

Mythical 691

Chapter 691: Unintentional Details

The day after Xu You severed Chen Xi's supply line, Zhuge Liang went to report his recent work to Chen Xi. Over the past few days, apart from constructing fortifications, there had been no significant events. Chen Xi had no intention of engaging Xu You in open field battles; his goal was simply to stall the enemy.

As for how Chen Xi knew the opposing strategist was Xu You, it was something he deduced from various pieces of intelligence. Although he was concerned about Xu You's sudden disappearance, it didn't affect his own plans. Whether Xu You showed up or not didn't concern him in the slightest; his main objective was to establish Linyi.

At this point, Chen Xi had already given up on bringing his wife to Linyi. With full-scale war underway, he couldn't guarantee her safety. Therefore, he quickly dismissed the idea of bringing Chen Lan to Linyi. His current focus was on wrapping up the war by June and then returning home to await the birth of his child.

"Is there anything else, Kongming?" After listening to the report, Chen Xi continued reviewing military affairs but noticed that Zhuge Liang hadn't left yet. Confused, he looked up and asked.

"Our army receives a supply convoy every three days, but today's supply convoy arrived without the scouts from the following day's convoy," Zhuge Liang hesitated before speaking.

"Oh, the supplies arrived, but there were no scouts from the next convoy?" Chen Xi's expression became serious as he looked up.

"Did this convoy bring any messages for the next one?" Chen Xi recalled a similar situation from the past, his expression relaxing a bit as he asked.

"No, they didn't," Zhuge Liang shook his head. Last time this happened, Chen Xi had demoted a commander and sent a stern warning to the officers in charge of transporting supplies. No one would dare act recklessly after that.

"Oh, how many days of supplies do we have left?" Chen Xi asked.

“We originally had forty-five days of supplies. This convoy brought an additional three days’ worth, totaling forty-eight days,” Zhuge Liang replied with a slight frown. He found Chen Xi’s strict instructions on the supply deliveries rather unreliable—who only transports three days’ worth of supplies at a time?

“Send out scouts along the main road, three at a time, and dispatch one group every half hour. If after ten groups there is still no response, prepare for the possibility that someone has come from behind us. Also, send someone along the Jishui River to Licheng,” Chen Xi ordered.

“Is it that serious?” Zhuge Liang asked, finding it hard to believe.

“Better to be safe than sorry. Besides, Licheng is my backup supply route. As for how serious it is... well, if ten groups of scouts don’t return, we can be fairly certain that there’s trouble behind us,” Chen Xi replied nonchalantly. If something went wrong in the rear, it wasn’t his responsibility; as long as he was safe, others would take care of the problem.

Seeing Zhuge Liang’s continued confusion, Chen Xi sighed, “Kongming, think about how many days it takes for supplies to arrive from Feicheng to here.”

Zhuce Liang paused and then quickly realized, “So, if all ten groups fail to return, the enemy is likely no more than a day’s march away from us.”

“A day? That’s impossible. If they’ve caught up with our supply convoy, they’re likely all cavalry, and considering the time lost in sending out scouts, they’re probably no more than three hours away from us,” Chen Xi shrugged.

“It seems you’ve been distracted by Miss Huang recently. You’ve been a bit muddled,” Chen Xi remarked with a helpless smile. Incidentally, Huang Yueying had requested to stay behind to conduct research, and seeing Zhuge Liang’s reaction, Chen Xi had agreed.

Of course, the task of protecting Huang Yueying was handed to Zhuge Liang, under the pretext of “strengthening their relationship.” In reality, Chen Xi was more interested in Huang Yueying’s extraordinary engineering skills. She had managed to replicate a repeating crossbow that the Qu family had struggled with, just by dismantling a few models.

Although there were still issues with accuracy and range, there was no denying that Huang Yueying was a genius. Her mechanical aptitude had surpassed the imagination of ordinary people. As for material strength, Chen Xi had already assigned a dozen soldiers with internal energy to assist in tempering the materials.

Zhuge Liang grimaced slightly. He had indeed been somewhat distracted, but it was mainly due to his lack of experience with this type of strategizing.

It was similar to how Guo Jia strategically positioned scouts at specific intervals. Chen Xi had issued strict orders regarding the timing of supply deliveries. In reality, Chen Xi's camp wasn't particularly short on supplies; they received enough food at the beginning of each month to last forty-five days, with quarterly checks.

The purpose of the tri-daily supply convoys was merely a precaution against someone cutting off their supply line.

It took three days for a well-equipped cavalry unit to travel from Feicheng to Chen Xi's camp, while a supply convoy would take five days. Chen Xi had instructed the supply officers at Feicheng to dispatch supplies every three days and to send out a scout from the next convoy each day.

If someone were to intercept the supply line, Chen Xi would be forewarned. Scouts moved quickly, while convoys were slow, so the first convoy would almost reach Chen Xi's camp when the first scout from the second convoy caught up.

If the first convoy arrived and the scouts didn't, it meant either the scouts or the convoy had been lost. And on a major road, if something disappeared without explanation, it could only mean one thing—prepare for battle.

After Zhuge Liang understood the reasoning behind this arrangement, he realized that Chen Xi's method of sending just three days' worth of supplies at a time was indeed a game. No wonder he often found odd items among the supplies—transporting the goods on time was more important than the goods themselves.

“But are we just going to let them move freely behind us and only defend the camp?” Zhuge Liang suggested to Chen Xi. After all, he was still young and lacked battlefield experience.

“We don’t know their strength. Besides, half of Dongping doesn’t belong to us. As for the rear, Wenhe and Wenruo have been preparing for so long; do you really think they’ve been idle? So just stay put. Our main task is to hold this position,” Chen Xi replied indifferently. The enemy could only use their tricks if they were able to.

“I don’t doubt your preparations, but I’m concerned about the Yellow River and the Jishui River. If they control those two locations, we might be pinned down here,” Zhuge Liang pointed to Chiping and the Jishui crossing.

“I stationed two battalions in Chiping. As for the Jishui crossing, I didn’t station troops there, but there are river pirates on the Jishui. It’s my hidden supply route, so we can play along with Yuan Shao. Go fetch Fazheng for me,” Chen Xi nodded, ready to respond to any potential flanking maneuvers.

Chapter 692: The Opportunity Arises

As Xu You had predicted, the actual situation was as he guessed. However, contrary to what he imagined, Chen Xi didn’t station troops at Chiping to guard the crossing. Instead, Chen Xi had prepared three supply routes from the very beginning.

Chen Xi knew all too well how many battles had been lost due to issues with supplies, and he wasn’t about to let himself fall victim to such a basic blunder. So when it came to setting up supply lines, his arrangements were so thorough that anyone who knew about them wouldn’t even bother trying to cut off his supplies—it would be a trap.

After Zhuge Liang asked some more questions to ensure there were no major oversights and confirmed that Chen Xi had indeed prepared everything, they didn’t discuss anything further. The next step was figuring out how to respond.

In this situation, there was no need to specifically consult Chen Xi. Zhuge Liang and Fazheng would handle things on their own, knowing full well that whoever was coming from behind was likely the same Xu You who had mysteriously vanished earlier.

"Xu Ziyuan, how did that guy manage to get behind me?" After Zhuge Liang left, Chen Xi's previously casual demeanor shifted to one of caution.

Chen Xi had put on an air of nonchalance in front of Zhuge Liang to instill a sense of confidence, making it seem as if everything was under control. After all, he had anticipated this.

With Chen Xi appearing so calm, Zhuge Liang and Fazheng would naturally feel confident enough to deal with Xu You on their own. After all, it was Zhuge Liang and Fazheng's intelligence that was the real source of Chen Xi's confidence.

[Inwardly, however, Chen Xi was cursing the situation.]

["What the heck is happening behind my lines? How could they get cut off so easily? And while Xu You managed to sneak around, why do I have no intel on it? Did Jia Wenhe's intelligence network just fail completely?"]

Once Zhuge Liang was gone, Chen Xi inwardly began to curse, constantly blaming Jia Xu for the oversight.

It was understandable for Chen Xi to be upset; after all, the intelligence network he had established was something he rarely interfered with, but it didn't mean he had relinquished control. Critical information related to his own safety, like this, should have been delivered promptly. The fact that it hadn't made Chen Xi question whether Jia Xu had made a serious mistake. Had he not been well-prepared in advance, his rear lines might have been completely exposed.

In reality, Chen Xi had overlooked the fact that Xu You had taken a direct route, with a fast-moving cavalry unit on double-horses. They hadn't bothered to hide their approach. For any intelligence report to reach Chen Xi faster than Xu You's troops would have required someone to move in a straight line just as quickly. But without someone like Lu Bu, that was impossible. Xu You's method was specifically designed to exploit this kind of logical loophole.

"Ah-choo!" Jia Xu suddenly sneezed, then slumped over the desk. Even so, Lu Su, who was sitting at the head of the table, didn't lift a hand to help him. Realizing this, Jia Xu silently lifted his head, pretending nothing had happened as he continued with his work.

"Report...!" The sound of an urgent report being drawn out from outside the administrative hall suddenly interrupted them.

Before the messenger could deliver the report, Jia Xu rose immediately. "Read it. What urgent news do we have from the front?"

Lu Su glanced disapprovingly at Jia Xu's sudden enthusiasm. He knew that Jia Xu had grown weary of handling matters related to military affairs and education. The problem with this type of administrative work wasn't setting up frameworks but constantly revising them in practice. Having to make three changes to the plan every ten days was beginning to wear down Jia Xu's patience; it was, in his words, an insult to his intelligence.

"An urgent report from Fan County. Feicheng has been attacked by an unknown force. The report is from the sixth day of the third month," the messenger quickly scanned the report before summarizing.

"Feicheng has been captured by an unknown force?" Lu Su immediately jumped up. "Do we have any news from Zichuan?"

"No," Jia Xu replied before the messenger could. He frowned, then glanced across the table at Li You. "Wenruo, it seems they didn't fully trust you."

"As long as they believe the bait, full trust isn't necessary. The fish has taken the hook," Li You said with a smug expression, setting down his brush. "They didn't make the first move, but if we had acted first, it would have seemed less justified."

"Since when did you, Li Wenruo, start caring about justifications?" Jia Xu laughed heartily.

"To silence the idle talk of the noble families," Li You replied indifferently. He was no longer the same Li Wenyou who once roamed free in the western frontier. Back then, he didn't care about anyone's opinion, but now that he had left that environment, he had to be more mindful of his actions.

"So they're going to take the fall for this. Finally, we've waited long enough. Once this issue is resolved, we won't need to devote the majority of our energy to these noble families anymore. What's the plan?"

Lu Su had also pieced together the situation by this point. He rubbed his forehead, a smile spreading across his face.

Realizing what was happening, Lu Su felt a great sense of relief. He had recently been focusing on the final strategic preparations for the northern campaign and had almost forgotten what the three of them had been staying in Taishan for all this time.

“We’ve waited long enough. The final attempt by the noble families in Qingzhou and Xuzhou to resist is finally about to unfold,” Jia Xu said, feeling a deep sense of satisfaction.

“Qingzhou and Taishan will be in your hands then,” Lu Su said with a smile.

Once the internal issues were resolved, there would be no further obstacles for Liu Bei. They could still incorporate noble families, but those families would have to follow Liu Bei’s laws. Privileges could exist, but they would be limited.

This legal framework was stringent for most noble families, but to Jia Xu and the others, the fact that they weren’t stripping the families of all their private soldiers was already a significant concession.

What’s more, not taking away the noble families’ private soldiers didn’t mean they were abolishing the families’ privileges. Even now, noble families in Liu Bei’s territory still maintained private troops, albeit in much smaller numbers than under other warlords.

Chen Xi had once considered completely eradicating the private armies that noble families maintained, but he realized that without those troops, the families would become easy targets. Given the current legal system, a noble family without private soldiers could be wiped out.

The class that holds wealth and wisdom must also possess commensurate power. Without it, they would inevitably be overthrown. In the grand scheme of things, while the existence of noble families posed many problems, they still had a role to play.

That’s why Chen Xi had always advocated for limiting or dismantling these families, or gradually easing them out of history. He never suggested outright eliminating them because such an act would cause too

much turmoil. Simply wiping out an entire class would create a vacuum that would need to be filled by another class—an exceedingly complex task!

Rather than directly destroying the noble families and setting off a chain of events that could spiral out of control, it would be better to implement policies gradually, over time, that would slowly erode their power. This would avoid the catastrophic social upheaval that a sudden eradication would cause and allow this class to fade out over a century or more.

To achieve this, however, there was one unavoidable truth: all the noble families had to understand who the true master of the realm was. Only then could they be dealt with gradually.

Chapter 693: I'll Take the Lead

The noble families' rebellion, which had been uncertain as to when it might occur, finally found an opportunity to erupt, thanks to the machinations and patient waiting of Jia Xu and the others. To their surprise, Yuan Shao's side had unexpectedly triggered this conflict earlier than anticipated, not during the large-scale war between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei that Jia Xu and the others had originally prepared for.

"Go inform Baining," Jia Xu instructed as he exited the administrative hall. He ordered the Tiger Guards to secure the entire building and sent a messenger to notify Man Chong.

"The timing is even better than we anticipated," Lu Su said with a face full of delight.

"The worst-case scenario didn't happen, and that's great news," Jia Xu remarked with a sigh of relief. They had initially prepared for Yuan Shao to execute this move after the full-scale war between Yuan and Liu had begun. Having it occur this early was better than they could have hoped for.

"They're operating from a different perspective than we are. The person who designed this scheme is targeting not just us but also this place." Li Ru pointed to a spot on the map, and the other two smiled knowingly.

"The Yuan clan truly is hopeless. I can't believe that Yuan Shao's advisors would act against the Yuan family without his implicit approval. It's clear that Yuan Shao, once he gained power, could no longer restrain his ambitions," Jia Xu said, his expression turning cold.

Previously, Jia Xu had held Yuan Shao in high regard, believing that even if Yuan Shao were to fail, he would fall like a hero. However, as more intelligence reports arrived, Jia Xu's respect for Yuan Shao, who was gradually slipping into mediocrity, completely dissipated.

[Fengxiao, it seems you understood Yuan Shao's nature the moment he seized control of Jizhou. You've surpassed the limits of human understanding of the human heart.] Jia Xu thought silently.

Jia Xu didn't hold much awe for Guo Jia. To him, apart from Guo Jia's grasp of human nature, the rest of his strategies weren't particularly remarkable. Guo Jia's tactics, to Jia Xu, could be easily countered, as every strategy Guo Jia devised was based on manipulating human emotions.

But now, seeing Yuan Shao's gradual decline, Jia Xu couldn't help but sigh deeply. He had underestimated Guo Jia. Even he might not have been able to escape Guo Jia's mastery of human nature.

"Not necessarily. Yuan Shao wouldn't stoop so low," Li You shook his head, recalling the events in Chang'an. At that time, it was only Yuan Shao who had the courage to raise his sword against Dong Zhuo, while the rest of the warlords appeared mediocre. Moreover, Yuan Shao's actions during this period had undoubtedly shown him to be a true hero.

"Perhaps he's using this opportunity to manipulate the Yuan family, dragging them into a war against our forces, thus forcing them to fight with all their might," Lu Su speculated. In his view, while Yuan Shao and Liu Bei had different ideals, Yuan Shao was still worthy of the title of a hero.

Jia Xu nonchalantly glanced at the two and didn't offer further explanation. They would soon see what kind of person Yuan Shao really was. With the Yuan family's support and the possibility of leading the entire Yuan clan, Yuan Shao likely believed his power was sufficient to sweep through the world.

[When the situation is unfavorable, a person becomes a model of virtue. When in power, complacency sets in. This saying is indeed true.] Jia Xu's expression was indifferent as he analyzed the current situation with Li You and the others, though his thoughts wandered far.

"If the noble families do rebel this time, I'll take the lead in dealing with them," Li You said calmly.

"Currently, most of the noble families in Qingzhou are rooted in Fenggao, which is also our stronghold. If

they manage to capture it, it will boost their morale. So, if they're not foolish, attacking Fenggao would be their best choice."

"Leave only three thousand troops for city management, and vacate Fenggao. When Zichuan was constructing Fenggao, he specifically reinforced the main street. Now, those reinforcements have become a hindrance to Fenggao's development. The southern street's shops are mostly fronts for the noble families. If an uprising occurs, it will undoubtedly start there," Lu Su said, given his deep involvement in administrative matters and thorough knowledge of Fenggao's layout.

"Three thousand men are enough. Although urban combat will diminish our troops' effectiveness, we still have a significant advantage over them," Li You said with a calm demeanor. He had seen truly elite soldiers before, so he knew what the three thousand troops in Fenggao were capable of.

"That leaves the final question: how should we handle this situation?" Lu Su asked, looking at Li You.

"Divide, compensate, and reestablish the ruling family," Jia Xu replied in place of Li You.

"Not extermination?" Lu Su glanced at Jia Xu before turning to Li You, staring at him intently. Since Li You would be the one executing this plan, he needed to agree on the overall approach.

"Not extermination," Li You replied calmly. Seeing that Lu Su was still staring at him, he sighed. "Zijing, while I may be ruthless at times, I'm not so far gone that I can't distinguish right from wrong. I understand how to act in a way that benefits our lord."

"Then it's in your hands," Lu Su said, finally withdrawing his gaze and ending the conversation.

"Prepare to notify Chen Yuanlong. He needs to be informed of what's happening in Jizhou and be ready to deal with the Xuzhou noble families' assault and the Yuan family's invasion from Yuzhou," Li You said after Lu Su stopped staring at him.

"Chen Yuanlong..." Lu Su frowned. "Can he be trusted? If there's any doubt, I recommend Man Baining. When Fazheng proposed this plan, I already thought it was too risky. Can we really trust him?"

"He's trustworthy," Li You replied succinctly.

"Baining entering Xuzhou now would be too conspicuous. If someone with ill intentions notices, it could cause problems," Jia Xu explained. "Besides, Chen Yuanlong's ambitions don't lie in the world at large. Everything he plans is for his family. That's his weak spot. With the Chen family currently flourishing and him serving as the Xuzhou Administrator and the governor of Xiapi, the Yuan family's invasion would bring him no benefit."

"In that case... we'll go with it," Lu Su hesitated for a moment before nodding, accepting Jia Xu's explanation.

Lu Su knew that Man Chong couldn't leave Taishan right now. After all, the moment when Li You would dismantle all the noble families was also the best time to announce Man Chong's new legal code. This code, developed by Man Chong by integrating various ideas and theories, was a comprehensive legal system combining customary law and case law, among other concepts that Chen Xi had partially formulated.

When Xun Yue received the code from Man Chong, he was thoroughly shocked. He had always regarded Man Chong as nothing more than a harsh enforcer, but after reading this legal code, Xun Yue never underestimated Man Chong again. In his eyes, Man Chong was simply a genius with a peculiar temperament.

Chapter 694: The Foundation of Legislation

When Man Chong arrived, he brought his legal code with him. For some reason, when the messenger found him, he suddenly felt as if the time had finally come for his hard work to be published. This almost prophetic feeling prompted Man Chong, who never believed in such things, to instinctively grab the code.

As soon as the stern-faced Man Chong appeared at the doorway, Jia Xu and the others felt a chill run down their spines—a nearly instinctual reaction. Although Jia Xu and the others had never really done anything wrong, seeing Man Chong blocking the entrance, with the sunlight casting his shadow into the room and darkening the hall, made them feel an uneasy sense of foreboding.

"You're here, Baining," Jia Xu said, trying to force a smile.

Even Jia Xu found it uncomfortable to interact with someone as cold as Man Chong. Man Chong's presence was like that of someone who had just crawled out of a coffin—standing next to him made you feel a chill. And without Liu Ye to temper him, Man Chong had become an icy figure.

"I am," Man Chong replied, raising a hand to greet the others. He forced a smile, but his face twitched awkwardly, and then the expression vanished, leaving Lu Su and the others feeling unsettled.

The three of them forced strained smiles in return and gestured for Man Chong to come in, inwardly cursing. They thought, This is what it means to be born with the face that reflects the heart—he might as well have 'Iron-faced and Unfeeling' written on his forehead.

Once they confirmed that Man Chong had successfully completed the entire legal code, Jia Xu and Li You felt fully at ease. From this point on, it was up to them to implement it. After this, they intended to bind all the internal noble families to their chariot, ensuring that there would never again be any factions within their ranks whose interests were not aligned with Liu Bei's. This was a crucial goal that had to be achieved: internal unity was necessary to eliminate internal strife and better prepare for external wars.

"Has the lord already reviewed it?" Li You casually flipped through the code. Among the hundred or so laws, a few stood out—unlike the rest of Man Chong's strict and emotionless legal framework, these laws had traces of humanity woven into their wording.

"He has," Man Chong replied, his face as expressionless as ever.

Though Man Chong's face was emotionless, he couldn't help but feel a slight sense of pride when he recalled how Liu Bei had spent a month thoroughly reviewing his legal code and found little to criticize. This was, after all, the result of his hard work. When Taishan was first established, the task that Chen Xi had assigned him had finally borne fruit.

"We'll use Baining's general outline as the basis for regulating the noble families," Lu Su said after thoroughly reading the general framework. He was clearly impressed—Man Chong's legal code had far exceeded his expectations. "But, Baining, please provide me with a copy of the laws specifically related to noble families. I need to study them further."

"No problem," Man Chong responded with authority.

"All privileges should be exchanged for corresponding responsibilities and obligations. Who came up with that idea?" Li You was particularly interested in this principle—this concept ensured that all privileges had a foundation for their existence.

"It was written in an ancient book. I used it as the foundation for the legislation," Man Chong said, his thoughts momentarily drifting.

"That's a good approach. But what should we do now?" Li You asked, turning his head.

"First, we need to establish the foundation. As for implementation, when the lord has the authority to confer the twenty-tiered nobility system, it will naturally come into play. For now, we need to clarify the privileges for each tier. The twenty-tiered nobility system is viable, but we must avoid the situation that occurred four hundred years ago," Man Chong said, hinting at potentially rebellious sentiments.

In the Han dynasty, members of the Liu family were all eligible for succession. Unfortunately, Emperor Liu Xie had no sons. If the throne was still in the hands of the Han dynasty in the future, it might come down to selecting a successor from the Liu clan. Given the current state of the world, such a selection would be unnecessary—Liu Bei's offspring had a significant advantage.

"Let's discuss this further. The privileges for each tier must be clearly defined. If a privilege exists, it should be specified; if it doesn't, it should be clearly stated as well. Social welfare should also be outlined," Li You said seriously. "And once these details are written into the law, they must not be altered. We need to determine the maximum capacity for each social tier—this is something we cannot forget!"

"This must indeed be handled with care. Many of the old veterans in Guanzhong during the late Qin dynasty didn't resist because their social privileges were destroyed," Lu Su nodded in agreement. "The twenty-tiered nobility system's privileges should be written into the general legal code."

"We also need to assess the responsibilities and obligations that each tier should bear. The higher the tier, the greater the obligations and privileges. Figuring out how to measure this will be a challenge," Jia Xu sighed, realizing that balancing social responsibilities and privileges would be a complex issue.

"Perhaps this is the buffer time Zichuan left for us. After all, we don't currently have the authority to implement the twenty-tiered nobility system," Li You said after some thought. "We still have a long time to figure out how to distribute these rights and responsibilities."

"He's always one step ahead of us. When it comes to strategic planning, he's always the best," Lu Su sighed. "The issue of the twenty-tiered nobility system isn't that difficult, given that we already have a plan. We just need to take our time. We still have plenty of time, at least until the northern lands are pacified. Until then, we don't need to worry too much about this."

"It won't be long. I foresee that our war with Yuan Shao will inevitably break out this year. There's no other possibility," Li You said with a sigh. "Once this rebellion is crushed, let's directly promote the students from the academies to fill the vacant positions."

"That's exactly what I was thinking. Promote the students directly, and increase the proportion of officials from humble backgrounds to fifty percent," Lu Su agreed with a nod.

The monopoly of government positions by the noble families at the end of the Han dynasty was what made all those in power wary. Even though Taishan had been weakening the influence of the noble families, the reality was that seventy percent of the officials under their control still came from noble backgrounds. Some were direct descendants of noble families, while others were trained by them. In contrast, the truly humble origins made up less than thirty percent.

"We'll continue the system of military merit leading to ennoblement. The first fifteen ranks of nobility won't have strict requirements, but the fifteenth to eighteenth ranks must require military merit. As for the nineteenth and twentieth ranks, the Marquis of the Interior and the Marquis, these can only be earned on the battlefield," Jia Xu added.

"Only dukes and marquises can become ministers," Li You sighed. "Let's maintain that rule. As for the nineteenth and twentieth ranks, let's make a change. Pure civil officials seeking ennoblement must govern a territory the size of a province for three years. If sixty percent of the people approve, their case will be reviewed for advancement. If eighty percent approve, they will be directly ennobled."

"Agreed," Lu Su nodded. While he didn't have much regard for civil officials who couldn't fight, he acknowledged the need to offer them some hope. As for the eighty percent approval rate leading to direct ennoblement, Lu Su thought, Even I couldn't achieve that level of approval right now. If someone can, there's nothing more to say.

Chapter 695: An Unsettled Heart Is the Root of Chaos

Lu Su and his group's planning largely avoided one critical point—Chen Xi. Although they were aware that someone had cut off Chen Xi's supply line, they were not the least bit worried. Their trust in him had become almost blind.

In contrast to Liu Bei's situation, Yuan Shu was now in trouble. After being driven to the south of Jing Province and suffering great hardship, Liu Biao successfully counterattacked in the northern part of Jing Province and regained his foothold. It was only then that Sun Ce managed to arrive in Xiangyang, Jingzhou, but by this time, most of Nan Commandery had already returned to Liu Biao's control.

"Hmph!" Sun Ce slammed his fist onto the table. "Liu Jiye, how dare you be so ungrateful and seize Lord Yuan's land!"

"As expected, we will have to deal with two armies this time. Let's not even talk about Liu Jingxuan—though he is indeed courageous and decisive, if he had shown such resolve back when he hadn't lost Jingzhou, it would have been extremely difficult for us to take Jing and Xiang," Pang Tong, seated just behind Sun Ce, spoke as an advisor in his capacity as a scribe.

"Hmph, Kuai Yue is indeed a man of extraordinary ability. His repeated offensive tactics have made it difficult for our army to gain the upper hand," Liao Li sighed. "At the time, our biggest problem wasn't that we couldn't win but that we couldn't command our troops perfectly. Now, though Liu Jingxuan has regained a foothold in the north of Jing, with our absolute advantage, they have little chance."

"Ziyuan is right. Back then, our greatest challenge wasn't that we couldn't fight, but that we couldn't command our soldiers seamlessly. Now, although Liu Jingxuan has regained his position in the north, given our overwhelming advantage, they stand no chance," Gu Yong said, brimming with confidence. The news that Sun Ce had been named Yuan Shu's heir had already reached their ears.

"Bo Fu, who do you consider your greatest enemy?" Pang Tong asked after listening to Sun Ce's subordinates discuss the situation.

"Liu Jingxuan, Kuai Yue, and Cao Ren!" Sun Ce replied solemnly, though without the anger he once harbored. Burdened with heavy responsibilities, he had matured significantly, at least understanding when to remain calm.

"Then may I ask, what do Lord Yuan and Wu Chenghou expect from you?" Pang Tong asked, lowering his head in thought.

"Lord Yuan's expectation is, of course, focused on the world's affairs. As for my current situation, he expects me to inherit all his achievements and establish a dominant legacy for the world," Sun Ce replied without hesitation. "As for my late father's expectations, I believe he would want me to prioritize the family's legacy and strengthen the Sun clan."

"Then at this point, the best way to strengthen the Sun family is to base it on the foundation of the entire world, to establish a legacy for all ages," Pang Tong's calm words echoed in Sun Ce's ears like a thunderclap.

"A legacy for all ages..." Sun Ce murmured.

"Exactly. Bo Fu, you must now set your sights on the entire world. You are already among the strongest of the warlords in the land. You are no longer that child who lived under the protection of others. All the people before you, including myself, are your subjects," Pang Tong said, looking directly at Sun Ce with great seriousness.

"Minister Liao Li pays respect to his lord!" Liao Li was the first to stand and bow deeply to Sun Ce.

"Minister Gu Yong, Yu Fan, Ling Cao, Dong Xi, Jiang Qin...pay respect to our lord," Pang Tong's words prompted a wave of ministers to rise and bow before Sun Ce.

"A legacy for all ages..." Sun Ce's eyes grew brighter, and then he slowly stood up. "Gentlemen, join me in this endeavor!"

After everyone paid their respects, Sun Ce finally realized his current situation. He was no longer the small, dependent figure he once was; he was now a warlord of considerable power. No wonder, upon arriving in Jingzhou, Liu Xun and Li Feng showed him newfound respect.

To be fair, Yuan Shu was indeed an oddity—his generals might not have been the most capable, but their loyalty was beyond reproach. They obeyed only Yuan Shu's orders, which is why, even with Sun Ce's rise to power, the Yuan family could not sway Yuan Shu's top generals.

After helping his subordinates rise, Sun Ce fully understood that he now represented not just himself but one of the most significant forces in the land.

"Now that you aim for the entire world, I urge you to let go of your hatred toward Kuai Yue. Back then, it was simply a matter of serving different masters; this man is a rare talent," Liao Li said seriously, glancing sideways at Pang Tong after being lifted by Sun Ce.

"No!" Sun Ce immediately rejected Liao Li's suggestion.

"My lord, Minister Liao speaks wisely. Those who aim to rule the world should not sacrifice their greater ambition for personal grudges. When Guan Zhong shot an arrow at Duke Huan of Qi, nearly killing him, Duke Huan forgave him. This act of tolerance is what ultimately made him the leader of the Five Hegemons!" Pang Tong quickly intervened, echoing Liao Li's reasoning.

Although Pang Tong didn't understand why Liao Li had glared at him, his earlier questioning had been intended to convey the same idea. For someone with ambitions as grand as Sun Ce's, he should be willing to forgive a capable adversary like Kuai Yue, as their previous enmity was simply the result of serving different masters.

"We'll discuss this matter later!" Sun Ce's face darkened, and he prepared to reprimand them, but then he recalled Yuan Shu's hopeful gaze and the final words his father had conveyed through Huang Gai and others. His burning anger transformed into a heavy sense of responsibility, and he swallowed his rebuke.

After hearing Sun Ce's words, Liao Li became even more displeased with Pang Tong. It was intolerable for him to see a newly crowned youth openly serving as a scribe but effectively acting as a military advisor. If it weren't for Zhou Yu's undeniable brilliance, Liao Li would have felt the same way about him too.

"Very well, we'll discuss it later, as you wish," Pang Tong said, feeling a bit of relief when he saw Sun Ce relent. He then shot a glance at Liao Li, thanking him for his cooperation, but Liao Li ignored him entirely, leaving Pang Tong confused. They had been working well together before; what had changed?

The issue was that Pang Tong and Zhuge Liang had both entered public service at a very young age. Despite their intelligence, they hadn't yet fully grasped the intricacies of human relationships. They understood many things in theory, but when faced with them in reality, they sometimes struggled.

After all, since Pang Tong's debut, he first met Zixu, who solved a major problem for him for free, and then encountered Zhou Yu and Sun Ce, who showed no discrimination against him. In Pang Tong's mind, good people were more common.

As for Sima Yi, when Hu Zhao took him to the northern frontier, it was to show Sima Yi the world's complexities—love and hate, joy and sorrow, and the instability of human nature.

In this regard, Hu Zhao was indeed an excellent teacher. However, his method of teaching Sima Yi to observe human nature by focusing on its darker aspects was bound to lead Sima Yi down a twisted path. Of course, there was also the issue of tailoring his teachings to the individual.

"Now that we have regained our positions and no longer face obstacles, I suggest we split our forces to deal with Liu Jingxuan and Liu Jiyu," Liao Li shifted the conversation away from Kuai Yue and back to military matters.

"Our forces are indeed strong, so that's a good idea," Pang Tong nodded in agreement. "Everyone here has fought many battles in Jingzhou, often emerging victorious, so you all have considerable experience. In that case, let us continue as we have, with me accompanying the lord to meet Yizhou."

Chapter 696: The Terrifying Auxiliary Troops of Yizhou

【Hmph, I knew you'd say that. I've been waiting for you to divide the forces like this. The soldiers of Yizhou are no easy opponents. If you don't run into some serious trouble, how else will my talents be recognized?】 Liao Li's expression remained calm, but his mind was filled with cold sneers.

As expected, things unfolded just as Liao Li had predicted. Pang Tong indeed volunteered to head to Zhigui to deal with the Yizhou army.

"Shiyuan, you should not underestimate the generals of Yizhou. Yizhou has been relatively isolated, and we have not heard much about their capabilities as they march into Jingzhou," Gu Yong cautioned Pang

Tong, worried that Pang Tong might underestimate Yizhou's generals, which could lead to Sun Ce's forces suffering losses. He stepped forward to offer his warning.

"I'll be careful," Pang Tong nodded. He didn't actually intend to underestimate his opponents; in fact, he knew full well that once he arrived on the battlefield, the enemy would likely mock him and Sun Ce as mere youngsters.

"You should also be cautious of Kuai Yue. He is well-versed in the art of sacrificing pawns. If necessary, he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice even himself," Pang Tong advised Gu Yong, Yu Fan, and the others. After all, he had been born in Jingzhou and had a good understanding of Kuai Yue's abilities.

"Since that's the case, I will lead Liu Xun, Chen Lan, and Li Feng to Zhigui to intercept the Yizhou generals. Jiang Qin, you will serve as the vanguard. The rest will deal with Liu Biao of Jingzhou. We'll split into two groups, and if one side finishes first, remember to divide your forces to assist the other," Sun Ce instructed after seeing that his subordinates had divided up the military tasks with much discussion.

"Shiyuan, you will accompany me on the march west. In the past, I may have neglected you, but from now on, you will serve as an advisor to the central command," Sun Ce turned to Pang Tong and said. The others congratulated Pang Tong, as although the position of central command advisor wasn't particularly high-ranking, it granted considerable authority, especially given Sun Ce's trust.

【Hmph, let's see how long you'll remain smug. Central command advisor, indeed!】 Liao Li feigned congratulations while inwardly sneering, 【The higher you climb, the harder you fall.】

As Sun Ce led Liu Xun and the others westward, with Jiang Qin as the vanguard, Zhang Ren had already marched out of Jiange, heading toward Hanzhong. Another force, led by Yan Yan, had successfully captured Zhigui and was preparing to seize Shangyong, launching simultaneous attacks on Hanzhong from two directions!

Pang Tong wasn't naive; he had no intention of directly confronting the Yizhou army. Instead, he sent messages to Zhang Lu to forge an alliance while dispatching scouts to investigate Shangyong, planning to take the city and seal off Yan Yan's northern route, thereby freeing Zhang Lu to deal with the other Yizhou force.

Initially, Pang Tong had considered using naval forces to move upstream and encircle and annihilate Yan Yan's army. But when he arrived on the battlefield, he quickly abandoned that idea—not because he didn't want to but because he didn't dare!

The enemy, this so-called auxiliary force of the Shu army, boasted one army-wide ability and three spiritual abilities. Pang Tong instantly realized that the usual tactics against ordinary strategists would only result in a massacre against such formidable opponents.

"Shiyuan, you've looked rather gloomy since arriving at Zhigui," Sun Ce, seeing Pang Tong riding a white horse, teased.

"My lord, I fear that the force we face is not an auxiliary force of the Shu army but rather their main force. My spiritual ability allows me to sense others' spiritual abilities, as well as army-wide abilities. You are aware of this, correct?" Pang Tong said with a bitter smile. After confirming the enemy's lineup, he couldn't bring himself to smile anymore.

"Yes, I know. Gongjin once told me that all range-based spiritual abilities have the power to detect others with similar abilities, but if the other party fully suppresses their abilities, they can't be detected," Sun Ce nodded, licking his lips. "You're saying there's an internal energy expert on the other side?"

"No..." Pang Tong shook his head.

"Not an internal energy expert? Then it must be a spiritual ability. Shiyuan, you need to have the same confidence as Gongjin. What's there to fear from a mere spiritual ability? You still have me!" Sun Ce laughed boisterously, trying to boost Pang Tong's confidence.

Pang Tong rubbed his forehead, at a loss for words. Seeing Pang Tong's lack of reaction to his laughter, Sun Ce stopped laughing, finding it pointless. He then spoke earnestly, "Tell me what's on your mind so I can help. If you stay silent, I won't know where to start."

"The enemy has one army-wide ability and three spiritual abilities. I've already tallied the numbers," Pang Tong said with a wry smile. "I refuse to believe that a mere auxiliary force could possess so many formidable individuals."

Sun Ce's eyebrows began to twitch. He had only recently reached the level of an internal energy expert, having lost his internal energy once before and only now truly reaching the internal energy departure stage. But his army-wide ability hadn't fully developed yet, and now, the enemy had three spiritual abilities and one army-wide ability? And this was supposed to be an auxiliary force?

"What should we do?" Sun Ce wasn't foolish. Although he enjoyed defeating enemies, he knew to be cautious not to get crushed in return.

"What else can we do? I'll first probe the enemy to determine the nature of their spiritual abilities. We'll start by testing the waters," Pang Tong replied irritably. He hadn't expected his first experience as a grand strategist would involve such a situation, but this only fueled his determination.

"Be careful. You strategists are often more frightening than we are on the battlefield. A single miscalculation could cost the entire army, so be cautious, Shiyuan," Sun Ce advised, looking at Pang Tong.

"Alright, I will be," Pang Tong nodded.

On the other side, Yan Yan and his men had already received intelligence of Sun Ce's arrival. However, the situation was that there were three strategists in Yan Yan's camp—Yizhou Prefect Zhang Song, Yizhou Deputy Zhang Du, and Liu Ba, who had fled to Yizhou due to the chaos of war.

Among these three, only Liu Ba's rank was lower than Yan Yan's; the other two held higher positions, though they only had advisory roles under Yan Yan's command.

"With Sun Ce's reinforcements arriving, the Jingzhou soldiers, hearing that reinforcements have come, will undoubtedly fight to the death. It might be wise to wait a few days, test the situation, and then make further plans," Liu Ba suggested after Yan Yan summoned the officers to a meeting. He was advocating a more conservative approach since they had yet to engage Sun Ce's forces.

"I disagree. Our army has been victorious in every battle thus far, and our morale is high. If we retreat upon hearing of their arrival, it would make us appear cowardly. We should take advantage of their unstable footing and launch a decisive attack to defeat them," Zhang Du, full of vigor, countered.

"I believe our current objective is flawed. Our goal should be to capture Hanzhong, not to engage Sun Ce," Zhang Song said, clearly opposing Zhang Du's suggestion. "If we are to fight Sun Ce, it should not be us leading the charge. We should coordinate with the forces from Taishan, forcing Sun Ce to fight on multiple fronts. That would be in our best interest."

"Our forces are formidable, and we have no established ties with the Taishan army. Given the distance, even if there is an intention to ally, it would take considerable time to finalize. Moreover, with the northern front still uncertain, Liu Xuande is nearly stretched to his limit," Liu Ba scoffed at Zhang Song's proposal.

Chapter 697: The Vigilantly Guarded Yizhou Army

"Our army is clearly blocked now, and as for whether the strategic objective has become problematic, that's not important. We've already occupied a considerable amount of territory—are you suggesting we just abandon it?" Zheng Du retorted discontentedly.

"Our goal should be to take Hanzhong, not to dawdle here!" Zhang Song argued, glaring at Zheng Du. "Moreover, if we ally with Xuande Gong to destroy Yuan Shu, we can reestablish the trend of the Three Shepherds guarding the Yangtze River. This way, as long as the three of us stand together, the Han dynasty will not fall!"

Zheng Du was taken aback, feeling the urge to curse. He had never cared much for the Han dynasty, serving only as a minister to Liu Zhang to further his interests. Who cared about the fate of the Han? And as for Zhang Song's talk of mutual defense and preserving the Han dynasty—who believed that nonsense?

Zheng Du's spiritual ability, in essence, was a keen understanding of reason. This ability was incredibly powerful in that it allowed him to see through the essence of things. Simply put, it let Zheng Du perceive situations clearly without the influence of human emotions, making him exceptionally adept at pinpointing key strategies.

Of course, speaking of Zheng Du's spiritual ability, one must also mention Fa Zheng's. Fa Zheng's ability was to understand human hearts. If these two ever faced off, Zheng Du, even with his "golden finger," would be thoroughly outmatched—simply because Fa Zheng's ability perfectly countered Zheng Du's.

With such a spiritual ability, Zheng Du knew well that at this point, the priority was not capturing Hanzhong; the real concern was the territory they had already seized. Some things, once touched, cannot be easily abandoned.

Zhang Song noticed Zheng Du's twitching expression and felt a bit embarrassed. The rhetoric he was using was the same stuff he usually used to placate Liu Zhang, and now, saying it in front of these three, even though Yan Yan might not notice, there was no way Zheng Du and Liu Ba would buy into it.

After that exchange, Zhang Song, Zheng Du, and Liu Ba all fell silent. Yan Yan, sensing an opportunity, cleared his throat. "Ahem, well, I think we've come too far to turn back now. Zhang Biejia has made some good points, and so has Zichu. Why don't we observe the situation first and try to make contact with potential allies?"

Yan Yan was clearly trying to smooth things over. There wasn't much else he could do—these three weren't easy to deal with. The fact that their advance had been so smooth so far was not only due to Yan Yan's own formidable strength but also because these three strategists were all highly capable.

"Alright, I'll go see if I can talk to the local tribes and perhaps borrow some troops," Liu Ba conceded. He had noticed that, among the three of them, his presence was the weakest—probably because his spiritual ability was better suited for internal development rather than strategy.

"Fine. Zichu, you take charge of the battle. I'll see if I can connect with Xuande Gong and arrange for a three-way alliance to destroy Yuan Shu," Zhang Song grumbled. He was realizing that in terms of warfare, he was no match for the ruthless Zheng Du. His spiritual ability was more focused on strategic planning, not on the direct confrontation that Zheng Du thrived in.

Once the two somewhat frustrated individuals left, Zheng Du began discussing how to deal with Sun Ce with Yan Yan. Compared to Liu Ba's cautious approach, Zheng Du's strategy was much bolder, relying on their high morale to propose a direct confrontation to blunt Sun Ce's advance.

"A head-on clash?" Yan Yan frowned after hearing Zheng Du's proposal. This hardly seemed like a strategy at all. Despite their string of victories, Yan Yan didn't underestimate the enemy in the slightest—his decades of experience as a general made him far more cautious than younger commanders.

"We should engage them to gauge the difference between this force and the ones we've faced before. If they're similar, a decisive battle could settle it. But if they're stronger, we'll need to be prepared," Zheng Du explained seriously.

Upon learning that this force was led by Sun Ce, Zheng Du knew they were dealing with a formidable opponent. After all, Sun Ce was Yuan Shu's appointed heir—losing another one due to inadequate protection would be unthinkable.

Zheng Du wanted to test Sun Ce's forces first, to see just how strong they were before committing to a full strategy. Without understanding the enemy's strength, he felt uneasy proceeding.

"But we can't just rush into a night attack, right?" Zheng Du sighed, deliberately baiting Yan Yan into a trap.

"Actually, that's not a bad idea. Even if it doesn't yield a significant victory, it would give them a strong warning," Yan Yan responded decisively.

"Their defenses will be tight. After all, this is Yuan Shu's heir we're talking about—their precautions will be far more stringent than those of the forces we've faced before," Zheng Du shook his head. "But since you're against it, maybe we should focus on capturing Badong and wait for them to come to us."

Following Zheng Du's suggestion, Yan Yan moved to capture Badong, quickly taking control. By the time Sun Ce's forces arrived in the area, Yan Yan had already secured the mountain passes and choke points, ready to observe Sun Ce's military capabilities up close.

Faced with the stubborn tactics of the Yizhou army, Pang Tong was at a loss. The enemy not only had the advantage in numbers but was also fully committed to a defensive strategy, showing none of the arrogance typical of victors.

"Report! The Yizhou army is challenging us to battle, and General Sun has already ridden out!" A messenger rushed into Pang Tong's tent, shouting.

"What?" Pang Tong was startled and quickly mounted his horse, fearing that Sun Ce might have walked into an ambush.

To his relief, when he arrived, he saw that Sun Ce had not pursued the enemy with his full force. Instead, he was engaged in a fierce duel with an older general, who looked to be around fifty. The two fought with great vigor, their weapons clashing in a display of raw power. However, it was clear that Sun Ce, due to his youth, was at a slight disadvantage in terms of strength.

[That must be the enemy's commander, Yan Yan. His strength is indeed formidable. Among my lord's generals, the only one who could surely defeat him is Zhou Yu, who is currently in Shouchun. This man commands his troops with strict discipline, is cautious in battle, and is supported by three capable strategists—truly a troublesome foe!] Pang Tong thought, frowning as he watched Yan Yan.

Chapter 698: Targeting the Yizhou Army for Complete Annihilation

Although Sun Ce had not yet reached the peak of his power, he was still a prodigy. On the other hand, Yan Yan, while experienced, was not like Huang Zhong, who grew fiercer with age. Thus, although Yan Yan could suppress Sun Ce in terms of raw strength, it wasn't easy to claim an outright victory.

At the beginning of their battle, Sun Ce struggled against Yan Yan's powerful spear techniques, but as the fight dragged on, Sun Ce seemed to grow stronger, gradually turning the tide in his favor.

The two fought fiercely, with their respective armies clashing in the background. After switching horses and continuing the battle, Yan Yan, realizing that age was catching up with him, eventually ordered his troops to advance, leading to a chaotic skirmish that left over a hundred bodies on the battlefield before both sides withdrew.

"Clang!" Sun Ce slammed his helmet down onto the table and then grabbed a large bowl of wine, downing it in a few gulps.

"That old general is truly formidable!" Sun Ce exclaimed with admiration after setting the bowl down. "In the heat of battle, he was actually stronger than me by a few notches at first, but unfortunately, his age is starting to show—his recovery isn't what it used to be."

"You're focusing on the wrong thing," Pang Tong said with a frown. "Relying on brute strength in the heat of the moment is not a good habit. Didn't you notice that the enemy activated their army's special ability just now?"

"What's the big deal? Even after they activated it, they only managed to stabilize their situation. Their soldiers are far inferior!" Sun Ce laughed loudly, slapping the table. "But I have to admit, the enemy's general is incredibly strong."

"Indeed, the soldiers under his command are not his personal guards. You can see subtle differences if you look closely, and your troops were just ordinary frontline soldiers. In that sense, they were evenly matched," Pang Tong said, still frowning.

"Huh, how can you tell they weren't his personal guards? Their armor and equipment looked just as good as any elite unit's. How could they not be his personal troops?" Sun Ce asked, puzzled.

Pang Tong rolled his eyes, too tired to explain in detail. If the soldiers that Yan Yan led in this fight were his personal guards, they wouldn't have hesitated during the battle. Nor would they have shown signs of faltering, even as Yan Yan himself hadn't ordered a retreat.

Sun Ce noticed Pang Tong's eye roll but didn't take offense. He trusted Pang Tong because he was recommended by Zhou Yu, whom Sun Ce deeply respected. If Pang Tong didn't want to explain, Sun Ce wouldn't press the issue.

"Hmm, I think I've got a good idea," Pang Tong mused, recalling the relatively low combat strength of Yan Yan's troops compared to those of the Central Plains, and a plan began to form in his mind.

"Bo Fu, when the enemy activated their special ability earlier, did you notice any significant changes in their soldiers' combat effectiveness?" Although Pang Tong had observed the battle himself, he wanted to confirm his thoughts with Sun Ce.

"It felt like they became more resilient, harder to break through," Sun Ce replied, stroking his chin. "Yeah, that's it—they became tougher and more difficult to defeat once they activated their ability, almost as if they were becoming stronger with age."

"Just as I thought," Pang Tong nodded.

"Earlier, I was close to defeating him, but after they activated their special ability, it felt like his strength didn't increase much, but his endurance did. It became much harder to push him back," Sun Ce added, recalling the battle.

"Exactly," Pang Tong said with a smile. "They were testing our strength."

"Testing us?" Sun Ce's face darkened. "Does that mean I gave myself away by charging out with the vanguard? My personal guards were still in the central camp!"

"On the contrary, you did well," Pang Tong said, shaking his finger. "Didn't you notice that the soldiers you brought from Shouchun are far more elite and better equipped than the ones here?"

"Now that you mention it, you're right. By the way, Shiyuan, just call me Bo Fu. I'm not used to you addressing me so formally," Sun Ce replied, not fully grasping what Pang Tong was implying.

Pang Tong fell silent for a moment, finally understanding why Zhou Yu often used his spiritual ability when talking to Sun Ce. Sun Ce just didn't seem to grasp what was being said. "Alright..."

"By the way, what did you mean earlier?" Sun Ce asked, finally circling back to Pang Tong's earlier comments.

"I mean that I know how to defeat them," Pang Tong replied, rubbing his forehead with a look of resignation. "You did well earlier—leave the rest to me. This time, even if we can't completely crush the Yizhou army, we'll scare them senseless!"

"Hah, I knew you could do it!" Sun Ce slapped Pang Tong on the shoulder, grinning widely. "But didn't you say they have three spiritual ability users? Are you sure you can handle it?"

"It won't be a problem," Pang Tong nodded. "Sometimes, those who are highly intelligent become too confident in their judgments, and that's the limitation of any strategist's vision. That's the key to defeating them."

"Hahaha, I'll leave it to you! But remember to set up a rematch between me and that old general—I'm sure I can beat him next time!" Sun Ce said, patting Pang Tong on the shoulder again.

"Don't worry, I'll pick a good time for you to fight him again," Pang Tong replied with a slight smile. If his estimation was correct, the enemy would likely mistake the soldiers Sun Ce had led in the previous battle for his personal guards.

[This will work well—now, to implement a plan to exploit their arrogance... No, that would be too obvious. Instead, we'll play it straight and use the local troops as bait. If we truly lose, no one will suspect it was a trap.] Pang Tong continued to plan, mindful of the three enemy strategists. But more than anything, he wanted to trap all three in one fell swoop.

[However, if this strategy allows the Yizhou army to gain momentum, it could become difficult to manage. No, I have to let them build momentum. That way, even if they suspect something, they won't back down. We'll leave a lasting shadow over the Yizhou army.] Pang Tong finally made up his mind. Yizhou, a region that was already part of his and Zhou Yu's plans, needed to be kept in check.

Having confirmed that the enemy had indeed come to test their strength, Pang Tong devised a plan to thoroughly entrap them.

As for the risks involved, Pang Tong decided to gamble. If successful, he would eliminate all three enemy strategists at once, securing Yizhou's future. But if he failed and couldn't stifle the Yizhou army's momentum, he'd be in serious trouble as well.

Chapter 699: The Proper Use of a Legion's Talent

While Pang Tong was preparing to wipe out the entire Yizhou force, Yan Yan was also quite pleased. Although his defeat at Sun Ce's hands left him somewhat disheartened, his years of experience allowed him to gauge the strength of Sun Ce's army accurately.

After returning to his camp, Yan Yan looked displeased. He realized that Zheng Du was correct—Sun Ce's reinforcements were indeed stronger than the previous garrison troops they had faced. The probing had been necessary after all.

"How did it go, General Yan?" Zheng Du asked with a smile.

"Just as you said, this Sun Ce's army is indeed stronger than the previous garrison troops. They may only be slightly weaker than our own forces, and Sun Ce himself is not inferior to me in strength," Yan Yan replied with a bitter smile.

"My soldiers have been victorious in every battle since leaving Yizhou. Their morale is high, and they've been equipped with my personal guards' weapons and armor. If it weren't for my legion's talent, we might have been completely routed by the enemy's elite troops," Yan Yan added as he saw Zheng Du deep in thought.

"Is that so?" Zheng Du's face lit up with joy.

"Indeed, even with our numerical advantage, defeating them completely would be extremely difficult," Yan Yan said helplessly.

"If that's the case, then all the better," Zheng Du said with a smile. "General, please summon Advisor Zhang and Official Liu for a discussion. With this information, I believe we can thoroughly defeat the enemy in the coming days."

Hearing this, Yan Yan was overjoyed. Any general loves to win battles, and Yan Yan was no exception. Knowing that Zheng Du had a solid plan in mind, he immediately ordered the drums to be sounded to summon his officers to a council of war.

Soon, Zhang Song and Liu Ba were back in Yan Yan's tent. After analyzing the situation based on Yan Yan's report, they were all satisfied with Zheng Du's plan, although there were some concerns about potential losses.

"This plan could result in significant casualties," Liu Ba said, frowning. "After all, General Yan mentioned that the enemy's elite troops are stronger than our ordinary soldiers. Even if their troops are only slightly weaker overall, the enemy's morale is high since they've just arrived."

"That's why we need to strike hard while our morale is at its peak and break their spirits in one go," Zheng Du said with a stern expression. "This strategy is difficult at first but will become easier as it progresses. If the first step succeeds, our momentum will grow, and we can pursue them relentlessly. If everything goes as planned, we could win five battles in a row and take Shanyang."

Liu Ba's brow furrowed deeply. He had to admit that Zheng Du's reasoning was sound. This was indeed a situation where winning the first battle could secure victory in the subsequent ones. In fact, if they won the first battle decisively, they might not even need to fight five more.

"What if we fail to defeat them in the first battle? Or what if the enemy is tenacious and cannot be easily routed?" Zhang Song asked, acknowledging the wisdom in Zheng Du's strategy but also considering possible setbacks.

"General Yan, if I'm not mistaken, your legion's talent doesn't show its full effect during a winning battle, but rather, it has a special function in certain situations, correct?" Zheng Du turned to Yan Yan.

"My legion's talent doesn't show much effect when we have the upper hand, but when my troops are tired, facing defeat, or on the verge of collapse, it gives them extra resilience," Yan Yan said with a bitter smile. He felt that his legion's talent was practically useless.

Zhang Song's eyes suddenly lit up as he immediately grasped Zheng Du's intention. He quickly asked, "General Yan, how many soldiers can your legion's talent cover?"

"It can cover two to three thousand men, but it doesn't seem to be of much use, regardless of the number," Yan Yan said, pulling a wry face. If this talent could increase their combat power, even by one percent, it would be strong enough, but it only seemed to make the troops more resilient in difficult situations.

"Let's go for it," Zhang Song said decisively.

"What's there to hesitate about? Since we're already in an advantageous position, why worry? Let's go ahead with it!" Liu Ba added, understanding that Yan Yan's talent was perfect for ensuring that their troops would not collapse in battle.

The thought of General Yan being killed and the legion's talent being disrupted was brushed off. In their minds, it was almost impossible to kill an Inner Qi Master who wanted to escape. Throughout history, no Inner Qi Master had ever been killed when they were determined to flee.

"General, if you had such a useful legion's talent, you should have told us earlier!" Zhang Song said, patting Yan Yan on the shoulder.

"..." Yan Yan was dumbfounded. To him, this talent seemed utterly useless in terms of increasing their combat strength.

"Since the General has such an ability, why don't we split our forces into four and wipe out the enemy completely? Even if something goes wrong, we won't be routed, and at worst, we can fall back to Shanyang," Zhang Song suggested with a vicious grin.

Knowing that they wouldn't face a complete rout, they were willing to take any risks. Zhang Song pointed out four key locations on the map, planning to take them all in one sweep.

"In that case, we should gamble on which direction the enemy will try to break out and then ambush them. A single decisive strike could allow us to take everything west of Yiling!" Liu Ba added fiercely.

With no fear of suffering a massive defeat, there was no need for concern. They would employ the most dangerous strategies, confident that even if they faced a setback, it wouldn't be disastrous. The more dangerous the plan, the less likely the enemy would expect it.

"We'll push relentlessly, never stopping!" Zheng Du said coldly. "Since General Yan's legion's talent increases the troops' resilience, we'll make full use of it in this plan."

Zhang Song and Liu Ba worked with Zheng Du to refine the plan, crafting a strategy that was incredibly bold and dangerous. Even Yan Yan, after seeing the plan, felt that one misstep could lead to their complete annihilation.

"Don't worry, General. As long as your legion's talent works as you've described, there won't be any problems. Trust us, your talent is perfect for this kind of risky plan. There's no need to fear any unexpected events," Zhang Song and the others reassured the now somewhat exasperated Yan Yan, who was beginning to doubt the plan's wisdom.

"This plan leaves no room for error. One mistake and we'll be routed!" Yan Yan said, bewildered.

"Your talent is precisely what's needed to handle such situations. Besides, think about it—if we succeed, everything west of Yiling will be ours. Don't you trust your soldiers, General?" Zhang Song quickly countered, persuading Yan Yan. This plan could only be executed with Yan Yan's approval; without him, it wouldn't work.

Chapter 700: Let the Battle Begin

"Are you sure this will work?" Yan Yan asked, looking at the three men before him.

"It will work!" Zhang Song, Zheng Du, and Liu Ba nodded their heads like pecking chickens.

"There won't be any surprises?" Yan Yan looked at them skeptically.

"Even if there are surprises, we won't suffer a major defeat," they responded in unison.

"Alright, I'll do it!" Yan Yan said, his face darkening.

Little did Yan Yan know that this strategy would make him famous across the land. With only thirty thousand troops, he would take over a vast territory, including Yiling to the west and Shangyong to the south. Although his greatest triumph would be cut short by one of Pang Tong's schemes, no one could deny Yan Yan's formidable prowess during that time.

While the Yizhou forces were preparing to take down their enemies in one swift move, in Yanzhou, both sides were facing some miscalculations. Although Chen Xi had already made plans, he couldn't fully anticipate the "balance between stratagem and normalcy" that Xu You employed. Xu You's so-called "unorthodox tactics" completely exceeded the expectations of Zhuge Liang and Fa Zheng, leaving Chen Xi's side with nothing but frustration when they finally encountered them.

In Ji Yin, Guo Jia didn't fare much better. Tian Feng, too, gained no advantage. However, after several rounds of probing, Guo Jia managed to grasp the essence of Tian Feng's mental talent.

"How are we supposed to fight this?" Even Guan Yu felt awkward. After several failed attempts to outmaneuver their opponents, Guan Yu became more cautious, but caution alone wasn't enough when facing an army nearly four times the size of his own, led by Yan Liang.

"I think I've figured it out. Tian Feng is even more difficult to deal with than I anticipated. He seems to have a talent that allows him to foresee the results of direct schemes," Guo Jia said, his mouth twisting in displeasure. It felt like playing against a cheat.

"This kind of mental talent is just unfair!" Guan Yu's face twitched as he finally understood why Guo Jia had only tested the waters against Yuan Shao's army in the past few days.

"Yes, but what is your objective, General Guan?" Guo Jia asked casually.

"First, we need to hold Ji Yin at all costs!" Guan Yu said grimly.

"That won't be difficult," Guo Jia replied, nodding slightly.

"It won't be easy either; the enemy has a massive army," Guan Yu said, clearly feeling the weight of the situation.

Guo Jia smiled but didn't say anything further. He had more or less grasped the nature of Tian Feng's mental talent. Now the challenge was figuring out how to counter Tian Feng and Yan Liang's massive army. Guo Jia began considering his options.

"From what I've observed, Tian Feng's mental talent is highly effective at countering direct schemes. If I plan against him outright, he'll likely foresee the outcome and take precautions," Guo Jia thought, analyzing the situation.

"However, if I constantly switch tactics midway through, although he might still foresee the results, his ability to respond would be hindered. This approach could exhaust him, but it would also strain our own forces." Guo Jia rubbed his brow, deep in thought.

Guo Jia realized that someone like Liu Ye could drive Tian Feng to madness with an endless stream of strategies. Even if Tian Feng could predict the outcomes, the constant switching would be a headache.

"The second approach relies on creating unexpected situations. This reminds me of how Chen Gong managed to outmaneuver Tian Feng. Perhaps Tian Feng's mental talent isn't capable of predicting unforeseen events," Guo Jia continued to ponder.

He had already tested this theory against Tian Feng, creating an unexpected scenario that only took out about a hundred of Tian Feng's men. However, it confirmed Guo Jia's suspicions. It also validated his first hypothesis.

"As for the third approach, it seems the most viable." Guo Jia sighed.

The third method was something Guo Jia had prepared specifically to deal with Tian Feng. It was simple: force Tian Feng to follow his lead. Guo Jia would set traps ahead of time, guiding Tian Feng step by step into them, rather than reacting to Tian Feng's moves as before.

In essence, this wasn't really a scheme but more of a way to control the battlefield, akin to setting up a chessboard and waiting for your opponent to make a move that had already been anticipated. This kind of strategy required an incredible understanding of the overall situation. If the opponent wasn't significantly weaker, it could backfire disastrously.

However, Guo Jia had a suspicion: Tian Feng might be overly reliant on his mental talent, filling in any gaps in his own abilities with it.

If that were the case, Guo Jia believed he could exploit this overreliance. Sometimes, having too great an advantage could blind someone to their own weaknesses.

"I'll try all three methods and see what happens. Let's see how this 'unexpected' approach plays out!" Guo Jia thought, resigned to the challenge. "I wonder how things are going for Zi Chuan. Xu You is no pushover, and compared to regular mental talents, the kind that directly boosts intelligence is even more troublesome."

Just as Guo Jia feared, even though Chen Xi had prepared in advance, when he finally faced Xu You, he couldn't help but feel frustrated. Xu You didn't follow any conventional tactics. His chaotic onslaught left Chen Xi and his group dizzy and disoriented.

On the day Chen Xi learned that Xu You was leading the attack, he made several preparations. He sent orders to Sun Qian and others in Linyi to be on high alert, instructed Wang Xiu to defend the city at all costs, warned Xu Chu not to be provoked by potential enemy attacks, and asked Zhang Yan to tighten control over his subordinates.

Overall, Chen Xi's response was flawless, but sometimes, even when everything is done correctly, things still go wrong.

That afternoon, after Zhuge Liang confirmed that there was indeed an approaching enemy force, Chen Xi ordered his troops to rest in shifts to prevent a surprise attack. But when night fell, and the full moon rose high, bathing the earth in silver light, with no clouds in the sky—so bright that you could almost read a book—Chen Xi realized something.

"I forgot it's a full moon tonight; there's no way anyone would launch a night raid in these conditions," Chen Xi said with a wry smile as he gazed at the moon, now nearly at its zenith. In this kind of night, everything within a mile was clearly visible.

"I overlooked that too. If we hadn't noticed, though, a wind-manipulation tactic might have given us a serious headache," Zhuge Liang admitted with a sigh. "It's a good strategy from the enemy."

"No matter how good the strategy is, it's useless once we've spotted it," Chen Xi said with a smug smile, his earlier worries now gone.