Shao. Only after that did Gongsun Zan entertain the idea of taking all of Jizhou.

Chapter 677: Final Evaluation

As Gongsun Zan stood there, his face full of indignation, Shen Pei found himself at a loss for words.

"It's that simple. I don't trust him," Gongsun Zan said, laying everything bare. It was as if a huge burden had been lifted off his shoulders, and his expression returned to its usual calm as he looked at Shen Pei.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider?" Shen Pei sighed. He had considered many possibilities before coming here, but he had never anticipated that he would fail at the last moment like this.

"I don't trust Yuan Benchu. It's that simple. His valor and grandeur only show when his opponent is stronger than he is. Whether it was against Dong Zhuo, against me in the past, or against Xuande now, his courage is merely a response to facing stronger adversaries," Gongsun Zan sneered.

Shen Pei glanced at Gongsun Zan with dissatisfaction, feeling displeased at how Gongsun Zan was belittling his lord. However, considering what had been said earlier, Shen Pei held back from offering further explanations.

"Hmph, don't think I can't see what you're thinking. You don't like my assessment of your lord," Gongsun Zan said, casting a glance at Shen Pei with an expression that suggested he had seen through everything.

"Hmph, what do you know? My lord Yuan Benchu's valor is beyond your understanding," Shen Pei retorted, irritated.

"Yuan Benchu is indeed valorous. I haven't been idle all this time; I've learned a lot about him. Yuan Benchu is full of courage and determination in the face of adversity, his valor is commendable, and his grandeur is unmatched," Gongsun Zan said, shaking his head slightly. Shen Pei smiled, having braced himself for criticism but instead hearing praise from an enemy like Gongsun Zan.

If there's one type of praise that's most genuine, it's the kind that comes from the mouth of an enemy. Although Gongsun Zan's assessment didn't entirely match Shen Pei's ideal, it was valuable for its honesty—there was no flattery, no pandering, only a straightforward evaluation.

But before Shen Pei could fully enjoy this moment, Gongsun Zan continued with his critique. "Yuan Benchu possesses all the qualities needed to turn the tide in difficult situations. In adversity, he makes it clear to all his subjects what it means to be a leader. At such times, he shoulders all the responsibilities and mistakes, trusting every one of his subjects and making them feel his grand ambitions!"

Shen Pei nodded in agreement, thinking that Gongsun Zan had hit the nail on the head. Yuan Shao was indeed exceptional, a model for the entire realm.

But Gongsun Zan paid no attention to Shen Pei's nodding, his expression turning cold as he spoke again. "But that's only one side of Yuan Benchu. I won't deny that he has the ability to become the strongest warlord in the realm, but the moment he becomes the strongest is also the moment he's closest to death."

"His valor, his grandeur, his trust in others—these are as fleeting as a reflection in a mirror or the moon in water. He can share adversity, but not prosperity. His suspicion is too deep. His bravery in adversity is only because his ambitions and determination suppress his doubts," Gongsun Zan coldly narrated.

"Once he reaches the pinnacle, all his flaws will be exposed!" Gongsun Zan continued with the certainty of a prophet. "Yuan Benchu will inevitably fall because of his own suspicions!"

"Hmph, anyone can say that, but my lord has never shown such flaws," Shen Pei responded dismissively, choosing to ignore Gongsun Zan's latter comments.

Gongsun Zan smirked. This assessment wasn't his own; it had been given by Xu Zijiang, who had summed it up in one sentence: "A model for the world in adversity, but utterly ruinous in prosperity." It meant that Yuan Shao would perform impressively only when facing challenges, but once he succeeded, everything he did would lead to failure.

This evaluation hadn't been published but had come from Taishan. Initially, Gongsun Zan hadn't been entirely sure about it, but over time and through his own reflections, he had come to realize that Xu Zijiang's assessment was accurate.

Of course, Shen Pei was unaware of this. If he had known, he might have quietly taken note of today's evaluation and returned to warn Yuan Shao.

After all, Xu Shao's assessments were famously accurate, so much so that they were considered as good as gold. Back in the day, when Xu Shao had been giving out reviews, everyone who sought his judgment had felt a mix of love and hate—love for his accuracy, but hate for how his negative assessments were even more spot-on!

When Yuan Shao was in Luoyang, he had known about Xu Shao's reviews. Given his status, it wouldn't have been difficult for him to request an assessment, but because he had grand ambitions at the time and feared that Xu Shao might jinx him and scare off the heroes he had gathered, he ultimately decided against it.

In Yuan Shao's view, Xu Shao hailed from Yuzhou, and if Yuan Shu had put a little pressure on him, Xu Shao might have given a poor assessment on purpose. If that had happened, Yuan Shao's prospects would have been ruined.

As for Cao Cao, he had no such concerns. He had gone directly to Xu Shao with a sword, which, surprisingly, was in line with Xu Shao's rules. In the end, Cao Cao got his assessment, and Xu Shao quickly packed up and left, deciding that Luoyang was no longer a safe place for him.

When Yuan Shao realized that Xu Shao wasn't influenced by external factors in his assessments, he had tried to seek him out personally. But by then, Xu Shao had sworn off giving evaluations, and Yuan Shao, concerned about his own reputation, had hesitated for a long time before giving up on the idea of using force to obtain a review. As a result, he never got that final assessment.

All in all, Yuan Shao had always seemed strange to Xu Shao. When he had nothing, he was a hero—dashing and magnanimous, never giving up in the face of adversity. But when he was in high spirits, he seemed like a completely different person.

To be honest, when Yuan Shao had come to Xu Shao for a review, Xu Shao had been waiting for Yuan Shao to apply some pressure so he could go along with it and give him an assessment.

But the Yuan Shao he met didn't live up to his reputation; he was all bluster and no bite, far from the heroic figure Xu Shao had seen confronting the eunuch chief Zhang Rang in Luoyang.

Looking back, Xu Shao was relieved that he hadn't tied his reputation to an assessment of Yuan Shao. Otherwise, his name would have been tarnished.

This experience only deepened Xu Shao's interest in Yuan Shao. With his sharp eye, it was almost impossible for him to misjudge someone, and Yuan Shao had indeed been a hero when he first saw him. So how had he turned into a coward in just a few days?

Driven by this curiosity, Xu Shao continued to observe Yuan Shao intermittently and eventually concluded that Yuan Shao was indeed a peculiar case. He could be divided into two distinct states.

One was a god-like state in adversity, such as when he angrily rebuked the eunuchs in Luoyang, pointed his sword at Dong Zhuo in the palace, and fought desperately at Jieqiao against Gongsun Zan. The other was a pig-like state in prosperity, such as when he had just established his power and turned against his own father, bungled the campaign at Hulao Pass with the coalition of eighteen lords, and performed poorly against Gongsun Zan after first gaining control of Jizhou.

Yuan Benchu's pattern was to be slapped by someone, wake up and slap them back to death, then feel invincible and start making mistakes again, only to be slapped once more—repeating this cycle until someone slapped him so hard that it killed him.

Chapter 678: Tian Feng's Spiritual Gift

As Shen Pei left, he felt a deep sense of helplessness. The moment he stepped out of Changli, a wave of exhaustion washed over him.

"Sometimes wars are nothing more than the result of personal grievances that could have been resolved with a simple conversation. But because of the pride of those involved, who stand too high and hold too much power, and because of the countless lives at stake, something that could have been settled peacefully instead leads to one party's downfall," Shen Pei thought as he walked away, recalling a phrase Ju Shou had once mentioned—a line he had read in the Taishan Library. Shen Pei had nearly forgotten it, but now it resurfaced vividly.

"Gongsun Bogui..." Shen Pei glanced back at Changli, observing the ancient city walls marked with countless scars and stained with dark red blood, both of the Hu and Han people.

This had once been one of the most heavily raided areas by the Hu people, and in fact, it had once belonged to them. But later, during the Han dynasty's rise to power, the Hu people were defeated, and

the Han took control. For over a hundred years, this place had seen endless warfare until Gongsun Bogui finally defeated the Wuhuan, securing this land.

"Perhaps you had your own personal motives, but what you did indeed protected the Han people behind you," Shen Pei muttered as he stood in the twilight, feeling the biting east wind. Compared to the spring warmth of the Central Plains, it was still cold and harsh here.

Shen Pei bowed slightly toward Changli, then slowly straightened up. "Gongsun Bogui, I believe your words now. Perhaps the events of that year were indeed my lord's fault, but no one is without mistakes. My lord may have been wrong, but the pursuit of dominion over the realm is ultimately for the betterment of all. If killing one can save thousands, then it must be done."

The events in Youzhou had little impact on the Central Plains. Of course, if Shen Pei had managed to persuade Gongsun Zan, it would have been a major coup, as Yuan Shao would likely have launched a surprise attack, putting Liu Bei in a highly disadvantageous position.

With Lu Bu having left Yanzhou, the territory was divided between Liu Bei and Yuan Shao, though the division hardly satisfied Yuan Shao. Although there were orders to avoid large-scale conflict, such vague commands were unlikely to restrain Yuan Shao's beloved generals like Yan Liang and Wen Chou.

To avoid falling prey to another scheme by Chen Xi and others, Yuan Shao sent not only two mighty generals to Yanzhou but also Tian Feng and Xu You, along with a significant number of mid- and lower-ranking military officers and civil servants.

By now, both sides had some understanding of each other. It was clear that Guo Jia specialized in unconventional strategies, while Chen Xi preferred a steady, methodical approach, always playing it safe and leveraging overwhelming force.

Given this, Yuan Shao sent Tian Feng and Xu You to counter Chen Xi and Guo Jia. Tian Feng was all about steady victories, while Xu You was adept at surprise moves. The two complemented each other perfectly, though they often clashed due to their differing personalities. Fortunately, Yuan Shao's authority kept them in check.

"Our opponents are Tian Yuanhao and Xu Ziyuan, huh," Chen Xi remarked with a wry smile. "This one's on you, Guo Jia. I'll focus on defense, but if it comes down to facing Tian Yuanhao, leave him to me. You can handle Xu Ziyuan."

"How can someone have a spiritual gift like that?" Guo Jia said, his face twisted in disbelief.

If not for the reliable source of the information, Guo Jia would never have believed such a spiritual gift could exist.

Tian Feng wasn't interested in intellectual duels. His approach was to drag everyone's intelligence down to a basic level and then rely on his extensive experience to outmaneuver them. Who could possibly compete with someone who had honed their skills in such conditions for years?

This was even more frustrating than Sima Yi's ability to suppress spiritual gifts. At least when facing Sima Yi, Guo Jia's abilities wouldn't diminish too much. But against Tian Feng, it would be utterly infuriating.

"That's why I'm relieved that he didn't activate his spiritual gift last time. But I can guarantee that this time, he'll remember to use it. His spiritual gift is essentially precognitive," Chen Xi said with a smile. He wasn't too concerned about Tian Feng's spiritual gift, despite its potency, because of its significant limitations.

The reason Chen Xi's group knew about Tian Feng's spiritual gift was thanks to Cui Jun's infiltration of Yuan Shao's inner circle. It should be noted that anyone capable of partnering with figures like Zhuge Liang, Pang Tong, and Xu Shu was no ordinary individual. For instance, after returning to Jizhou, Cui Jun decisively split the Cui clan into two branches, giving birth to the Boling Cui family.

He then astonished the entire aristocracy by siding with the Yuan family, effectively sabotaging many of the powerful Jizhou clans. The Jizhou aristocratic alliance, having already been ravaged by the Zhen family's tactics and Yuan Shao's crackdowns, crumbled completely after Cui Jun's betrayal.

The Jizhou aristocracy had anticipated the possibility of betrayal within their ranks, but they never expected the turncoat to be none other than the leader of their alliance, the Cui family. The strongest alliances always fall apart from within, and even the mightiest forces cannot withstand internal sabotage.

After Cui Jun's critical blow to the aristocratic alliance, Yuan Shao quickly moved to suppress, divide, and co-opt them, plunging Jizhou into chaos. Some aristocrats even allied with Wei Yan to retaliate against the Bohai region.

In the end, the Jizhou aristocrats' resistance was futile, and Yuan Shao used the opportunity to consolidate his control over the region, except for the vast network of Zhen family shops spread across Jizhou. However, in Yuan Shao's eyes, the Zhen family's deep roots in Jizhou made it impossible for them to escape his grasp.

As the architect and executor of the plan to subdue the Jizhou aristocracy, Cui Jun became an indispensable figure under Yuan Shao, comparable to the Five Great Strategists. No one questioned the crucial role he played.

Because of this, Chen Xi learned about Tian Feng's spiritual gift, a secret rarely revealed by Tian Feng himself. Knowing this, Chen Xi decided to take on Tian Feng personally. If Guo Jia were to face Tian Feng without prior knowledge, he'd likely be overwhelmed; even with preparation, it would be a tough battle.

Tian Feng's spiritual gift, according to intelligence from Jizhou, was relatively simple. It allowed him to sense the outcome of enemy plots within a certain range, though not the full details, just the result of the enemy's schemes.

Though it only provided the outcome, it made conventional strategies nearly useless against Tian Feng. At his level, knowing the outcome often allowed him to reverse-engineer the process and develop a counter-strategy...

Of course, if the scheme was exceptionally high-level, Tian Feng might sense it but still be unable to decipher or counter it. After all, some strategies are so intricate that even knowing the endgame wouldn't help unless one had the intelligence to work backward—a feat not everyone could accomplish, except for someone with extraordinary intelligence like Chen Gong.

However, Cui Jun also pointed out a significant limitation of Tian Feng's spiritual gift: it only worked against enemies. Based on Cui Jun's analysis, this "enemy" was likely defined by Tian Feng's lord. In other words, Tian Feng's spiritual gift had to be tied to a master.

Chapter 679: I Will Face Him

In a secret letter, Cui Jun had included some speculations, but due to limited contact with Tian Feng, many of these could not be confirmed. Nevertheless, the information provided enough insight for Chen Xi and Guo Jia to be cautious. If they had encountered Tian Feng without any prior knowledge, they would have been severely disadvantaged.

Upon receiving this secret letter, Chen Xi breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that he hadn't attempted to directly scheme against Yuan Shao before. Otherwise, things could have ended very badly.

"It seems Tian Feng's spiritual gift has significant loopholes," Chen Xi remarked after analyzing the entire situation. "He may be able to foresee the outcome of a plot, but counter-plots are still effective."

"The human heart is always the hardest to predict," Guo Jia said with a smile. "If he can't grasp the intentions of people, he can't definitively identify the enemy. In that case, the simplest way to deal with Tian Yuanhao is through sowing discord. Rebellion against superiors is such a convenient excuse."

"Yes, that's true. But even so, defeating him on the battlefield won't be easy," Chen Xi nodded. "So, I'll leave Xu You to you, and I'll handle Tian Yuanhao."

So far, Chen Xi had never encountered a perfect spiritual gift. They all either focused too much on one aspect or were well-rounded but not particularly powerful. Whenever a spiritual gift had an astonishing effect, there was always a significant drawback. To this day, Chen Xi had yet to see a truly comprehensive and flawless spiritual gift.

Of course, even though some spiritual gifts weren't overly powerful or were limited in scope, their possessors were usually geniuses who had mastered their abilities to the fullest.

Some individuals, upon identifying their spiritual gift, continuously explored its potential. For instance, Cheng Yu had managed to evolve from a mere strategist into a commander, fully utilizing the effects of his spiritual gift.

Others, like Tian Feng, upon understanding the nature of their spiritual gift, focused on complementing their natural abilities, using the gift as a tool to fully realize their innate talents.

Clearly, Tian Feng belonged to the latter group. Because he could foresee the outcomes of enemy schemes, he found it relatively easy to avoid them, if not outright counter them.

As a result, Tian Feng concentrated all his efforts on overpowering his enemies in direct confrontations, focusing on large-scale warfare and how to systematically defeat his opponents.

After studying this for a long time, Tian Feng realized that some strategies were impossible to counter, even if you knew the outcome. Sometimes, by the time you figured out the enemy's plan, they would have already moved to eliminate you.

Understanding this, Tian Feng stopped wasting time on countering schemes and instead focused his energy on how to crush opponents through overwhelming force and strategic positioning.

This was also why Tian Feng had a good relationship with Ju Shou. Besides their similar temperaments, Ju Shou's spiritual gift amplified Tian Feng's strengths, making his already extensive experience even more formidable.

In essence, when Tian Feng and Ju Shou were together, they were nearly impervious to schemes, forcing opponents into head-to-head confrontations. Even more troubling was that both Tian Feng and Ju Shou were masters of large-scale warfare, with extensive experience in military formations, troop deployments, and relentless offensives.

This was why Chen Xi had assigned Guo Jia to handle Xu You while he took on Tian Feng. As long as Tian Feng was alive, a head-to-head confrontation was inevitable.

In a direct confrontation, Chen Xi believed his strengths would be more advantageous. It would come down to hard power—massive armies clashing head-on, where strategy and individual prowess would matter less.

Although Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun were exceptionally powerful, in large-scale battles involving tens of thousands of troops, individual martial prowess had limited value. Especially when both sides had equally brave soldiers, without the ability to ignore the effects of morale and formation, even Lu Bu could be at risk in such engagements.

This was similar to stories of old—if Xiang Yu faced Han Xin with only a hundred soldiers each, Han Xin would surely lose. With a thousand soldiers, Han Xin would still lose. But with ten thousand soldiers, Han Xin might struggle, though he would still likely lose. However, as the numbers increased to a hundred thousand or more, Xiang Yu's chances of victory would begin to plummet.

This illustrates the balance between personal valor and command ability. Up to a certain point, valor can replace command, and in small-scale conflicts, it might even be more crucial. But as the scale of war increases, personal valor diminishes, and the importance of command rises exponentially.

So far, most generals led by sheer force, their personal martial prowess directly influencing the combat effectiveness of their troops.

This is why, in the early Han dynasty, when the population was still large, most generals struggled to command forces exceeding ten thousand men; they typically managed around three to four thousand. But as the population decreased, more commanders emerged who could lead tens of thousands in battle.

Generals like Guan Yu, who occasionally studied military tactics, would gradually increase the number of troops they commanded, shifting from leading by force to leading by command, from a charging warrior to a battlefield commander, and eventually to a supreme commander.

After considering Chen Xi's suggestion, Guo Jia spoke up, "Let me deal with Tian Feng. You handle Xu You. If you stay in Linyi and don't move, Xu You won't be able to do anything to you. Meanwhile, let me test Tian Feng's mettle."

Chen Xi frowned, puzzled by Guo Jia's proposal. Engaging an opponent on their terms is not something a wise person would do, especially when there are better options available. Why would Guo Jia want to jump into this fight?

"I know you're confused, but I want to see what Tian Feng's spiritual gift is really about. Can it truly avoid all strategies?" Guo Jia explained, looking at Chen Xi seriously. "Cui Zhouping's intelligence isn't complete. Let me test it out—what if some parts aren't accurate?"

"Even if some details are off, the general direction is likely correct," Chen Xi sighed. "You're at risk of getting hurt if you charge in like this."

"It might not turn out that way. Let me try first," Guo Jia insisted, shaking his head. "I suspect Tian Feng's spiritual gift has other weaknesses. Otherwise, certain events shouldn't have occurred."

"Lu Bu's sudden assault on Jizhou was more like brute force," Chen Xi said, shaking his head. "That was all about overwhelming strength, and Chen Gong created the right opportunity for Lu Bu..."

As Chen Xi spoke, he suddenly looked up sharply, and Guo Jia met his gaze.

Chapter 680: The Vanishing Spiritual Energy

"Alright, you'll take on Tian Feng," Chen Xi said, fixing his gaze on Guo Jia. "But if things don't go as expected, or if you can't figure him out, let me handle it. I'll take the risk of directly confronting Yuan Shao's elite to eliminate Tian Feng!"

"Agreed, but I am confident that my strategy won't be seen through," Guo Jia replied, nodding in agreement to Chen Xi's condition.

Chen Xi knew that this decision was somewhat reckless. The most prudent approach would have been to let him or a more cautious strategist like Zhuge Liang handle Tian Feng. After all, given their strong foundation in Taishan, they had nothing to fear when it came to overpowering an opponent.

However, certain things affected the overall plans of Taishan, leaving them no choice but to let Guo Jia take the risk of probing Tian Feng. After all, everything from Cui Jun was essentially speculative. If there was even a slight flaw, it could lead to major trouble.

"Be careful, then. I'll be stationed in Linyi, so you should head to Jiyin and join forces with Second Brother. Additionally, Uncle Zhi's troops will be incorporated into your side," Chen Xi said after some thought. It wasn't that he doubted Cui Jun's capabilities, but the stakes were too high to allow for any mistakes.

"Alright, I'll thoroughly test Tian Yuanhao from all angles. But be careful yourself as well. Although Xu You is greedy and lacks restraint, his mind and decisiveness are truly terrifying, as I learned while under Yuan Shao," Guo Jia nodded and advised Chen Xi.

Guo Jia had a good habit of never declining help when offered. Incorporating 2,500 more troops would make it easier for him to deal with Tian Feng, especially since Yuan Shao's army marching on Yanzhou this time was a solid 100,000 strong, without any fluff.

"Hmm, I know a bit about Xu You as well. Besides his greed, his abilities are indeed strong. But don't worry too much about me. I'll be stationed in Linyi, and by the time he gets here, the city walls will almost be completed," Chen Xi said, recalling Xu You's image and nodding in understanding.

"That's good. I'll leave Linyi to you, then. I'll go confirm Tian Yuanhao's spiritual gift. By the way, try to figure out Xu You's spiritual gift as well. It's a shame about Zhicai's spiritual gift," Guo Jia couldn't help but bring up Xi Zhicai when talking about probing others' spiritual gifts.

"Yes, it's a pity. As for Xu You, I'll keep an eye out, but don't get your hopes up too high," Chen Xi also remembered Xi Zhicai, who, even on his deathbed, hadn't forgotten to make one last effort for Cao Cao. Truly, he had given his all until the end.

Thinking about Xi Zhicai, Chen Xi couldn't help but think of the small jade disc. He hadn't been dreaming about it as often lately, but he could feel its presence nearby, and the clear radiance emanating from it was growing brighter, although the disc occasionally dimmed.

Recently, a late spring cold snap and large-scale natural disasters struck many parts of the Han Dynasty. Even the few regions protected by Chen Xi's efforts experienced these disasters, but they were mitigated by Chen Xi's spiritual gift.

However, the sheer scale of these once-in-a-century disasters wiped out a layer of the spiritual energy shield that Chen Xi had formed with his extra spiritual energy. As a result, the small jade disc's radiance seemed even more dazzling than the large jade disc that represented Chen Xi.

Chen Xi remembered this clearly because, after losing that layer of spiritual energy, he felt drowsy. As soon as he fell asleep, he dreamed about it.

Seeing the small jade disc glowing so brightly, Chen Xi didn't hesitate to absorb some of its radiance to replenish himself, feeling much better afterward and waking up full of energy.

The next time he dreamed of the small jade disc, he noticed that the disc, from which he had taken about 30% of the radiance, had almost fully recovered. This left Chen Xi curious about how it had recovered so quickly.

Meanwhile, in Yanzhou, Xun Yu was also alarmed when he noticed that a third of the spiritual energy stored from Xi Zhicai's legacy had mysteriously vanished.

When the disaster struck, Yanzhou was also affected, but Xun Yu relied on the spiritual energy he had occasionally extracted from the legacy left by Xi Zhicai. Using it to change the weather on a large scale, he successfully weathered the storm.

When Xun Yu discovered that the stored spiritual energy could indeed be used for large-scale weather manipulation, he was almost moved to tears, realizing that they would no longer have to worry about food shortages. But just a few days later, Xun Yu noticed that a third of the stored spiritual energy had disappeared, frightening him half to death.

Xun Yu spent three sleepless nights confirming that the process of extracting spiritual energy from his colleagues and subordinates still worked and that there was no sign of further loss.

After reflecting on his recent weather manipulation efforts, Xun Yu estimated that the missing spiritual energy had likely been consumed in the process. However, the amount lost was several times greater than what should have been used, causing Xun Yu to feel a pang of heartache.

Although changing the weather on such a large scale consumed a lot of spiritual energy, Xun Yu's territory was small. In contrast, Chen Xi's efforts to adjust the weather, while consuming less energy, covered a much larger area, so the accumulated consumption was enormous.

It's hard to say whether this is because Cao Cao's territory was too small or Liu Bei's territory was too large...

With no way of knowing the true cause, Xun Yu could only accept it. Although the loss was significant, he could still replenish the spiritual energy over time. After all, it could be stored, and by harvesting a little every day, he could accumulate enough for another large-scale weather change in about ten days.

So, Xun Yu got back to work, like a diligent bee, extracting the excess spiritual energy from Cao Cao's civil and military officials and storing it away. As long as the amount extracted wasn't too much, no one would notice, and soon the small jade disc was replenished...

Not long after, Guo Jia, under Chen Dao's protection, headed to Jiyin. Meanwhile, the construction of the new city walls in Linyi intensified. Chen Xi had never intended to fight a field battle with Xu You; he had slightly fewer troops than Xu You.

In truth, in terms of pure numbers, Liu Bei's forces were at a disadvantage against Yuan Shao. However, this wasn't because Liu Bei lacked manpower or couldn't afford to arm tens of thousands of troops—he simply didn't see the need.

Liu Bei's forces included a large number of well-trained militia, ready to be called up if needed. Of course, Yuan Shao also had a vast number of militia at his disposal, but for both Yuan and Liu, this was a last resort.

For both Yuan Shao and Liu Bei, their current armies represented the optimal number of troops their respective generals could command and effectively utilize in battle.

After Liu Bei chose the optimal military structure, Yuan Shao decisively opted to give his generals the maximum number of troops they could effectively command. This "maximum number" referred to the absolute limit a general could handle before the force became unwieldy, leading to a decline in combat effectiveness due to poor command.