

Mythical 681

Chapter 681: Let Go, This is Mine

In the current situation, the disparity in troop numbers between the two sides was glaringly apparent. Chen Xi's regular forces in Yanzhou numbered only over 40,000, while Tian Feng had deployed nearly 100,000 troops in the area.

Fortunately, after taking control of Yanzhou, a large number of construction and farming corps were established, ensuring sufficient defensive forces in the rear. The only shortfall was in the forward units guarding against the forces from Jizhou.

With Guan Yu dispatched to Jiyin, and once Guo Jia arrived with Chen Dao, the forces in Jiyin would total about 20,000. On the opposing side, Tian Feng likely commanded around 40,000 troops, including over 4,000 cavalry.

If Chen Xi didn't have confidence in Guo Jia and wasn't aware that Tian Feng was not particularly adept at tactical changes, he would never have permitted such a high-risk attempt. After all, Tian Feng had an overwhelming advantage when it came to countering strategic warfare.

Similarly, Chen Xi's own situation wasn't looking too favorable. With Guan Yu and Guo Jia sent to Jiyin to deal with Tian Feng, the forces at his disposal would significantly dwindle. If Xu You suddenly decided to launch a full-scale assault, things could turn dire.

After Guo Jia's departure, only Chen Xi and a few others, including Zhuge Liang, remained in Linyi. Originally, Gan Ning and his forces were supposed to appear in Xuzhou to intimidate Yuzhou, then quietly withdraw, leaving Yuzhou uncertain of their true strength.

Of course, everyone knew that this small trick wouldn't fool Zhou Yu for more than ten days, but it was still done to make the Yuan family in Yuzhou more confident in their assessment of the situation in Xuzhou. Currently, the Yuan family in Yuzhou was convinced that only Zhang Fei commanded a troop in Xuzhou. Despite Zhou Yu's logical explanations, the Yuan family in Yuzhou remained restless.

"Have Ziyi swap positions with Zilong, taking over the defense of Dongping and the southern part of Sanyang. Bring Zilong to Linyi. We originally built this new city here as a bridgehead, and now we need to drive a stake into the border between Dongjun and Jizhou," Chen Xi ordered Fa Zheng.

At present, Chen Xi had retained the troops of Gan Ning, Taishi Ci, Zhuge Liang, and Fa Zheng. Until reinforcements arrived, Chen Xi had no plans to engage Yuzhou. First, he needed to secure this foothold.

"Xingba, I'll need to detain your navy in this area for a while," Chen Xi explained to Gan Ning. He was very thankful that when Liu Bei gave him the authority to dispatch troops, he hadn't delayed, or they would have been too late. The battlefield changes in an instant.

"Fighting here is just as good as fighting anywhere else. I'd rather take on Yuan Shao than Yuan Shu any day!" Gan Ning laughed heartily, showing no dissatisfaction with the change in orders.

"Order the scouts to operate in teams of five, expanding their search range. Instruct Gongyou to accelerate the construction of the new city in Linyi, and have Zhang Yan speed up the selection of soldiers," Chen Xi continued to issue orders to Fa Zheng, who quickly jotted them down.

While Chen Xi was contemplating how to deal with Xu You, the latter was already having final discussions with Tian Feng. Contrary to Chen Xi's plan to counter with strength against strength and trickery with trickery, Tian Feng and Xu You, after arriving in Dongjun as military advisors, immediately formulated a strategy to use strength to counter trickery.

Although Xu You didn't like Tian Feng, he admitted that if they were to face off on the battlefield, Tian Feng would certainly overwhelm him. This wasn't because he was inferior to Tian Feng, but because Tian Feng's spiritual gift absolutely countered strategists who relied on clever schemes. Under such suppression, Xu You had no better solution.

With this in mind, Tian Feng and Xu You had planned from the start to eliminate Guo Jia first, then combine their strength to steamroll Chen Xi.

The strength of Yuan Shao's forces in Yanzhou this time was entirely due to his bold decision to fully withdraw from most of Bingzhou, transferring his infantry and cavalry from the southern part of Bingzhou. Currently, the southern part of Bingzhou had barely any troops left. If Lu Bu wanted to, his more than 20,000 cavalry could wreak havoc in Bingzhou.

Though Chen Xi had anticipated that Yuan Shao would allocate some forces after Lu Bu's return to Bingzhou, he hadn't expected Yuan Shao to be so audacious. But once it happened, Chen Xi understood

that even without Lu Bu's return, Yuan Shao would have made the same move to withdraw his southern Bingzhou forces.

This demonstrated Yuan Shao's confidence in his northern frontier soldiers. By allowing Lu Bu to enter Bingzhou and then making this move, Yuan Shao also showcased his grandeur and boldness.

The strategy that Chen Xi and Guo Jia had set up was almost exactly what Tian Feng and Xu You had hoped for. However, Tian Feng and Xu You's strategy was based on the assumption that Liu Bei's side was unaware of Tian Feng's spiritual gift. Given the current situation, the outcome of the conflict remained uncertain.

"Yuanhao, I'll leave the Puyang area to you. I'm going to deal with Chen Xi," Xu You said to Tian Feng, rubbing his hands together.

"These are for you," Tian Feng sighed, handing Xu You a list. "Gold, jewels, and treasures."

Xu You glanced at the list Tian Feng handed over, a clear look of greed flashing in his eyes, but he showed no shame and simply tucked the list into his sleeve. For Xu You, life was all about collecting such rare treasures.

To say Xu You was a unique character would be an understatement. He had little interest in women or high-ranking positions. His true passion was wealth! Whether it was ancient seals, relics, or precious stones, Xu You loved them all. His life revolved around acquiring these valuable items.

When he looked up at Tian Feng again, Xu You's eyes had softened with affection. He suddenly realized that this stubborn man wasn't completely insensitive after all. Many of the treasures on the list were gifts Yuan Shao had bestowed upon Tian Feng.

"Can you handle Chen Zichuan?" Tian Feng asked, his face expressionless as he looked at Xu You, completely ignoring Xu You's gleeful reaction.

Tian Feng had little appreciation for treasures or fine jade. He often wore simple blue robes, sometimes even made of plain hemp, while Xu You dressed in luxurious Shu brocade, changing his outfit daily.

Though they were of similar age, standing next to each other, Tian Feng looked like a humble farmer beside a wealthy nobleman.

"Do you have more of this?" Xu You asked eagerly, his eyes gleaming.

"This too is yours," Tian Feng said, his face darkening. He went inside, fetched a box, opened it, and uncovered a piece of jade that emitted a warm, glowing light.

"A beautiful piece..." Xu You's eyes sparkled at the sight. As a collector of treasures, he immediately recognized the jade's value.

"Can you deal with Chen Zichuan or not?" Tian Feng asked, clutching the box tightly, completely ignoring Xu You's frantic tugging.

"Let go! This is mine now!" Xu You exclaimed in frustration.

"Can you handle Chen Zichuan?" Tian Feng repeated, staring at Xu You.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Xu You felt his mind clear, with every strategy suddenly becoming crystal clear. He grabbed the box containing the jade, nodding eagerly.

Chapter 682: Yuan Shao's Ruthlessness

Tian Feng loosened his grip on the wooden box, and Xu You immediately began admiring the jade inside. As he did, his demeanor gradually transformed from that of a greedy, petty individual to one exuding grandeur and scholarly elegance.

Noticing Xu You's increasingly pronounced change—from a greedy monkey dressed in noble attire to someone radiating dignity and scholarly aura—Tian Feng finally felt at ease.

"Thank you, Yuanhao, for bestowing this upon me," Xu You said, pushing his hairpin back in place. He now looked heroic and refined, a far cry from the earlier sneaky, money-hungry figure. His eyes no longer reflected greed.

"Ziyuan, let me confirm once more: can you handle Chen Zichuan?" Tian Feng asked, looking at Xu You, who now appeared almost godlike in his confidence.

"Who can say for sure without trying?" Xu You replied with a slight smile. "In this world, no one can claim to be able to defeat Chen Zichuan without having faced him first. I doubt such a person has even been born yet."

"So I'll leave him to you. I don't expect you to defeat him, but I need you to suppress him. If you can keep him in check for two months, I'll give you a luminous pearl when we return to Jizhou," Tian Feng nodded slightly, accepting Xu You's answer. The more they learned about Chen Xi, the more they realized how formidable he was.

"I will do my best. And I may make some seemingly irrational moves, so please cover for me, Yuanhao," Xu You said, his mind clear and resolute, unaffected by the mention of the luminous pearl.

"No problem. As long as you can handle him, I'll cover for you in everything," Tian Feng agreed earnestly. Besides his strategic brilliance, what made Xu You truly formidable was his decisiveness. In certain situations, he could act like a madman, making absolutely crazy yet highly effective moves.

"Then it's settled. I need 7,000 of the Bingzhou wolf cavalry, and Wen Chou as the commanding general of my forces," Xu You demanded, now that Tian Feng had given him the assurance he needed.

"Are you sure 7,000 wolf cavalry will be enough?" Tian Feng frowned. "Chen Zichuan's usual approach is to secure an invincible position before seeking victory. Cavalry can't take cities, and if he decides to fortify himself in the new city of Linyi..."

"If he chooses to hold Linyi, then even a large army won't be able to do much," Xu You interrupted Tian Feng. "So why not take a gamble? Bet that Chen Zichuan will prioritize driving a stake into the heart of Dongjun rather than fighting a major battle at Linyi."

"That indeed seems like a viable approach," Tian Feng mused after considering it for a moment. Xu You's reasoning made sense.

"Moreover, you have to deal with Guo Fengxiao. While schemes might not work well against you, and cunning strategies might have little effect, Guo Fengxiao is no easy opponent. It won't be hard for you to defeat him, but to eliminate him..." Xu You said seriously, his strategic brilliance now fully on display.

"The only way is a swift, thunderous strike to wipe him out!" Xu You emphasized, raising one finger. "With my current strategies, if I were to face you, I'd figure out your spiritual gift after three defeats at most. And as for Guo Fengxiao's spiritual gift, you're well aware—once activated, no amount of preparation on your part will matter."

Tian Feng frowned, recalling the intelligence sent from Cao Cao's side, which detailed two spiritual gifts—one belonging to Guo Jia and the other to Chen Xi.

"Alright, I'll be cautious. I'd rather suffer a few minor defeats than give him a chance to activate his spiritual gift," Tian Feng nodded. "Be careful with Chen Zichuan as well. I've heard he has a hidden expert protecting him."

"I will," Xu You nodded. "But such people never involve themselves in warfare. I've already gathered information from various sources—these hidden experts aren't few, but they only intervene in events that could reshape the entire world. And Chen Zichuan is one of those people."

"One of them?" Tian Feng frowned, hearing this secret for the first time. The idea that someone as crucial as Chen Zichuan, who could establish an imperial dynasty, was just "one of them" was surprising.

"Yes, he's just one. True overlords, the real rulers of the world, have never died from assassination because of these hidden protectors," Xu You explained vaguely. "Our lord has one too, but they don't participate in battles. They only protect certain individuals when necessary."

Tian Feng simply acknowledged with an "Oh" and didn't press further.

"Write the order then. I'll take Wen Chou to Linyi. While that stake may not cause much harm, having it there is still a nuisance!" Xu You sneered, his mind already forming a plan. The satisfaction of possessing the treasure had filled him with the confidence to compete with any strategist in the land.

Tian Feng quickly wrote the order and handed it to Xu You. With everything now clear, Tian Feng knew how to deal with Guo Jia.

"Sigh, I wonder how You Ruo and Zhong Jian are faring in Sili Province," Tian Feng muttered to himself as he stood atop the city wall.

After handing the order to Xu You, watching him leave for Wen Chou's camp, and then seeing him and Wen Chou depart with 7,000 wolf cavalry, Tian Feng felt much more at ease. However, Xu You's mention of hidden experts protecting lords reminded Tian Feng of Xun Shen and Chunyu Qiong, who had gone to Sili Province. After all, if lords had such protectors, what about the emperor?

In this world, the political landscape constantly shifts. Though Yuan Shao was powerful, he had never achieved an overwhelming advantage. So when Ju Shou proposed going to Sili Province to bring the emperor to Ye City, the council quickly approved after some consideration.

However, before Yuan Shao could decide who to send, he received intelligence that Liu Ye and his forces, who were initially believed to be attacking Yuan Shao, were actually heading to aid the emperor. With this news, Yuan Shao made his decision without hesitation, sending Xun Shen and Chunyu Qiong to Sili Province. Xun Shen, once one of the Eight Generals of the Western Garden, and Chunyu Qiong, one of his top strategists, reassured him.

Yuan Shao's haste was partly due to being intimidated by Liu Bei. If Liu Bei were to bring the emperor to Taishan, Yuan Shao's justification for conquering the world would be lost, and his motivation to attack Taishan would wane. Moreover, Yuan Shao was not yet ready to declare himself emperor.

Thus, Yuan Shao's orders to Xun Shen were clear: if they could take the emperor, they should do so. But if they couldn't, they must at least ensure that Liu Bei didn't succeed.

To Yuan Shao, it was better for the emperor to fall into Cao Cao's hands than Liu Bei's. For Liu Ye, having the emperor was more of a burden, and if they allowed Yuan Shao to take him, it would be equally troublesome. So, they preferred to hand him over to Cao Cao instead.

As for Yuan Shao's secret orders to Chunyu Qiong, they were even more ruthless: if they couldn't succeed, they were to kill the emperor and his court. In such a scenario, the blame would inevitably fall on Cao Cao, Yuan Shao, Liu Bei, and Li Jue alike.

This revealed Yuan Shao's determination. Of course, such orders were only given to confidants like Chunyu Qiong. If others knew of his intent to murder the emperor, they would certainly unite against him.

Chapter 684: Inner Beauty and Outer Elegance

"This is the direction towards the camp's entrance. Does this mean that among my father-in-law, my wife, and their party, there are three people like Cai Yan, who have brought a certain skill to the pinnacle?" Zhuge Liang was slightly surprised. Achieving such mastery in any skill, as Cai Yan had, was no less difficult than reaching the pinnacle in their own disciplines.

Unlike in his previous life when he moved to Jingzhou, in this life, Zhuge Liang only knew that he had a marriage agreement. As for who his betrothed was, what she looked like, or what her personality was like, he had no idea.

But this was typical of ancient times, where parental orders and matchmaking were paramount, and the wishes of the individuals involved mattered little. Just like when Chen Xi married Fan Jian, despite his high status and power, he still had to honor the marriage agreement made by his father over ten years earlier.

This is why Chen Xi would often say that Chen Lan was the one who truly shared hardships with him and never left his side, whereas his relationship with Fan Jian was more about responsibility. Although Chen Xi had changed inwardly, his bond with Chen Lan was more about shared experiences, while his connection with Fan Jian was driven by duty.

This was the fundamental difference for Chen Xi between Chen Lan and Fan Jian. However, with time, all feelings would eventually settle into a bond of kinship, which was the foundation of stable marriages in ancient times.

After all, compared to the fleeting passions of love, a relationship built on responsibility and mutual support, which eventually grew into warmth and then into genuine kinship, was seen as more reliable. In this era, there was no concept of divorce, only a lifelong commitment to each other.

This is why Zhuge Liang felt a surge of excitement upon learning that Huang Chengyan had arrived. Even though Zhuge Liang knew that, regardless of his feelings, Huang Yueying was destined to be his wife, meeting her beforehand would help him understand her better and ease future interactions.

At this moment, Zhuge Liang felt a mix of emotions—not because he was worried about Huang Yueying being unattractive or overly beautiful, but because the great Chancellor of Shu Han, Zhuge Liang, had already reached a point where he looked beyond physical appearance and valued inner substance. His concern was whether his future wife would share common interests with him.

As Zhuge Liang drew closer, his senses became sharper, and he realized that his initial perception had been slightly off. Two of the presences were almost identical to Cai Yan's, while the third was different from anything he had encountered before.

"As expected, the world is vast and full of wonders. It seems there are abilities beyond spiritual talents, and there are many different types," Zhuge Liang sighed, quickening his pace.

"Hey, Kongming, it's you coming to meet us! Come, meet your father-in-law," Jian Yong called out, spotting Zhuge Liang from a distance with a wave.

Beside him, Huang Yueying, upon hearing Jian Yong's words, showed a hint of curiosity but not much shyness. She scrutinized Zhuge Liang as he approached, taking him in from head to toe. First, she nodded, but then she sighed. Judging by her expression, Zhuge Liang seemed to have passed her assessment, though only just.

When Zhuge Liang saw Jian Yong, he also noticed the three people behind him and was immediately startled. The older man was undoubtedly his future father-in-law, Huang Chengyan, and the frail-looking, golden-haired woman had to be his future wife, Huang Yueying.

Zhuce Liang realized that she was evaluating him, and he quickly composed himself, stepping forward with a calm demeanor. "Nephew Zhuge Kongming greets Uncle Huang, Miss Huang, and this gentleman."

"You are Zhuge Kongming?" Huang Chengyan looked at the young man before him, who was quite handsome, and smiled. "Your uncle often praises you. I didn't believe it at first, but now I do. You're quite impressive."

Zhuge Liang paused slightly before bowing respectfully to Huang Chengyan. "My uncle praises me too much. I was rash and never sought his guidance. How is he faring in Jingzhou?"

"He's doing well in Jingzhou, but without this old friend, he will soon move to Yizhou. With another genius from the Zhuge family, he will have fulfilled his duty," Huang Chengyan replied with a chuckle, stroking his beard.

In fact, as Huang Chengyan spoke, he kept a close eye on Zhuge Liang's expression. Seeing a trace of sadness on Zhuge Liang's face, Huang Chengyan was even more satisfied.

"I see," Zhuge Liang sighed inwardly. How could he not understand his uncle's intentions? Unlike the younger generation of aristocratic families, who were filled with ambitions of achievement, the older generation was more concerned with the continuation of their lineage.

"This is the disciple of Shang Chang, Jiang Gongyan. Shang Chang wanted to take you, Shiyuan, and a man named Xu Yuan as his disciples, but it was not meant to be, so I brought him here," Huang Chengyan said, pointing to Jiang Wan. Jiang Wan was actually slightly older than Chen Xi.

"Disciple of Pang Degong from Lingling, Jiang Wan," Jiang Wan introduced himself with a bow, and Zhuge Liang returned the gesture. Just from this brief exchange, Zhuge Liang could tell that Jiang Wan seemed a bit rigid but exuded a certain authority.

"And this is my daughter, Yueying," Huang Chengyan said, gesturing towards Huang Yueying.

"I am Huang Yueying. Greetings... Sir," Huang Yueying said, feeling that meeting Zhuge Liang before marriage wasn't as great an idea as she had thought. She couldn't bring herself to address him as "husband" like Fan Jian and Jiang Ying had done, but calling him by his name felt too informal. After a brief moment of hesitation, she gracefully chose to call him "Sir," feeling relieved that Zhuge Liang was the eldest son of the Zhuge family, making this form of address appropriate.

"Greetings, Miss Huang," Zhuge Liang responded, following her lead.

At this moment, Zhuge Liang was elated. His worst fears had not materialized—his future wife was not only not unattractive, but she was actually quite beautiful. And she wasn't just a pretty face; the near-spiritual talent she possessed indicated that she was truly wise and talented, a perfect combination of inner beauty and outer elegance.

"Now I have no worries about not having anything in common with her. I wonder what her spiritual talent is used for," Zhuge Liang thought happily, momentarily forgetting that he was supposed to be welcoming the Huang family. This lapse in focus could potentially make a bad impression.

"Ahem, Kongming, take me to see Zichuan first. Then find a place for the three of them to rest. We've had a long journey and are quite tired," Jian Yong coughed lightly, snapping Zhuge Liang back to attention.

"This guy is my husband? No way... He seems so absent-minded," Huang Yueying thought, maintaining a gentle expression but internally groaning at the sight of Zhuge Liang's distracted state.

"Oh, is that a Qin crossbow?" Huang Yueying, feeling a bit embarrassed by Zhuge Liang's gaze, glanced sideways and noticed the crossbows mounted in the camp. In the next moment, her mind automatically reconstructed the Qin crossbow she had seen before and began habitually deconstructing it.

Chapter 683: The Arrival of the Huang Family

Originally, Jian Yong was supposed to travel from Jingzhou to Xuzhou by boat via the Yangtze River, but after Sun Ce mobilized his troops, Zhou Yu immediately blocked the entire Yangtze River route. The initial plan of passing through Yuzhou became impossible.

Moreover, since Huang Chengyan was related to Liu Biao by marriage, it would be difficult for the Huang family to leave once Liu Biao retook Jingbei. The alliance previously discussed with Yi Ji effectively became a dead letter, though Huang Xu had already been sent away in advance.

In the end, at Huang Yueying's suggestion, the Huang family decided to take a land route through Wancheng to Yuzhou and then to Taishan. This route was much slower, which explained why Jian Yong, who had left for Jingzhou before the New Year, had not yet returned to Taishan.

When Jian Yong and the Huang family arrived in Yuzhou via Wancheng, Liu Bei and Yuan Shao were in the midst of dividing Yuzhou. Naturally, Jian Yong, returning from the south, received a warm welcome. After staying for several days in Jiyin, the Huang family split into two groups.

One group, the main body of the Huang family, headed directly to Taishan, while the other group, led by Jian Yong, included Huang Chengyan, Huang Yueying, and Jiang Wan. This second group was bound for Linyi because Guan Yu had mentioned that Zhuge Liang was also in Linyi.

These three were all exceptionally talented and had their own reasons for wanting to visit Linyi. Huang Chengyan's intention was simple: he wanted to meet Chen Zichuan, who had not yet reached adulthood but had already joined Liu Bei and achieved great success in just a few years. Jiang Wan also wanted to meet Chen Xi, but his motive was to seek recognition for his talents and serve a worthy lord.

As for Huang Yueying, her reason was straightforward: she wanted to see what kind of person her fiancé, Zhuge Liang, was. Although she was destined to marry Zhuge Liang, Huang Yueying wanted to ensure that her future husband was a good match, even if her findings wouldn't change the outcome.

Huang Yueying originally wasn't allowed to go, but fortunately, Chen Xi had previously instructed Jian Yong to accommodate Miss Huang's requests as much as possible, as she was a crucial figure.

In this era, among the renowned women, Cai Zhaoji represented excellence in music, chess, calligraphy, painting, and poetry; Wang Yi exemplified strategic and military prowess; and Huang Yueying was undoubtedly the master of mechanical engineering.

When giving Jian Yong instructions, Chen Xi had simply said that out of respect for Zhuge Liang, Huang Yueying should not be slighted. Any of her requests, whether reasonable or not, should be granted within their means.

Because of this, Huang Yueying was pleasantly surprised to find that things she couldn't attempt at home were suddenly possible, thanks to the tall, thin, kindly-looking, and humorous elder who always made things happen.

When Huang Chengyan and his party arrived, Chen Xi was setting up camp on a site west of Linyi, backed by a hillside and near water. As Xu You had predicted, Chen Xi had no intention of engaging in battle at the new city of Linyi, as that would significantly slow its construction.

Instead, Chen Xi set up camp about ten miles from the new city. He believed that Yuan Shao's forces wouldn't dare to attack the city, as doing so would invite a double-edged assault from within the city and his camp outside, likely leading to disaster for them. Although Zhang Yan and Wang Xiu weren't particularly strong in battle, defending with the aid of the city and external reinforcements would be easy.

"Kongming, your father-in-law has arrived. Go welcome him," Chen Xi said as he read the letter Jian Yong had delivered.

"Understood," Zhuge Liang replied with a joyful expression and quickly left.

"Is his wife coming too?" After watching Zhuge Liang leave, Fa Zheng turned to Chen Xi and asked.

"You guessed it," Chen Xi responded curiously.

"It's only natural. What father-in-law visits a military camp just to see his son-in-law?" Fa Zheng smirked, then added with some gossip, "I wonder if Kongming's wife is beautiful?"

"Have you seen Cai Zhaoji?" Chen Xi asked casually.

"Don't tell me Kongming's wife is that beautiful!" Gan Ning exclaimed, stunned. Cai Yan had played the qin for them during the New Year, so everyone had seen her. Her beauty wasn't just in her looks; it was the aura formed by her experiences that made her so captivating.

"I was just saying," Chen Xi laughed as he noticed Fa Zheng's eyes practically bulging out.

"I knew it..." Fa Zheng muttered, relaxing a bit.

"But she's probably just a bit less beautiful than Cai Zhaoji and maybe even more so than the youngest daughter of the Mi family," Chen Xi added before Fa Zheng could finish his sentence.

"Marry a virtuous wife, take a beautiful concubine—hmph! Beauty isn't everything. If you gave me the youngest daughter of the Mi family, I'd probably lose ten years of my life," Fa Zheng retorted, then shared an example.

Jiang Ying, Fa Zheng's wife, wasn't particularly beautiful, especially compared to someone like Wang Yi. Therefore, at meals, Fa Zheng would always talk about how one should marry a virtuous wife, not a beautiful one, though it was true that his wife was indeed very virtuous.

"That may not be the case," Chen Xi chuckled.

Gan Ning, who was nearby, shook his head. If it weren't for Cai Yan's extremely special status, he might have wanted to court her. He didn't care about superstitions like being cursed, but considering that Cai Yan was the last descendant of the Cai family, he decided it wasn't worth the trouble. There were plenty of other beauties in the world.

As Zhuge Liang walked out, he noticed something odd. Although he hadn't activated his spiritual talent, which usually made him less perceptive of other spiritual talents, he still couldn't have made such a big mistake. What were these three presences that felt like spiritual talents but weren't?

At first, Zhuge Liang thought he was confused and had misidentified the direction. But after confirming that the spiritual talents of Chen Xi, Fa Zheng, and Gan Ning were still present inside the main tent, and carefully verifying that these three strange presences were still there, he started to feel a sense of familiarity.

"Isn't this the same feeling I got from Cai Zhaoji, something similar to a spiritual talent? I even tried copying it with my own spiritual talent," Zhuge Liang thought, finally remembering where he had encountered it before.

Back during the New Year, when Zhuge Liang had sensed something akin to a spiritual talent from Cai Yan, he impulsively decided to try activating it, figuring that with Liu Bei nearby, nothing would go too wrong.

After activating it, Zhuge Liang discovered that while he could indeed access this talent, he couldn't actually use it. Cai Yan's talent required the medium of music, and not just any music—it had to be on par with Cai Yan's skill level. That was a tall order indeed.

Chapter 685: The Talents of Many

【This structure...】 Huang Yueying's mind deconstructed the Qin crossbow she had just seen, then reassembled it with several new components. 【To improve further, it seems I still need to dismantle a real one.】

The Qu family had spent enormous amounts of time and resources to reconstruct the Qin crossbow, but Huang Yueying had grasped most of it with just one glance. If other experts in mechanics knew about this, they would be astonished beyond words.

Though there were still some aspects Huang Yueying didn't fully understand from just looking at the exterior, the fact that she could reconstruct it with such accuracy was enough to be considered extraordinary. This level of ability was no longer just a simple understanding of mechanics but had transcended to a level of mastery.

As Huang Yueying followed Zhuge Liang into the military camp, she observed various siege and defense equipment, most of which were remarkably ingenious. Some she hadn't seen before, but with her insight and intelligence, she quickly figured out their purposes.

"People speak of Taishan's prosperity, but it's only when you see it for yourself that you truly understand what kind of prosperity it is," Huang Chengyan said suddenly as they approached the central military tent, having followed Zhuge Liang through the camp.

Jiang Wan looked at Huang Chengyan, puzzled. What did he mean by that? They hadn't even gone to Taishan yet, so how could Huang Chengyan draw such a conclusion just from what they saw in the camp?

"Uncle, when you visit Taishan, you will understand even more. What you see in the military camp is just a glimpse of the whole picture," Zhuge Liang wasn't surprised. He had read many books that taught how to infer the whole from a small part, so Huang Chengyan's observation didn't shock him.

"It seems I underestimated Chen Zichuan. This is not just a matter of material comfort; you have already started extending in other directions. I truly wonder how he managed to achieve this," Huang Chengyan said with a sigh of admiration.

Huang Chengyan had the ability to perceive the larger picture from small details, but this skill was limited to analyzing situations or conducting surveys. It wasn't effective when it came to understanding people since human nature was unpredictable. Even Fazheng's spiritual talent, which targeted human nature, couldn't guarantee a complete grasp of someone's heart.

"Yueying and I will not enter the tent. Just arrange accommodation for us. We will return in the afternoon. Women aren't usually kept in military camps," Huang Chengyan said with a sigh.

Initially, Huang Chengyan thought that with his ability, he could offer Chen Xi some guidance and build a good relationship. But after arriving, he realized that even with his spiritual talent geared towards finding flaws, without a deep understanding of the situation in Taishan, he could only offer minor, non-critical suggestions.

Since that was the case, he decided to save the meeting for another time. Huang Chengyan planned to thoroughly understand Liu Bei's governance before discussing the situation in Taishan. For the Huang family to achieve long-term stability, Huang Chengyan believed that in addition to flourishing family traditions, they needed a strong pillar and to demonstrate their value to the ruler.

With Taishan's prosperity and Liu Bei's tolerance toward law-abiding aristocratic families, Huang Chengyan thought this might be the opportunity for the Huang family.

"Very well," Zhuge Liang agreed after a brief moment of thought. He knew this wasn't the time to indulge in personal matters, even though he wanted to spend more time with Huang Yueying. However, he couldn't be as thick-skinned as Fazheng or Chen Xi.

"Ganying, take my uncle to the rear camp to rest, and prepare a carriage," Zhuge Liang instructed Ganying. With the Tiger Guards now stationed at Linyi due to concerns that Yuan Shao might make an unconventional move, Chen Xi had assigned Ganying to take over his protection.

"Sir, may I examine your logistics?" Just as Ganying was about to lead Huang Chengyan and Huang Yueying away, Huang Yueying suddenly turned and asked Zhuge Liang.

"Here, take this," Zhuge Liang hesitated for a moment before handing his jade token to Huang Yueying. "With this, you'll be allowed access to most areas in the rear camp. Ganying, take care of the rest."

Zhuge Liang's commander's jade token granted Huang Yueying the freedom to move around the camp. Although Zhuge Liang's official rank wasn't extremely high, his authority was significant. However, he knew he couldn't let Huang Yueying roam freely, so he instructed Ganying to keep an eye on her.

"Thank you, husband..." Huang Yueying accepted the jade token, her voice barely above a whisper, and quickly left. The matchmaker's letter had already been delivered, and the betrothal gifts had been received. The process had advanced even further than Fazheng's, who still hadn't managed to send his belated betrothal gifts to Liangzhou.

While Zhuge Liang maintained a neutral expression, he was secretly delighted. Meanwhile, behind him, there was a loud crash as Fazheng tripped and pulled down the tent's curtain with him.

Cough, cough. "Congratulations, Kongming!" Fazheng stood up as if nothing had happened and offered his congratulations to Zhuge Liang. Fazheng had been itching to sneak a peek ever since he learned that Zhuge Liang's wife was quite beautiful.

Zhuge Liang shook his head slightly and watched as Huang Chengyan and Huang Yueying departed. He had grown accustomed to Fazheng's antics. Though Fazheng could be quite difficult at times, Zhuge Liang knew that he harbored no ill intentions.

"Stop staring; your soul's been hooked. She's gone, and besides, she's your wife. You can look all you want when you get home," Fazheng teased Zhuge Liang, waving a hand in front of his face.

"Let's focus on finishing this battle first," Zhuge Liang replied, glancing at Fazheng.

"You... Are you even human? Sometimes I think you lack basic human nature," Fazheng rolled his eyes and then leaned toward Jian Yong. "Jianhe, you're back! Without you, the Administration Hall has been completely taken over by workaholics like Zhuge Kongming."

"Don't lump me in with Zichuan and you slackers! I've been working hard, constantly running around for years. I've learned to speak over a dozen dialects by now. I can even communicate with the Qiang and the Hu people!" Jian Yong said proudly.

When it came to language aptitude, no one in Taishan could compare to Jian Yong. He now spoke more than ten different regional dialects and several languages of the barbarians. Of course, he was also fluent in Xianbei and Wuhuan languages, though his proficiency varied. Jian Yong had a natural talent for diplomacy.

"How do you do it? Every time you go on a mission, you come back speaking another dialect. So, what did you learn in Jingzhou this time?" Fazheng asked in exasperation, unable to deny Jian Yong's talent.

"I've learned the language of the Five Streams Barbarians. I'm now working on tracing the origins of all these languages and dialects to create a unified language, following Zichuan's previous assignment to me. I've even enlisted Weishuo's help and found several others. We're finally making some progress," Jian Yong sighed, explaining his ongoing work.

Chapter 686: The Late Bloomer, Jiang Wan

Back when Chen Xi first laid out his plans, the one with the slowest progress was Jian Yong. While others had accomplished significant feats and earned their reputations, Jian Yong still hadn't seen his project come to fruition. This sometimes made him feel embarrassed to show up with the likes of Chen Xi and the others, who had all made notable achievements. However, being easygoing and humorous by nature, Jian Yong didn't let it get to him, and he remained cheerful as ever.

Now, however, his project had finally made some headway. In addition, Liu Yan, who, despite being celebrated across the land, sometimes felt a bit uneasy, often lent him a hand. After all, the credit for papermaking was something Chen Xi had strongly attributed to Liu Yan. For someone as self-aware as Liu Yan, claiming such an achievement felt inappropriate, so he also wanted to accomplish something tangible on his own. The fame associated with papermaking was too great for him to bear.

Due to this, Liu Yan and Jian Yong had teamed up. It was worth noting that very few people in the world knew that the perfected bamboo paper wasn't Liu Yan's invention, thanks to Chen Xi's tight control over the information.

While Liu Yan might not excel in all areas, he had strong connections, and with his efforts, many great scholars had joined the project to trace the origins of languages and writing systems. All were highly motivated, aware of what such a project could mean if completed. Success would earn them recognition akin to that of the founders of the Hundred Schools of Thought, leaving a lasting legacy. With such aspirations, their enthusiasm was boundless.

However, by the time the project reached the point of analyzing the transition from Clerical Script to Small Seal Script, and then to Large Seal Script, the scholars had begun to diverge in their opinions. The writing system had started to fracture by region and locality.

In fact, these divisions had already emerged during the study of Small Seal Script. While the characters still looked somewhat similar, there were dozens of variant forms for each character. By the time they reached the study of Large Seal Script, the differences were even more pronounced.

Yet, as the project advanced to this stage, even those scholars who had initially held a deep resentment for Qin Dynasty's legalistic policies now found themselves admiring the boldness of Emperor Qin Shi Huang. The unification of writing was simply too important!

Currently, Jian Yong was grappling with the direction of the research. Although there had been some progress, much of it was based on the myth of Cangjie creating characters. But even this was better than having no progress at all.

In short, Jian Yong was diligently working to complete his task. The elimination of variant characters and the creation of a comprehensive dictionary were already well underway. As for phonetic annotations, Chinese characters did have their system of pronunciation.

These achievements were already impressive enough, but being surrounded by exceptional individuals made Jian Yong feel pressured. Compared to them, he felt that if he couldn't complete his entire plan, he might as well wait until after his death to release his unfinished work. He couldn't bear the thought of doing so while still alive, fearing it would tarnish his reputation.

This was the pressure of working alongside extraordinary people. As long as you could withstand the pressure and keep up with them, you would find yourself ahead of many others without even realizing it, simply because you were striving to keep pace with the best.

"Gongyan, as we traveled, I've come to see that you possess great potential. Would you mind if I acted as your introducer?" Jian Yong said with a smile to Jiang Wan.

During their journey, Jian Yong, who initially thought Jiang Wan was just an average talent, gradually recognized another side of him—a well-rounded individual, though not as specialized as Chen Xi or Li You. Nevertheless, Jiang Wan was still a talent worth introducing.

"It is my earnest desire, and I wouldn't dare ask for more," Jiang Wan replied with a smile.

Jiang Wan wasn't blind. Along the way, he noticed that while Jian Yong might not be as renowned as the initial generation of old ministers in Taishan, his familiarity with languages, scripts, and customs of various regions was astonishing. Jiang Wan couldn't help but marvel at this. Perhaps it wasn't that Jian Yong wasn't strong, but that his companions were so overwhelmingly powerful that they overshadowed his brilliance.

Jiang Wan himself was a classic example of a late bloomer. He respected geniuses but felt a kinship with those who, like him, continued to work hard. With them, he believed in mutual support and growth.

"Why wouldn't I dare?" Jian Yong chuckled. "Geniuses are not just born with innate wisdom; they become so by finding the right path and working hard. I've never believed in those who are 'born wise.' If I haven't seen their effort, it doesn't mean they haven't put it in."

With that, Jian Yong strode into the tent. "Zichuan, long time no see. Let me introduce you to someone. This is a true talent from Jingzhou. Though he's not yet at the pinnacle, I believe he will one day astonish the world."

"Jiang Gongyan from Lingling greets Lord Chen and the General," Jiang Wan said as he entered, instantly recognizing Chen Xi as the one seated at the head of the table.

"Jiang Gongyan from Lingling?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow, immediately realizing who he was. "Jianhe, if you vouch for him, I won't need to test him further. Gongyan, are you willing to join the army?"

It wasn't that Chen Xi looked down on Jiang Wan; it was just that his current status no longer allowed for the same casual interactions as during Taishan's early days.

Back then, he could have a carefree chat with someone like Lu Su. But now, even if he tried to be informal, only those who had already achieved greatness would dare to follow suit. Others, unless they were foolish, wouldn't dare show any disrespect. The few who could step outside the norms and engage with Chen Xi as equals were those familiar faces from the past; the rest simply lacked the courage and the right.

Jian Yong smiled, pleased with the respect Chen Xi had shown him. He turned to Jiang Wan, "Gongyan, will you join the army?"

"I am honored by Lord Chen and Mr. Jian's regard, but I am more skilled in administration and assessment. While I'm not entirely ignorant of military matters, I fall short of the standards here. I fear I would disappoint you both if I were placed in a military role. It might be better to find a position where I can fully utilize my strengths, rather than wasting the generosity shown to me," Jiang Wan replied, making the most prudent choice.

Jiang Wan hadn't expected Chen Xi to offer him a military role right off the bat. He had been prepared to start as a low-ranking official and work his way up.

Jiang Wan was genuinely ready to climb the ranks from the ground up. He knew that under Liu Bei's enlightened rule in the politically clean Taishan, with his efforts, he could reach a high position within thirty years.

Jiang Wan had never dreamed of becoming Chancellor. His goal was the Nine Ministers, which was already ambitious. For this, he had been working hard. Only when he finally reached the position of a Minister did he realize he had underestimated himself. Jiang Wan, the late bloomer, had finally come into his own!

Chapter 687: A Misfit and Self-Realization

As Jiang Wan mentioned, he wasn't entirely ignorant of military affairs. However, compared to his prowess in administration, his military skills were only at a level of around seventy percent.

For an average person, a military aptitude of seventy percent would be more than sufficient to serve as a commander of a thousand troops, or even to work hard and, with some luck, rise to the rank of a deputy general.

Unfortunately, this was Jiang Wan, and he had more confidence in his administrative abilities than in his military skills. This was why he declined Chen Xi's kind offer.

Jiang Wan wasn't sure if he was imagining things, but when he spoke up, it seemed as though he caught a fleeting smile at the corner of Chen Xi's mouth. Although he wasn't certain why Chen Xi might have smiled, he sensed a hint of goodwill behind it.

Still, Jiang Wan couldn't be sure if Chen Xi had indeed smiled or if he was pleased or displeased with his decision.

After Jiang Wan spoke, Jian Yong was momentarily stunned. Then, he frowned slightly, preparing to speak up and support Jiang Wan. He understood from their time together that Jiang Wan excelled in administration, and though his military skills were decent, making him join the army would be a waste of his talent. Even with Chen Xi's guidance, he might not be able to fully showcase his abilities.

"If you're that resolute, let me think about what position would be suitable for you," Chen Xi replied calmly, his expression revealing nothing.

"Thank you for understanding, Lord Chen," Jiang Wan said before respectfully excusing himself.

After Jiang Wan left, Jian Yong finally spoke up. "Hey, Zichuan, don't take it the wrong way. Gongyan isn't being picky; it's just that his strengths truly lie in governance."

Unlike others, Jian Yong didn't hold any particular reverence for Chen Xi. He had been around since the early days of Taishan's establishment, sharing hardships alongside everyone else, and was a fellow townsman of Liu Bei. In terms of seniority, he wasn't inferior to anyone.

"Sit here, Jianhe," Fa Zheng said, indicating the spot next to him. He was also one of the first batch of officials and was quite familiar with Jian Yong. The fact that he and others like Man Chong, Mi Zhu, Sun Qian, and Liu Yan had made room for him back then was one reason why Fa Zheng now sat among the top ranks.

Jian Yong casually took a seat, and Fa Zheng poured wine for everyone. Unlike Jian Yong, Fa Zheng had clearly noticed the slight smile on Chen Xi's face and immediately understood what Chen Xi meant.

“Are you worried that I’ll hold a grudge against Gongyan?” Chen Xi chuckled. “Do you really think I’m that petty? When have I ever held a grudge over something so trivial? Besides, Jiang Gongyan has the aura of a man destined for greatness.”

Chen Xi didn’t realize that his tone had subtly changed over time. When he first arrived in this world, he would have been hesitant to speak in such a manner about a historical figure. But now, he was comfortable evaluating others as if he were an elder appraising the next generation. Gradually, whether due to others’ flattery or his own adaptation, Chen Xi had fully integrated into this era.

“That’s true. You’re not the type to suppress newcomers. In fact, you’re probably eager for someone to take over for you,” Jian Yong remarked with a smile. “I just hope my visit doesn’t stir up any conflict and get me caught in the middle of it.”

Chen Xi shook his head, refraining from discussing the ongoing war. Instead, he continued the conversation about Jiang Wan. “He’s very capable. Even I need to carefully consider what position to assign him—something not too high, to avoid stirring resentment, but not too low, where his talents would go to waste.”

“Oh, you’re aware of that? Then tell me, if you had free rein, what position would you give him?” Jian Yong asked, downing his cup of wine in one gulp. He had always trusted Chen Xi’s judgment.

“A position as an Assistant Officer in the Ministry of Governance. This role would allow him to fully utilize his abilities, and it’s a position he can grow into, giving him insight into both the higher and lower levels of administration,” Chen Xi replied with a smile. In his mind, Jiang Wan should be groomed for the role of Chancellor, or at the very least, the position of Minister of Personnel. Wasting his potential would be a great loss.

“Assistant Officer in the Ministry of Governance...” Fa Zheng turned his head toward Zhuge Liang, who currently held that position. Zhuge Liang had been promoted from Senior Secretary to Assistant Officer in less than a year.

This was unavoidable. With Lu Su overseeing two and a half provinces and his rank already elevated to that of Governor, Li You had been brought back from Xu Province to serve as Chief Secretary. Naturally, a hard worker like Zhuge Liang was promoted when the time came. After all, only he and Lu Su were true workaholics, while everyone else avoided responsibilities unless absolutely necessary.

“That’s too high,” Zhuge Liang remarked calmly.

“It’s not. Right now, you’re underutilized as an Assistant Officer. Even if you were to manage three provinces, it wouldn’t fully tap into your potential. With your current abilities, you’re fit to be one of the Nine Ministers, specifically the Minister of Finance. After ten years in that role, you’d be ready to transition to the position of Chancellor. That’s my assessment of your capabilities,” Chen Xi stated earnestly.

In ten years, Zhuge Liang would be only twenty-four, around the age when he first emerged from his seclusion. By then, Zhuge Liang would have already developed the skills necessary to serve as Chancellor; what he lacked was experience. A decade of serving as a high-ranking minister would provide that experience.

Zhuce Liang was slightly taken aback. He hadn’t expected Chen Xi to hold him in such high regard. The position of Chancellor was something Zhuge Liang had once considered, but he wasn’t confident he could fulfill such a role in just ten years.

“Don’t underestimate yourself. Our opponents include all the great figures of history. If we can’t achieve this, what right do we have?” Fa Zheng remarked nonchalantly. He had come to terms with his own ambitions.

Fa Zheng’s calm demeanor was partly because he had already fulfilled his life’s ambition—to gain his father’s acknowledgment that he no longer needed any ancestral protection to thrive and that he could live well on his own merits. In fact, he could now use his success to shield future generations of the Fa family.

Fa Yan had never explicitly praised Fa Zheng, but Fa Zheng had seen enough in his father’s expressions to know that he had earned his approval.

Having gained immense satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment from his father’s recognition and his wife’s love, Fa Zheng no longer felt the need to prove himself as he once did.

When he brought his father to Taishan, and when Jiang Ying arrived to complete the final piece of his contentment, Fa Zheng no longer needed wealth or power to validate his success. He had moved past that phase of his life.

While Zhuge Liang might be astounded by the possibility of becoming one of the Nine Ministers or even Chancellor, Fa Zheng felt no such interest. His focus had shifted to contemplating whether he was acting foolishly or whether he could still fulfill the oath Liu Bei had once sworn.

Fa Zheng's interest now lay more in self-realization. The tangible rewards of wealth and power no longer held much appeal for him. At this stage, he was more interested in how to achieve the grand vision Liu Bei had set forth.

Chapter 688: The Key Point

While Chen Xi had already set up defenses, prepared to drag out the battle and leverage his advantages, Xu You was busy strategizing on how to win the war.

The seven thousand troops under Wen Chou's command were entirely cavalry, with each man having two horses. In the current world, only Yuan Shao and Li Jue could muster such a large cavalry force.

Xu You, without pausing for rest, rushed towards Linyi. Originally, both he and Tian Feng had come from Jizhou to Bingzhou, regrouped their forces, and were now heading back towards Linyi, which was near Jizhou. If not for the initial time constraints, Xu You would have already launched a large-scale battle at Linyi.

"Wen Chou, send your personal guard, Wen Chang, with your seal to Jizhou to request reinforcements," Xu You commanded as he changed into a fresh robe after a long journey, casually issuing orders as he began eating.

"More reinforcements?" Wen Chou was shocked. Though he was straightforward and a bit rough around the edges, he was no fool. Yuan Shao had already deployed an army of one hundred thousand troops, a mix of regular soldiers and local militia. No other lord would dare entrust such a large force to their generals without leading the campaign themselves.

"If you want to win, do as I say. Chen Zichuan is exceptionally skilled at exploiting every opportunity. If I can't crush him in one decisive blow and the battle drags on, I won't win," Xu You said, biting into his dried meat and chewing vigorously before swallowing.

"But..." Wen Chou began, trying to explain.

"No buts!" Xu You cut him off sharply. "If you want to win, go get those reinforcements."

Wen Chou hesitated for a moment before gritting his teeth. "Fine, I'll request reinforcements, but only if you assure me of victory! We desperately need a major victory right now, especially to boost morale before we fully engage in this war. If you can guarantee a win, I'll get the troops."

"I know what you're thinking, but let me be clear: I can't guarantee victory against Chen Zichuan. In this world, there isn't anyone who can claim they will definitely beat him, because he has never lost," Xu You said seriously, staring into Wen Chou's eyes.

"I'll ask you one last time: will you request reinforcements or not?" Xu You's expression remained calm, completely unfazed by Wen Chou's look of frustration and anger.

"Fine, I'll do it!" Wen Chou agreed through gritted teeth. "If we lose, I'll take the blame!"

With that, Wen Chou summoned his guard, Wen Chang, and asked Xu You, "Now, tell me what you need—infantry, cavalry, and which commanders?"

"I need three thousand cavalry and ten thousand infantry, nothing else matters," Xu You replied, meeting Wen Chou's gaze.

He then pulled out a map and pointed to a location, saying, "See this? In seven days, don't worry about anything else. Once the reinforcements arrive, attack this spot under the cover of night. Whether you succeed or not isn't important, but after that, split off five thousand infantry to hold the northern Yellow River and the southern Jishui River near Linyi."

"Uh, that's a lot of troops. My own forces don't even have that many," Wen Chou said, scratching his head.

"That's your problem, but I'm sure you can manage it. This is crucial for securing our position," Xu You said, patting Wen Chou on the shoulder.

Wen Chou felt the weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders. Over ten thousand troops—a force Yuan Shao had entrusted him with emergency mobilization authority to call upon in times of need—but using it here felt risky.

Xu You's expression remained steady. He wasn't pressuring Wen Chou unnecessarily. This kind of large-scale mobilization was within the scope of Yuan Shao's granted authority, but such a power was only given to those generals whom Yuan Shao trusted completely.

"Deploy one thousand men to capture this place!" Xu You pointed to Chiping on the map. "Chen Zichuan will likely have stationed troops there, but our army is stronger. If we secure this position and then hold the Yellow River, as long as Chen Zichuan doesn't react quickly enough, we'll take it!"

"Alright, I'll relay your orders to the reinforcements," Wen Chou agreed, though with visible reluctance. He couldn't make sense of Xu You's strategy.

As Wen Chou departed, Xu You stood up and gazed at the full moon. With his silk robe and handsome appearance, he looked almost like a celestial being descended to earth.

"Chen Zichuan, I wonder how you will respond this time. Yanzhou is still a newly acquired territory; no matter how much preparation you've done, it's impossible to consolidate it all at once," Xu You mused, considering his strategy. Despite its many flaws, if executed correctly, it could still succeed.

Sometimes, a strategy doesn't need to be perfect—it just needs to work. Even if it's full of holes, as long as the opponent can't counter it, it's still a brilliant plan.

After sending his personal guard to Jizhou, Wen Chou marched south. Though he had repeatedly questioned Xu You along the way, he received no answers, leaving him with no choice but to follow Xu You's lead.

Xu You offered no further explanations, continuing his march south, bypassing Chen Xi's forces and heading directly toward Feicheng. This location served as the main supply hub for Chen Xi's army, a critical link in the supply chain connected to Taishan and Fenggao.

"Strategist, are you sure we should cut off the supply route at Feicheng?" Wen Chou asked, growing increasingly concerned as they approached Feicheng. Though his troops didn't know the exact target, Wen Chou had finally figured it out.

"Yes, strike the snake at its seven inches—the most vulnerable point. Severing the supply line at Feicheng will isolate Yanzhou, Jibei, and Dongjun," Xu You said with a cold smile.

"But strategist, attacking that spot won't do much good. It's a major road, and if Chen Zichuan gets cornered, Liu Bei could dispatch reinforcements in just three days! Sun Gongyou has ensured that Liu Bei's territories are connected by a network of roads. Their troops move too quickly, and they won't even exhaust their rations in those three days," Wen Chou protested.

"Three days is enough. I assume you're bringing reinforcements from the Lu brothers in southern Jizhou. Zang Ba is cautious and methodical, and Wei Yan is skilled at taking risks. They're stationed in northern Qingzhou, and our movements can't possibly go unnoticed!" Xu You replied, seemingly unfazed by Wen Chou's objections.

"Doesn't that mean we'll destabilize southern Jizhou?" Wen Chou exclaimed, realizing the implications. He had indeed requested reinforcements from Gao Lan's subordinate commanders, but now Xu You's words made him see the potential dangers.

"Don't worry. Gao Lan is a strict military leader and well-versed in tactics. Once you request reinforcements, he'll prepare accordingly. However, a battle between Jizhou and Qingzhou is inevitable. If that happens, Liu Bei will have no troops to send," Xu You reassured him, shaking his head dismissively.

"That's impossible! Fenggao is only three days' march from Feicheng!" Wen Chou said in disbelief.

Chapter 689: The Enemy Cannot Escape Internal Strife

"We need to force him to mobilize the troops from Fenggao. Liu Bei's rise to power has been too rapid—his military strength is formidable, and his subordinates are fierce warriors. This is why the aristocratic families under his rule do not dare to act recklessly. But if the forces maintaining control at Fenggao are drawn away..." At this moment, Xu You's eyes revealed no attempt to conceal his thoughts—cold and calculating.

"With the forces maintaining central power at Fenggao drawn away, and with our overwhelming military strength, I refuse to believe that the aristocratic families of Xuzhou, Qingzhou, and Yanzhou won't make a move. Liu Bei's wealth and power have been built by sucking the lifeblood of these families!" Xu You sneered, resorting to underhanded tactics when he couldn't win directly.

In this state of mind, Xu You's intelligence could be considered among the top in the world. The level at which he was operating was no longer focused on winning individual battles but on how to gain greater benefits in each campaign, influencing the overall situation and shifting the balance of power in the world.

Xu You was no longer concerned with the gains or losses of a single city or territory. Instead, he focused on achieving his broader strategic goals. He was willing to sacrifice certain assets to achieve specific objectives.

Xu You's current strategy involved sacrificing the aristocratic families of Qingzhou and Xuzhou to gamble on toppling Liu Bei's foundation. If successful, the most powerful force in the world would collapse, and there would be no stopping Yuan Shao's path to unification.

At this moment, Xu You's calculations were not about the gains and losses of the eastern district of Linyi. He was contemplating the entire Qingzhou and Yanzhou under Liu Bei's rule, as well as the Yuan family elders. The world's fate, once it fell into Yuan Shao's hands, would bring Xu You immense benefits.

Xu You's strategy involved using others' lives to gamble on his own rise to power. This was his plan—to shift the burden of his problems onto others, using the smallest amount of force to achieve his goals, or rather, to steal the final prize through this calculated means.

However, Xu You was not like Jia Xu, who left no way out for his pawns. Xu You's methods were more akin to a merchant's trade, using the cards he held to drive others to act, thereby obtaining what he wanted. Though a cunning strategist, he always left a glimmer of hope, but that hope was merely a means to better control his pawns.

[Yuan family elders, I have laid everything out for you. Now it's up to you to make your choice,] Xu You thought as he looked back toward Xuzhou, sneering inwardly. Once he had stirred up all the dissatisfied aristocratic families under Liu Bei's rule, he couldn't believe that the elders of the Yuan family in Yuzhou would pass up such a golden opportunity.

[Xuzhou is a huge trap—let's see how many people fall into it this time. These weakened internal aristocratic families are too insignificant as leverage. Moreover, this strategy will undoubtedly provoke Liu Xuande's wrath. If he launches a desperate counterattack, it could be quite painful. Yuzhou elders, it's time for you to make your sacrifice. The Yuan family only needs one leader, and that is my lord, Yuan Benchu!]

In Liu Bei's eyes, Yuan Shu in Yuzhou was a fattened pig ready for slaughter. Similarly, Xu You saw Yuan Shu as a juicy piece of meat. What Xu You intended to do was shift the ensuing anger from the upcoming war away from Yuan Shao and onto Yuan Shu. Only by doing so could he align more closely with Yuan Shao's interests and the Yuan family's shared goal of destroying "Liu."

Although Yuan Shu was a tempting prize, Xu You did not believe that a weakened Liu Bei could swallow him whole. Even if Liu Bei managed to devour Yuan Shu in one gulp, he wouldn't be able to digest it. Even if Liu Bei attempted a plundering strategy like Cao Cao had once employed, he wouldn't be able to sustain his already weakened state.

Wen Chou was not entirely oblivious. Xu You's words made it clear that this was a no-holds-barred plan. Xu You intended to completely destroy Liu Bei's foundation. Even if the plan failed, a province-wide rebellion among the aristocratic families would still damage Liu Bei's base.

Realizing this, Wen Chou's eyes lit up with excitement. He suddenly understood that all the blame he had been shouldering was not a burden but rather proof of his achievements.

"Dammit, from now on, if the strategist says go east, I won't head west!" Wen Chou swore, pounding his chest in agreement.

"Enough with the talk. Soon, I want you to lead the charge into Feicheng. Don't let anyone escape," Xu You ordered, glancing at Wen Chou without much interest in his pledge. When it came to commanding fierce generals, Xu You had his own philosophy—achieve victory.

"No problem," Wen Chou promised confidently.

Seeing Wen Chou's confidence, Xu You didn't say anything more. The real test had not yet begun.

"Come with me," Xu You said as they entered Jibei. He dispersed most of his troops, leaving only five hundred soldiers to follow him toward Feicheng. After stopping at the last resting place, Xu You turned to Wen Chou and instructed him.

"Uh, okay," Wen Chou replied, still puzzled, but he followed Xu You.

This time, Xu You rode without any pretense, clad in silk robes on a tall horse, followed by Wen Chou, exuding an aura of menace, and seven or eight soldiers dressed in simple clothing with weapons in hand. They looked every bit like a noble scion on an outing.

Without any disguise, they made their way to Donglin Township, outside Feicheng, where a powerful family resided. Although the family wasn't well-known, Xu You deemed them sufficient for his plan. He wouldn't have concocted such a scheme without the necessary research—hence his confidence.

"We're here," Xu You said as he led his horse onto a country path, arriving at the gate of the He family.

"Strategist, why are we suddenly here?" Wen Chou asked, confused.

"To recruit allies and spread the word," Xu You replied calmly.

"May I ask if Old Master He is at home?" Xu You dismounted and bowed politely to the gatekeeper.

As a rule, a family's gatekeeper might lack in other areas, but one quality they must possess is good judgment. Although the He family's gatekeeper had never seen Xu You before, the air of authority in Xu You's movements made him immediately aware of the man's significance.

"Sir, please wait in the main hall. I will fetch the master at once," the gatekeeper said, noticing the menacing aura emanating from Wen Chou. Understanding that these were either fierce generals or trusted retainers of a noble house, he dared not delay. After ushering them into the main hall and offering tea, he quickly went to inform the head of the He family.

The head of the He family, realizing the importance of such visitors, did not dare to delay. After changing his clothes, he came out to meet Xu You. Such was the plight of a small household: though they could

wield power in their local area, they had to set aside their pride and show humility in front of true noble houses.

"Master He, I've heard that your youngest son serves as a quartermaster in Feicheng. Is that true?" Xu You asked, his presence radiating an authority that sent a chill down the spine of the He family head, who had already noticed the seal hanging from Xu You's waist.

Chapter 690: A Fight to the Death

Xu You deliberately exposed the seal at his waist for the He family to see. Although it was only for a brief moment, the head of the He family immediately grasped the gravity of the situation concerning his family's life and death.

"Sir, is there something the He family can assist you with?" Upon seeing the seal that Xu You unintentionally displayed, the head of the He family became even more deferential.

It wasn't that the head of the He family recognized Xu You, but he understood that the group before him came from the north under Yuan Shao's command. The single character "Ji" on the seal was enough to reveal their identity.

As for forgery, even though it was the late Han period, with the Han dynasty still technically in power, no one dared to counterfeit official seals. This was one reason why the various warlords of the time did not hold excessively high official titles.

Of course, there were those bandits and rebels who self-styled themselves with grandiose titles like "Dragon Soaring General" or "Emperor of Heavenly Might." However, true contenders for supremacy acknowledged the legitimacy of the Han dynasty, for their strength was not yet sufficient to replace it entirely.

"I'm offering you a dangerous opportunity for wealth and power. If you accept, someone will ensure the protection of your family." Xu You's tone was light as he looked at the head of the He family, then he gently sipped from a porcelain teacup before placing it back down with a serene expression.

Hearing this, the head of the He family froze for a moment, his face showing signs of struggle. He knew that every opportunity for wealth and power came with risks. The fact that Xu You even mentioned the

danger showed he was giving the He family considerable face. Given the stakes, the He family had little room for maneuver.

"My eldest son is the quartermaster at Feicheng. Perhaps, sir, you were mistaken earlier," the head of the He family replied after a moment of intense thought, ultimately deciding to take the gamble.

To him, this crisis was also an opportunity for the He family to advance. If successful, his eldest son would no longer need his support, and there would be no more disputes over the family's legacy. If they failed, the consequences would be obvious and not worth fighting over.

"Haha, very well," Xu You responded with a chuckle. It didn't matter what decision the He family made; the key point was that after today, the noble families under Liu Bei's rule would learn that the massive army from Ji Province had arrived. Once Feicheng fell, this information would quickly spread among the aristocratic families throughout Liu Bei's territory.

As Xu You left the He family, he pondered a crucial question: who truly owned the world—the nobility or the common people? After a long consideration, Xu You arrived at an amusing conclusion: it belonged to neither. The world belonged only to the strongest individual, and everyone else was merely subservient to the strongest person or group, essentially slaves—just with a looser chain.

No matter how institutions change, the fundamental nature of power does not. From the mythical era to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, through the Spring and Autumn periods, and now to the Qin and Han dynasties, nothing has changed. The world belongs to the strongest, which is the greatest fairness and, at the same time, the greatest injustice.

[The greatest fairness, and also the greatest injustice.] A smile appeared on Xu You's face. [Yet it's precisely because of this unfairness that we have value. In essence, regardless of how we disguise it, what we do is merely re-consolidate power and then redistribute it among the people.]

After Xu You and Wen Chou led 500 soldiers and successfully seized Feicheng with the assistance of the He family, they also managed to cut off communication between Liu Bei's soldiers, who might have warned others. Thus, the supply depot at Feicheng fell entirely into Xu You's hands.

Ordering his soldiers to seal off Feicheng, Xu You stood atop the city walls, watching his troops make their final preparations. Once mounted, they would ride hard for three days straight, catching the Linyi forces off guard with a surprise attack.

As for the possibility of any messengers escaping to warn Chen Xi about the fall of Feicheng, Xu You wasn't particularly concerned. This sudden strike was so unexpected that even if word got out, there wouldn't be enough time to prepare.

"The internal vigilance within Liu Bei's army is indeed not weak, or perhaps they've been on guard against the aristocracy from the start," Xu You mused aloud to Wen Chou as he observed the soldiers cleaning up the bloodstains in the city.

"Haha," Wen Chou laughed, not comprehending Xu You's thoughts.

"That's fine." Xu You didn't mind Wen Chou's confusion. For him, the more Liu Bei guarded against the nobility, the better. Whether this vigilance was due to inherent caution or deliberate strategy, it provided Xu You with the perfect opportunity to agitate the noble families under Liu Bei's rule.

Seeing Wen Chou's simple grin, Xu You didn't want to dampen his spirits. While Wen Chou believed the situation was already decided, Xu You knew there was still a significant gap. The next step—completely crushing any counterattack from Chen Xi's side—was the most crucial.

"Wen Chou, prepare to move out. The next battle will be extremely dangerous, and I need soldiers who are fearless and ready to die. Tell your men that those willing to follow should come along, and those who aren't can stay behind to guard the city," Xu You said, turning to Wen Chou.

"Huh? Isn't every battle dangerous?" Wen Chou responded carelessly. "I may not be the top warrior in the world, but I've never been afraid of anyone. If the strategist has any concerns, just say it!"

"I know you're not afraid of death, but that doesn't mean your soldiers share your courage. This battle is incredibly risky. My troops will be up against forces several times their number. Only those who are fearless and ready to fight to the death can survive. Any hesitation will be fatal, and one wavering soldier could demoralize the entire army, ruining our strategy," Xu You said seriously, his gaze fixed on Wen Chou.

"My soldiers are all men of honor from Bingzhou who volunteered to follow me. They brought their own weapons and horses, and later, my lord Yuan Benchu rewarded them with fine steeds and treasured blades. How could such men not give their all? The spirit of Yan and Zhao lives on. These men, won over by kindness and justice, would never fear death!" Wen Chou knelt on one knee, his voice filled with emotion.

Wen Chou was a warrior who didn't understand the complexities of strategy and had no need to flatter his superiors. Instead, he used his loyalty to follow the lord he had chosen and his simple-minded sense of honor to inspire his soldiers.

"Good," Xu You said after a long look at Wen Chou.

"Thank you for your trust, strategist. Even if this path leads to certain death, once my soldiers set out, they will not retreat without your order. If any man hesitates, I request they be punished according to military law!" Wen Chou stood up and declared firmly.

"Very well, I will remember your words today," Xu You replied, his voice calm but cold. In his current state, if the situation Xu You described actually occurred, he would not hesitate to execute Wen Chou. However, whether Xu You would still possess the same intelligence and resolve in such a moment remained uncertain.