

Mythical 721

Chapter 721: The Nobility and the State

"The people listed on this paper are those who are unwilling to accept their fate. They want to make an attempt, a final desperate struggle, and in doing so, they serve as both a means for the nobility to purge its own internal threats and as pieces on the chessboard for you, Zichuan," Chen Shang said with utmost calm.

"Do they know they're just pawns? Or do they even understand their situation?" Chen Xi asked thoughtfully. "Or do they even know what their own families think?"

"Now, everyone on this list knows they're being sacrificed. They're fully aware that they're playing the role of Chen Hou's pawns to bring greater benefits to Xuande Gong. At the very least, by being branded as rebels, the situation remains under your control, giving you maximum flexibility, and allowing those of us who survive to gain the greatest recognition." A flash of pain was evident in Chen Shang's eyes.

As he spoke, Chen Shang closed his eyes slowly, and when he reopened them, there was a renewed sense of determination. "We want to truly integrate under Xuande Gong, not remain as outsiders. We live within this state, yet we don't feel like we belong. If sacrificing ourselves can lead to the rise of our families, we, as the nobility, have never feared such sacrifices, including myself."

Chen Xi rubbed his forehead, acknowledging that while there might be some exaggeration in what was said, the so-called rebels were not mere words. They had a real chance of success, especially with internal and external collusion.

But now that Chen Shang had laid everything out, it was clear that these individuals were indeed accepting infamy and enduring humiliation to create an excellent opportunity for the rest of their families.

Sigh, Uncle, if only you could inspire the nobility to sacrifice themselves for the country and nation as they do for their families, I could assure you that the nobility would enjoy unending prosperity, Chen Xi thought bitterly.

Ah, the nobility... this is what they are—willing to risk their lives for the survival of their families, but with little concern for the country. They possess all the virtues, but unfortunately, they use them solely for personal gain.

"Very well, I will report this to Xuande Gong, and let him decide. There shouldn't be any issues." Chen Xi sighed, acknowledging that the nobility was betting their lives that he would grant them a way out in exchange for their sacrifice.

"Thank you," Chen Shang said this time, fully adopting the role of an elder of the noble families, bowing deeply to Chen Xi.

"Is it worth it?" Chen Xi asked with a bitter smile. "They know it's a dead end—why do they still go through with it?"

"Because it achieves the family's goals, satisfies their own desires, and even holds a glimmer of hope for success. What's there to regret about sacrificing one's life? How do you think the nobility has survived countless crises if not through such sacrifices?" Chen Shang's voice was calm, but it carried a sense of deep satisfaction.

Chen Xi had nothing to say. He could understand the noble families' beliefs, and they indeed left him in awe. But unfortunately, these principles wouldn't make him compromise on his values. A nation, a state—without it, there's no family. It's unacceptable to weaken the state to fatten the nobility.

If the nobility could channel such sacrifice towards the country, even with all their flaws, Chen Xi wouldn't let them fade into history. But their sacrifices were only for their families, remembering only the virtues of their kin while forgetting the grace of the state. This short-sightedness inevitably led to their downfall.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that the Confucian scholars of later dynasties were even worse than the nobility. At least the true nobility had no deficiencies in virtue, and in times of national crisis, their interests often aligned with those of the state. This is one reason Chen Xi was not overly harsh on the nobility.

If the noble heirs could protect the state as they protected their families, Chen Xi believed it would be perfectly justifiable for them to enjoy their current power and privileges. In the current situation, the

nobility is willing to die for their families—if they could do so for the country, there would be nothing more to say about their privileges.

Oh well, the nobility has its reasons for existing. Since they prioritize their families, given their moral integrity, I'll show them a way forward. How much they understand is up to them, Chen Xi thought, slightly moved by Chen Shang's resolute expression. After all, he wasn't entirely heartless.

"Uncle, the existence of the nobility has its rationality. However, many of your actions have turned that rationality into irrationality. If you wish for long-term stability, family education and land are indispensable, but they are not the most important factors," Chen Xi sighed, planning to give Chen Shang some guidance. Whether the nobility would heed it was beyond his control.

Chen Xi's greatest confidence in dealing with the nobility was that he hadn't treated them like swine to be slaughtered, as Emperor Wu of Han had done with merchants and powerful families. His policies towards the nobility had always been fair.

Except for restrictions on privilege and power, Chen Xi had never targeted the nobility in other areas. As long as they engaged in legitimate business, ran schools, and developed industries properly, Chen Xi never looked at them with a jaundiced eye. In Liu Bei's domain, the nobility enjoyed the same benefits as everyone else, and they also had to follow the same laws.

Indeed, Chen Xi had taken their land, but he had clearly stated from the beginning that they would be compensated later, and he had provided significant support in commerce. Otherwise, those who followed his lead wouldn't be making such a fortune now. Of course, if you compare yourself to the Mi family, there's no way you can compete.

Similarly, the plan to develop the Northeast Plain was a big pit, but it was filled with gold. Chen Xi's goal was simply to develop that land as quickly as possible.

For this reason, he planned to use this opportunity to integrate the power of the nobility from behind the scenes, driven by morality, honor, and benefits. In this regard, Chen Xi could confidently say he was genuinely providing benefits to the nobility. After this, the thousands of acres of land owned by noble families would multiply into vast, fertile fields.

These were tangible benefits, so even if the nobility eventually realized the full picture, there wouldn't be much to complain about. They might grumble that Chen Xi was less than straightforward, pushing them into action without full disclosure.

The vast, uninhabited plains of the Northeast weren't difficult to cultivate, but relocating people there was a challenge, especially with the initial wave of settlers. In the Central Plains, Chen Xi had laid all the groundwork; the people weren't displaced or suffering. In such a situation, if the government tried to force migration, it would surely cause widespread unrest.

Even if this move was beneficial for both the people and the state, under the prevailing mindset of the common folk—deeply attached to their ancestral lands and content with their current well-being—the plan would likely result in significant loss of public support, and Liu Bei and Chen Xi might never see the successful development of the Northeast.

However, if the nobility were involved, they would have no choice but to relocate their servants, private soldiers, and laborers. Faced with the prospect of owning too much land to fully cultivate and failing to meet the requirements of their agreements, they would be forced to relocate even more people.

Chapter 722: You Really Don't Have to Do This

At this point, as long as Chen Xi gave his tacit approval, the tenant farmers who had once been vassals of the noble families would migrate to the northeast under the nobles' direction.

By then, even if the common people wanted to curse their misfortune, they wouldn't have any grounds to blame Chen Xi and Liu Bei. The nobility would share the public's grievances, and with Chen Xi providing additional land to the people via the nobility, the development of the vast northeastern plains would be practically guaranteed. Moreover, both the commoners and the nobles would receive their fair share, easing the government's burden and internal tensions.

Sometimes, even if you have a brilliant strategy, you need to be able to implement it. Otherwise, even if you know it's beneficial, if you can't show the people tangible results, how could the short-sighted common folk possibly follow your lead?

The people desire tangible benefits that they can see with their own eyes. If you can't provide those, they might tolerate it for a while, but over time, don't be surprised if your formerly loyal citizens turn into troublesome dissenters.

"Do you have any advice for us, the noble families?" Chen Shang asked with a smile. After their deep conversation, he had come to understand Chen Xi's attitude towards the nobility. It wasn't exactly favorable, but at the end of the day, Chen Xi was still a product of the noble class, so Chen Shang decided to hear him out.

"It's not so much advice, just some suggestions. If you're willing to listen, great. If not, that's fine too," Chen Xi said, shaking his head.

"Go ahead, Zichuan, say what you will," Chen Shang responded, observing Chen Xi's calm demeanor.

"If the nobility wants power to remain in their hands forever, if they want privileges to always be by their side, they must be willing to make sacrifices," Chen Xi said, looking directly at Chen Shang. "Only with sacrifice can there be rewards. If the nobility wants to gain these things legitimately, they need to offer something of equal value."

Chen Shang fell silent. He understood what Chen Xi was saying, but he knew that the interests of the state and the interests of the noble families could never fully align. There would inevitably come a time when the two would clash.

"You've misunderstood. The interests of the state and the nobility don't have to be in conflict," Chen Xi continued calmly. "Although it requires the nobility to keep their greed in check, I believe that's a more stable approach than risking the entire family on the slim hope of a sudden windfall."

"If the interests of the state and the noble families could always align, we wouldn't mind curbing our greed. No one wants to risk the downfall of their entire family for some faint hope," Chen Shang said in a steady voice. After all, what family would willingly risk annihilation unless they were forced into a corner?

"That's good to hear. Honestly, I don't understand why you haven't seen this problem in the past few centuries. In truth, aligning state and noble interests is entirely possible. Just look at now—Tai Shan is expanding, and the noble families are being pulled along with it," Chen Xi nodded, speaking casually.

Chen Shang remained silent, carefully listening to Chen Xi. He wasn't entirely sure what Chen Xi was getting at.

"Let me put it this way: if the government controls one-third of the power, the noble families another third, and the emperor the final third, the world would be stable," Chen Xi said, not caring whether Chen Shang fully understood.

"But most of the time, it's impossible to be that balanced. However, as long as no one party holds more than half of the power, there shouldn't be a problem. Even if one party does hold more than half, as long as everyone's goals are the same, it won't matter," Chen Xi continued. Chen Shang caught onto something but couldn't fully grasp it.

"There's no point in discussing this too deeply. Let me ask you a straightforward question: when is it that everyone's efforts align towards the same goal?" Chen Xi asked, noticing Chen Shang's thoughtful expression.

"During times of war, when there's a drive to unify the land. At such times, the goals of the noble families and the ruler are aligned because a unified land brings the greatest benefits to both," Chen Shang responded. "Afterward, they can even coexist peacefully for decades."

"Exactly," Chen Xi clapped his hands. "The nobility and the state can actually move in unison. Sometimes, dying for your family is also dying for your country. You could very well be on the same path."

"But once the war ends, the noble families and the state gradually drift apart. Over time, the bonds formed during mutual support are eventually erased," Chen Shang calmly recounted a truth that had been proven time and time again: the interests of the state and the nobility would inevitably clash.

"Hah, then why focus on internal strife? Look outward. The world is vast, and you don't even know how large it is. Why not give it a try? Internally, conflict is inevitable. Externally, when has the Han Empire ever disappointed the nobility? Why not use your power to erode other nations? As long as you can work through certain channels in the Han Empire..." Chen Xi's calm voice took on an almost hypnotic quality, sending shivers down Chen Shang's spine while filling his mind with endless possibilities. Indeed, the neighboring states were all vassals of the Han Empire, but when had they ever fulfilled their obligations? Taking action against them was only just.

"Within the Han Empire, the noble families are strong, but the state is stronger. But in those other countries? I have a rough idea of the Chen family's strength. Five Chen families could subdue a small

country, hand over protection fees to the state, and share the spoils—how much would that be?" Chen Xi laid out the facts calmly.

"The interests of the state and the nobility would align. Even if they didn't, the protection fees would make them align. The nobility would grow stronger, and if necessary, they could even enlist the border troops to help. Open up the whole system, maybe even pull everyone along to form a collective," Chen Shang finished Chen Xi's sentence, his mind racing with the implications.

The nobility still can't change their core thinking. Oh well, I won't push them. Let them do as they please, Chen Xi thought, feeling a bit exasperated. He hadn't meant to suggest this, but the nobility had interpreted it that way, so what could he say? Judging by Chen Shang's tone, it was clear the nobility had done similar things before.

"Interpret it however you like. The nobility is more practical than the state—that's something you must understand. The nobility seeks profit, while the state seeks morality. When morality and profit clash, you can step in," Chen Xi continued, not bothering to clarify his earlier statements.

"The nobility's virtue applies only to its own. We don't have to concern ourselves with others. Seeking profit isn't wrong, and when the state's morality clashes with profit, we're in a better position to handle it. The problem is, the state doesn't trust us," Chen Shang acknowledged Chen Xi's words.

Chapter 723: Prioritizing the Greater Good

"That's because you've acted too dangerously in the past, so we had no choice but to be cautious with you. The stronger the power, the greater the potential for destruction—that's something you should understand. If your interests align with those of the state, your growth also means the state's growth, so no one will stop you," Chen Xi said, leaving the rest for them to grasp on their own.

The reason Chen Xi was willing to say this much was that, despite their many faults in another timeline, the noble families had not yet had the opportunity to implement the nine-rank system in this one. He wouldn't dismiss them entirely because they still served a purpose.

In Chen Xi's vision of the future Han Dynasty, the moral principles of the noble families would still be necessary, though those principles would need to align with the interests of the state.

These were all matters Chen Xi had to consider carefully. Compared to the Confucian scholars who emerged after the Song Dynasty, Chen Xi valued the morality of the noble families more. Moreover, the ethical standards of the Confucian scholars of the late Han period were still commendable, at least for this era.

After further conversation with Chen Shang, who left deep in thought, Chen Xi was left to ponder. Chen Shang had achieved his objective but had also been presented with more questions.

"Let's hope the noble families continue on this path and don't repeat the past by blocking the upward mobility of the vast majority of the population. Their moral integrity is indeed intact, but when sharp class divisions arise, even the most flawless morality becomes a tragedy for other classes," Chen Xi muttered to himself after seeing Chen Shang off, watching as his carriage disappeared into the distance.

Afterward, Chen Xi went to his study and recorded the day's events, noting down all the key points.

"Chen Bo, please deliver this letter to Lord Xuande. If he asks about my intentions, tell him to let Jia Wenhe and Li Wenru handle it," Chen Xi instructed his steward after folding the letter and handing it over.

"Rest assured, Master," the steward replied, accepting the letter with a respectful bow before leaving swiftly.

Meanwhile, Jia Xu and Li You were ready to close the net. They had discovered the most critical piece of information: Yuan Shao's army had already reached Fenggao. Although several noble families had tried to cover it up, Li You had easily detected the discrepancies through the household registration system, leading him to the truth.

"These noble families are truly audacious, daring to use their caravans to conceal Yuan Shao's elite troops," Li You said with a slight shake of his head, his eyes flashing with coldness. His opinion of the noble families was far from positive, especially considering their role in abandoning Liangzhou, which had descended into chaos partly due to their actions.

"This likely isn't the first time they've done this. They seem quite familiar with these tactics, suggesting they've made similar preparations before," Jia Xu remarked calmly. He had suspected Yuan Shao would make a move, and now his suspicions were confirmed.

"The household registration system has some loopholes—or rather, we've been too lenient in our management of migration between provinces. We've been lax in our inspections due to our efforts to increase the population, relying too much on the local noble families' assurances. But this time, we can root them out completely," Li You's voice carried a hint of killing intent as he spoke.

"It seems Yuan Benchu has indeed planted spies among us. If that's the case, these noble families are the true enemy. We can follow the clues and eliminate all of these spies," Jia Xu sensed Li You's murderous intent, but at this stage, more aggressive measures were necessary.

Just as Li You and Jia Xu were discussing when to send the signal, Liu Bei arrived, holding the letter from Chen Xi. Without saying much, he handed the letter to Jia Xu. A single glance was enough for Jia Xu to understand the critical points.

"This is good news for us. As for the promises Zichuan made to the noble families, they align perfectly with our next steps," Jia Xu said, passing the letter to Li You. "As we suspected, there's internal conflict within the noble families."

"My lord, when shall we proceed with the plan?" Li You asked after reading the letter, showing no objection to the promises Chen Xi had made.

"The plan must commence as soon as possible. We can't delay the unification of the northern provinces any longer. His Majesty is still waiting for us to rescue him. The recent reports from Ziyang are not encouraging—Yuan Benchu's subordinates, Xun Chen and Chunyu Qiong, have already engaged them," Liu Bei said, his expression resolute.

"Ziyang has encountered Xun Chen?" Jia Xu frowned, then looked at Liu Bei. "With Ziyang's capabilities, dealing with Xun Chen shouldn't be too difficult, especially with Zijian and Wenze supporting him. There shouldn't be any major problems."

"The situation isn't ideal. According to Ziyang, Chunyu Qiong is merely a minor threat; Xun Chen, however, is a formidable opponent. Ziyang mentioned that many of his strategies have been countered, and he suspects that Xun Chen's spiritual abilities are putting him at a growing disadvantage," Liu Bei explained, recalling the private letter he had received from Liu Ye.

Jia Xu and Li You exchanged glances, understanding the implications.

"Did Ziyang suggest any solutions or request reinforcements?" Li You asked, bowing slightly.

"He didn't request reinforcements. He said he would do his best to stall them but lacks the strength to rescue the Emperor on his own. He's considering whether to enlist the help of Cao Mengde, leaving it to His Majesty to decide who will protect him—Ziyang or Cao Mengde," Liu Bei replied, summarizing Liu Ye's letter.

Jia Xu and Li You exchanged another look, both understanding the underlying message.

"I don't trust Cao Cao. His actions in Xu Province, where he took revenge on the common people, make me doubt his intentions. Even if he claims to be loyal to the Han, I suspect his motives are far from pure," Li You responded immediately.

"You can't judge him so harshly. While Cao Mengde was wrong in Xu Province, he was avenging his father. Moreover, he later admitted his mistake publicly. During the incident in Luoyang, he was the first to pursue Dong Zhuo, proving himself a loyal servant of the Han," Jia Xu interjected, maintaining a neutral expression. He understood Liu Ye's intentions all too well.

"Ziyang made a similar argument, but I'm still uneasy," Liu Bei admitted, his expression troubled.

"There's no need to worry, my lord. Yuan Shao is the true enemy of the Han Dynasty. If he seizes the Emperor, our efforts to restore the Han will lose their legitimacy, and we'll be at a severe disadvantage," Jia Xu urged, reminding Liu Bei of his oath. "My lord, do you remember your vow?"

"..." Liu Bei hesitated, then gradually regained his composure. "I understand. First, we deal with Yuan Shao and secure the Han Dynasty. If Cao Mengde shows any disrespect to His Majesty, I will not forgive him!"

Chapter 724: The Escape Plan

Neither Jia Xu nor Li You took Liu Ye's report from Liu Bei very seriously. Besides their confidence in Liu Ye's abilities, they also had great faith in the offensive and defensive combination of Hua Xiong and Yu Jin.

In their minds, although Xun Shen had long served as Yuan Shao's strategist, he hadn't achieved much. Instead, he was known for uniting figures like Tian Feng, Ju Shou, Xu You, and Shen Pei in internal affairs.

As for military accomplishments, Xun Shen had no notable achievements and mostly stayed at the central command without leading independent expeditions. To Jia Xu and Li You, Xun Shen seemed more focused on political strategy.

Although Jia Xu and Li You questioned Xun Shen's abilities compared to those of Xun Yu, Xun You, Xun Yan, or Xun Yue, they weren't overly concerned. Liu Ye was an exceptionally capable strategist, and with Liu Bei's support, they believed the situation was under control.

However, this was just their speculation. The reality, as Liu Ye experienced it, was far more challenging. He was beginning to suspect that Xun Shen's spiritual abilities might be as he feared, especially after suffering several small defeats at Xun Shen's hands.

Although Xun Shen had only won small victories, Liu Ye could feel the increasing pressure Xun Shen was exerting on him. If things continued this way, Liu Ye worried that Xun Shen might successfully prevent him from rescuing the Emperor, allowing Cao Cao to take the opportunity instead.

Similarly, Xun Shen, stationed in Sili, also found Liu Ye a formidable opponent. Despite repeatedly thwarting Liu Ye's strategies after seeing through his initial feints, Xun Shen hadn't managed to decisively defeat him. Liu Ye's strategy constantly evolved, keeping Xun Shen on his toes.

Xun Shen's spiritual ability allowed him to gradually understand his opponent's strategic thinking patterns after each encounter. The more he faced the same opponent, the better he understood their tactics, eventually anticipating their moves. This ability made him an increasingly difficult adversary for any strategist, often leading them to lose confidence as their plans were consistently foiled.

However, this ability also depended on intelligence. While those with lower intelligence might occasionally devise high-level strategies, it required much more effort and time, creating a natural limitation.

In other words, even if Xun Shen had the same thought patterns as a top strategist like Zhuge Liang, there would still be a delay in reacting to the situation. Zhuge Liang might have already set his plan in motion while Xun Shen was still devising a rough strategy.

Nevertheless, such situations were rare. With his intelligence level, Xun Shen was well-equipped to handle most scenarios, making it increasingly difficult for any strategist to outmaneuver him after losing the initial engagement.

Liu Ye found himself in precisely this situation. After his initial feint was seen through, he fell into Xun Shen's rhythm, turning the situation into a constant struggle. If not for Liu Ye's spiritual ability to shift thinking modes, he would have been defeated long ago. Liu Ye's claim that he was unable to rescue the Emperor was sincere; without his spiritual ability, he had no counter to Xun Shen's strategies. Even with it, Xun Shen's relentless pressure made every move a challenge.

Xun Shen's main objectives were to rescue the Emperor and, more importantly, to prevent Liu Bei from gaining control of the Emperor. Seeing that he couldn't defeat Liu Ye outright, Xun Shen decided to take a similar approach—stalling Liu Ye while reaching out to Cao Cao.

Although the alliance between Yuan Shao and Cao Cao was shaky, Xun Shen was willing to try. Even if Cao Cao managed to take control of the Emperor, it would be far better than letting Liu Bei do so.

Meanwhile, in a development neither Yuan Shao nor Liu Bei anticipated, Sima Lang had successfully convinced Ma Teng and Han Sui to rebel in Liang Province. With disturbances once again flaring up, Li Jue mobilized the Xiliang cavalry to head to the Three Adjuncts region, intending to negotiate with Ma Teng and Han Sui.

With little friction among the four Xiliang generals at the time, Fan Chou and Guo Si were tasked with handling the forces of Cao Cao, Yuan Shao, and Liu Bei, while Li Jue marched toward Liang Province. The ailing Zhang Ji remained in charge of Chang'an, with his nephew Zhang Xiu by his side. Though Zhang Ji's deployments were reasonable, fate had other plans.

After Li Jue left, Zhang Ji dedicated himself to safeguarding the interests of the Xiliang soldiers in Chang'an. Despite provocations from certain court officials, Zhang Ji maintained a restrained response, keeping the city under tight control despite its rising tensions.

However, due to his deteriorating health, Zhang Ji gradually handed over more responsibilities to Zhang Xiu, who, though capable in military matters, struggled with governance. Even with Zhang Ji's guidance, Zhang Xiu's administration was far from effective.

Realizing that his nephew was not cut out for leadership beyond the battlefield, Zhang Ji felt increasingly despondent. With no biological children of his own, Zhang Ji had raised Zhang Xiu from a young age, investing all his hopes in him. Faced with Zhang Xiu's limitations, Zhang Ji reluctantly turned to external assistance.

Just as he had once brought Jia Xu to Zhang Xiu's side, Zhang Ji now set his sights on Zhong Yao, believing that aligning with a wise advisor would be safer than seeking another lord. With this plan in mind, Zhang Ji, carrying a collection of Cai Yong's manuscripts as a gift, led his nephew to Zhong Yao's residence.

Unbeknownst to Zhang Ji, every move he made—and even his thoughts—had already been anticipated by Zhong Yao and Yang Xiu. As Zhang Ji made his way toward Zhong Yao's estate, the pieces of their long-laid plan began to fall into place, signaling the start of the Emperor's escape.

Chapter 725: A Fatal Move

Jia Xu and Li You were unaware of many of these developments. Their focus now was to set everything in motion and guide the situation to unfold according to their plans.

"Zi Chuan really has a grand vision," Man Chong remarked as he read the proposals in Chen Xi's letter, a glimmer of hope flashing in his eyes. "Who was the first to spread the rumor about the emergence of the Tianren Two Cauldrons, or where did it originate?"

"I don't know," Jia Xu replied, shaking his head with a blank expression, signaling that he too was unsure.

"If Wen He doesn't know, then it's truly intriguing. Either someone has orchestrated this on a grand scale, or it might actually be real," Man Chong commented, his usual stern demeanor giving way to a fervent excitement. The opportunity to engrave laws and human values on such an artifact was a long-held dream of Legalists, and Man Chong wouldn't let it pass by.

"Perhaps," Jia Xu responded briefly, glancing at Li You. Though Jia Xu hadn't uncovered the source of the rumor, it had spread widely across the land, evading his detection. This led Jia Xu to suspect those closest to him.

"We'll find out soon enough," Li You said calmly, lifting his eyelids slightly. He knew very well the origins of the rumor—it was his own doing. "I believe that law, morality, and civilization should coexist."

"Thank you," Man Chong responded, understanding that Li You was endorsing the idea of engraving laws onto the Tianren Two Cauldrons, thus solidifying the rule of law as eternal.

"We'll discuss it when the time comes. For now, let's focus on dealing with the rebellion. The aristocratic families have divided into three categories. Bo Ning, you'll handle the third category," Jia Xu said, addressing Man Chong. "Wenru, you'll take care of the second category. As for the last category, once everything is settled, Zizhong and I will handle it."

"Leave it to me. I'll make sure they understand where they've gone wrong," Man Chong replied, his stern demeanor returning.

"Report!" Just as Li You was about to speak, a messenger hurried in, holding a red envelope.

"It's time..." Xun Yue, who had remained silent and passive like a piece of wood, finally spoke. The red envelope signified a situation just short of the most urgent level—an indication that what they had been anticipating had begun.

Jia Xu quickly took the letter, scanned it briefly, deciphered the oracle text, converted it into numbers, and cross-referenced it with the Book of Songs before giving his analysis.

"It has begun, just as we predicted. The Yuan family in Yuzhou has mobilized, and our inside sources report that Zhou Gongjin has also agreed to dispatch troops. This means the Yuan family's forces will far exceed our estimates," Jia Xu stated calmly, tossing the letter onto the table.

"The forces we have stationed in Xuzhou are insufficient," Xun Yue commented, narrowing his eyes and looking at Li You. "Some of the Xuzhou families might actually rebel. Those in the second category may fall into a lower category."

“The northern campaign requires internal unity. It’s better to eliminate these hidden dangers early on. As for the gap in Xuzhou’s forces, hasn’t Zijing already moved to Yanzhou? A small difference in forces isn’t significant,” Li You retorted, his approach undeniably harsh but necessary given the families’ previous attempts to undermine him.

Xun Yue was momentarily stunned, recalling that Lu Su had indeed arrived in Linyi and conducted a troop exchange, with Gan Ning and Fa Zheng moving to Shanyang, while Zhuge Liang and Taishi Ci moved to Jiyin.

“You’re insane!” Xun Yue suddenly realized the implications, his face showing shock as he looked at Jia Xu and Li You.

“So it seems that Xiu Ruo has figured it out,” Jia Xu said calmly, unperturbed by Xun Yue’s reaction. He expected that once everything was laid bare, Xun Yue would deduce the strategy.

“What if a single corps can’t hold Xiapi? Do we really need such a risky plan? Even if the aristocrats in Yuzhou have a tendency to support the winning side, they wouldn’t betray Yuan Shu at this time!” Xun Yue argued, understanding the mindset of the aristocratic families better than anyone.

“A risky plan? On the contrary, after this, Yuan Gonglu should exit the stage of history,” Jia Xu replied evenly. Fa Zheng’s plan might be audacious, but it was undeniable that this one move could cripple Yuan Shu beyond recovery.

“Exit history?” Xun Yue almost laughed in disbelief. “Do you think Yuan Shao won’t see this as a golden opportunity? If our war with Yuan Shu doesn’t end in a decisive victory within three months, we’ll be forced into a death match with the entire Yuan family. I don’t see our forces easily defeating Yuan Shu’s 100,000 troops. That’s 100,000 soldiers, not 100,000 pigs!”

“Yuan Shu will be out of the picture within a month. As for why—remember that we’ve already fought through Yuzhou once before. This time, it’s even better. Once we sever the Liangguo-Runan line, Liu Jingsheng and Liu Jiayu will both know what to do,” Jia Xu explained calmly. “We’re taking everything north of the Huai River!”

Xun Yue silently processed Jia Xu's words, realizing he had been too emotionally involved to see the full picture. Now that Jia Xu had laid it out, Xun Yue understood. For Zhou Yu, currently stationed in Shouchun, his primary concern was Sun Ce, not the Yuzhou forces attacking Xuzhou.

Even if Zhou Yu learned that his 100,000 troops' supply lines had been cut off by Liu Bei, he would prioritize rescuing Sun Ce. If he failed to do so, the moment the situation became clear, Liu Biao, Liu Zhang, and Liu Bei's auxiliary forces would undoubtedly make it their top priority to eliminate Sun Ce.

More crucially, Zhou Yu knew that the Yuan family was likely rejecting Sun Ce's involvement. If Zhou Yu didn't move to rescue Sun Ce, the Yuan family would abandon him, leaving Zhou Yu no choice but to lead the rescue personally. And it would have to be his naval forces.

This ensured that Fa Zheng and Gan Ning could safely take the northern Huai River. As for Zhou Yu's naval forces disembarking to rescue Sun Ce, Zhuge Liang would be there to meet them.

As for Xun Yue's concern that a single corps might not hold Xuzhou, it was valid. But a corps could defend Xiapi for a month, which was enough time for Fa Zheng and Gan Ning to march from Runan to Xuzhou and cut off Yuan Shu's entire route of retreat.

"A war of encirclement... Yuan Gonglu's forces are too spread out. Once we cut through the middle, he'll be unable to respond," Xun Yue murmured to himself. "What a ruthless strategy. So, it was you who manipulated Yuan Gonglu into relocating his capital. Did you anticipate this outcome from the start?"

Chapter 726: Chaos Unleashed

"Not exactly; we didn't foresee this exact scenario back then," Jia Xu reflected. Initially, Jia Xu and others merely considered that Yuzhou couldn't be relocated, and they couldn't just burn it down. After some deliberation, they decided to leave Yuzhou with some resources for a future confrontation, sparing themselves the trouble they encountered the first time.

As time passed, their thinking became more meticulous, leading to the current situation where they aimed to split Yuan Shu's forces into three.

"A middle strike to sever the line, then closing in for the kill—this is indeed a clever plan," Man Chong agreed, nodding. His military strategy was strong, though his expertise leaned more toward law enforcement.

"This tactic also makes me see some other hidden aspects of the strategy used by Xu You earlier. It seems that the intent might have been to divide our forces in Taishan, Qingzhou, and Xuzhou into three isolated regions," Xun Yue mused, realizing that one strategy could often be expanded into many insights.

"To truly make us defenseless, they would need to capture the entirety of Taishan. But Taishan is our defensive core. Of course, back then, Runan was also Yuan Shu's defensive center, but Yuan Shu abandoned it himself, exposing his weakness," Li You said with a cold smile. When Yuan Shu moved his capital, he never considered that Shouchun wasn't in the center of his territory.

"Xu You might have had such thoughts, but he likely never had the thorough preparation that we have now, poised to decide victory in one strike," Jia Xu shook his head. He didn't dismiss the possibility that Xu You had similar thoughts, but Taishan's defensive capabilities were far stronger than any possible offensive force Yuan Shao could muster. Any strategist who devises such a plan for others would certainly bolster their own defenses. To fail by one's own scheme would be a disgrace.

"Who among you will lead the forces to Xuzhou?" Jia Xu asked, looking at Li You and Man Chong.

"Wenru will go. I'll transfer my city management troops to him, retaining only the regular garrison," Man Chong stated, his expression stern.

"I'll ensure everything is timed perfectly and return as scheduled. I only need to take two thousand of the city management troops, leaving a thousand to defend the residences of the civil and military officials. If anything goes wrong, those will be prime targets," Li You calmly agreed to Man Chong's proposal.

"Strengthen the city's defenses. The aristocratic families may not be trustworthy. Yuan Shu's rallying cry will likely lead many to believe we are doomed, so be cautious about how we deal with them," Jia Xu remarked, not even glancing at Xun Yue as he spoke, showing no consideration for his feelings.

"Move the families of officials residing on the outskirts into the city center. Have them temporarily stay within the core area. Notify Han Mou to return to Taishan; suspend fieldwork for now. Also, summon Doctor Hua back to the city center and keep him from leaving for the time being. Relocate master craftsmen of the highest rank into the city as well. Enforce a curfew, starting at three-quarters past Shen hour," Li You added.

"I agree," Xun Yue, though unhappy with Jia Xu and Li You's attitude, acknowledged the soundness of their plan.

"I second that," Man Chong raised his hand.

"In three to five days at most, there will be a battle," Jia Xu said with a sinister smile. Although things were happening quickly, he saw this as good news.

Three days later, the aristocratic families had gathered some intelligence on Xuzhou. With Jia Xu no longer blocking the flow of information, the details of the situation in Xuzhou became increasingly clear. Some families, using their connections to the Yuzhou clans, learned the exact size of Yuan Shu's forces—eighty thousand strong!

Such a massive army, especially with Liu Bei's forces currently engaged with Yuan Shao, caused many families to see this as a critical opportunity. Even though Chen Xi had repelled Xu You's army, Xu You's presence had drawn away much of the already limited forces in Taishan.

Now, with Yuan Shu deploying his troops immediately after Liu Bei sent his forces to Yanzhou, Xuzhou, already weakened by its campaign to seize Yanzhou, was suddenly faced with an overwhelming force.

A storm was brewing, and the plans that had been laid out suddenly seemed like mere paper, easily discarded. Many families that had previously submitted to Liu Bei's might now saw a chance. Liu Xuan De's forces seemed stretched too thin.

Should they deliver a fatal blow to Liu Bei in the heart of his power? This became the question for many aristocratic families after Li You departed for Xuzhou with reinforcements. How to strike, and how hard, to bring Liu Bei under their control—these were the matters they now debated.

In this atmosphere of doubt and calculation, the aristocratic families convened again. But unlike the last gathering, this time it was virtually a council of the family heads.

However, before this meeting could even begin, the rebellion erupted. Those family heads present, hearing the battle cries outside, were momentarily stunned, and then realized they had been set up.

"Wang Yu, you're despicable!" Bai Ying shouted in fury at Wang Yu, who was seated at the head of the table. At this point, how could he not understand that Wang Yu had orchestrated this meeting with no good intentions?

"Hehehe, why so agitated?" Wang Yu responded coldly, completely unmoved by Bai Ying's anger.

"You've trapped our families in a snare!" Fang Chen also realized what was happening and yelled angrily.

"If it weren't for your constant hesitation, I wouldn't have had to resort to such measures. Our families should be standing atop the jade steps, overlooking the world, yet you've thrown away our dignity for some petty gain by submitting to Liu Bei's tyranny. You've disgraced the aristocracy!" Wang Yu scolded the crowd.

"I'll kill you!" Cheng Hui shouted furiously, drawing his sword and stepping forward. But before he could act, a man behind Wang Yu moved swiftly. A flash of a sword later, Cheng Hui's weapon was sliced in two, and his head rolled to the ground, blood splattering everywhere. The sudden violence threw the other family heads into disarray.

"Are you with Yuan Shao?" Chen Shang asked, taking a deep breath as he stepped forward.

"Yuan Benchu is also of the aristocracy, as am I. Does it matter whose side we're on? Elder Chen, please wait patiently. After tonight, you will be free to leave," Wang Yu replied, glancing at Chen Shang.

"Those of you who've allied with Yuan Benchu, step forward. At this point, there's no need to hide it. We're clearly your hostages," Chen Shang said, turning to the others.

Soon, seven or eight family heads stepped forward, bowed to Chen Shang, and then moved to stand by Wang Yu's side.

"Good, very good. You're truly formidable," Chen Shang said icily, his gaze sweeping over the defectors. These were the very people who had strongly advocated for peace with Liu Bei not long ago.

"The will of the people," the previously silent man beside Wang Yu remarked.

"The so-called 'will of the people'—yet you still need to coerce our family soldiers into this?" Chen Shang sneered. He wasn't worried about his safety; he had learned from multiple sources how important Chen Xi was, which also served as his shield.

Chapter 727: Awaiting the Dawn

"It's merely taking advantage of the situation," Han Xun replied, his tone calm. "Please hand over your family seals. By tonight, Fenggao will have new masters, putting your minds at ease."

"The Chen family's seal isn't with me, and you needn't overthink it. I'm just an elder of the Chen family," Chen Shang glanced at the others, his anger subsiding as he tried to stay composed. The current head of the Taishan Chen family was Chen Xi.

"The Chen family naturally requires no involvement, as Chen Hou is of great importance to us as well," Han Xun said, giving Chen Shang a glance. He then bent down to remove the jade pendant from Cheng Hui's waist, before standing up and looking at the other family heads.

"Sigh!" Bai Ying let out a long sigh, the first to hand over his bronze short sword to Han Xun. With the first person complying, the other family heads, albeit reluctantly, also handed over their family seals with expressions of resignation.

[As expected, Bai Ying has issues. Given the situation, let them be.] Chen Shang gave Bai Ying a quick glance, realizing that the others must understand this as well. But if they were willing to hand over their seals now, there were likely ulterior motives at play.

"My family's seal isn't with me, and I have nothing on me that could prove my identity," Deng Lun stepped forward, facing Han Xun directly. In such a critical moment, there were bound to be those who had thought ahead and brought nothing with them.

"The ones behind me are the same. We suspected something, so we brought nothing that could identify us. And tonight, no matter what happens, any family member or elder who dares to step outside has the right to execute anyone caught outside," Deng Lun said, meeting Han Xun's gaze with unwavering eyes.

"Hmph, aren't you afraid of dying here?" Han Xun's cold gaze swept over Deng Lun and the family heads standing behind him.

But surprisingly, Deng Lun relaxed, casually pulling up a chair to sit down. "I can give you face by allowing you to bind us. You can also kill us here, but the aristocratic families, when facing life or death, can sacrifice anyone, including me."

A cold light flashed in Han Xun's eyes, but Deng Lun remained utterly at ease, showing no trace of fear. The other family heads behind him were similarly unafraid.

"General Han, it's best not to kill these few. Since they were prepared, let's do as they said and bind them here," Wang Yu quickly stepped in, seeing that Deng Lun and the others showed no fear.

In Wang Yu's view, tonight held a high chance of victory, and depleting the strength of the Qingxu aristocracy didn't align with his interests. Later, he would need the Qingxu families to follow him in gaining more benefits from Yuan Shao.

"Hmph!" Han Xun snorted coldly but made no further move.

"Men, bind these people and take them to the secret room. Who else among you is like them?" Wang Yu ordered the private soldiers standing outside.

Another group of family heads stepped forward calmly, accounting for about one-fifth of all the heads present.

[What a pity that Cheng Hui was too hasty.] Chen Shang quietly turned his head, as if the door to the room no longer existed.

As the secret room's door closed, Deng Lun muttered to himself, "What gave you the confidence to blind yourself to the truth?"

"Let it be; we'll wait for the head of the Chen family to rescue us. Being tied up for one night is a small price to pay if it means our families can gain more. I wouldn't mind going through this a few more times," the head of the Shen family said with a wry smile.

"Let's see what tomorrow brings. Although I don't believe Yuan Benchu has any chance of victory, ever since Chen Zichuan settled here, Fenggao has grown rapidly. Let's wait for dawn," another family head added.

"Indeed, let's wait. I can tell they have no interest in tormenting us. In that case, why not focus on developing our families?" the head of the Han family said nonchalantly.

These were all open-minded family heads who, after realizing they couldn't keep up with Taishan's development speed, turned inward to seek knowledge and nourishment from Taishan, growing their strength in preparation for the future.

"Click." The head of the Zheng family, Zheng Tai, used a specially crafted bracelet to cut the ropes binding him. Stretching lazily, he remarked, "I think this is good news. We should form an alliance among our families."

"Zheng Gongye, how are you free to move?" Deng Lun suddenly noticed Zheng Tai leaning back in his chair, eating snacks.

"Hurry and untie us; I'm nearly suffocated." "Me too, I can't stand this anymore." "I've never suffered such indignity! How could you free yourself without helping us?"

Now that Zheng Tai had freed himself, the others began clamoring.

"I'll untie you right away," Zheng Tai quickly set to work, and soon all the family heads were free. They each sat in the chairs they had been tied to, sharing Zheng Tai's snacks.

"I feel much better now. Gongye, what was that thing you used?" Deng Lun asked.

"Wengong gave it to me," Zheng Tai replied, showing off the bracelet-like tool on his wrist. "My younger brother made it; not bad, right?"

"No wonder Wen Gong has a reputation as a skilled craftsman," one of the family heads praised, even in such circumstances. Zheng Hun was already well-known, even at this time. "I think the outcome is clear—Yuan Benchu is doomed."

"We were prepared," Shen Wen said with a sigh of relief.

"So, let's just wait for the result," Deng Lun said with satisfaction.

The night, which should have been peaceful due to the curfew, turned into chaos. The sounds of shouting and fighting echoed through the streets of Taishan.

The clouds in the sky grew thicker, and soldiers emerged continuously from the shops of families that had already aligned with Yuan Shao. Armed with the family seals, Han Xun began mobilizing the private soldiers of the aristocratic families.

Some private soldiers joined Han Xun without question upon seeing the family seal, while others fell into disarray, only to be suppressed by the increasing number of other families' private soldiers who took over.

Of course, there were also families that simply did not open their doors, no matter how hard they were knocked. While some might see this as foolish, these family heads were wise in the larger scheme.

For those who couldn't be swayed, Yuan Shao's lower-ranked officers had no better plan. Once Han Xun's signal arrow was shot, all of Yuan Shao's troops and private soldiers gathered, preparing to storm the core of Fenggao—where the families of both Yuan Shao's and Liu Bei's high-ranking generals and officials resided.

As the family soldiers, servants, and private troops gathered, Han Xun and Gongsun Du led a force of three thousand Yuan Shao soldiers and several thousand private soldiers from various families.

At the same time, due to Yuan Shao's plan, or whether it was out of ignorance or complicity, aristocratic families across Taishan, Qingzhou, and Xuzhou revolted. However, compared to other regions, the rebellion in Fenggao was by far the most significant!

Chapter 728: Surprisingly Strong

The private soldiers of the aristocratic families were far inferior to Liu Bei's garrison troops, but they compensated for this with their stealth and unpredictability, ambushing and taking out quite a few garrison soldiers through accumulated small victories.

As for the core city management troops, they faced no such problems. Even when divided into teams of five, their well-maintained large shields were more than enough to handle the aristocratic soldiers armed only with simple sabers.

"You're digging your own graves!" Man Chong suddenly appeared on the street, shouting angrily as he charged forward, sword in hand, dressed in a thick silk robe. With a single strike, he disemboweled one of the private soldiers, then kicked another in the chest.

"Get him! Kill this tyrant Man Chong!" one of the aristocratic youth shouted excitedly upon seeing Man Chong in action. "Tonight will be your last!"

"My last? You'll be the one to die first!" Man Chong retorted, swiftly firing a three-arrow crossbow, killing the arrogant youth on the spot.

Meanwhile, on a high platform outside the Jingling Palace, Jia Xu observed Man Chong's fierce combat with a slight twitch in his eye. It was true that during the Han Dynasty, there were no pure civil officials—everyone could fight—but seeing Man Chong in action, even he was taken aback by how formidable the man was.

"This martial skill is better than most military officers," Xun Yue remarked, also stunned by the display. No wonder Man Chong had volunteered to play the fool earlier; it turned out he could fight remarkably well!

"Zhao Yue, Qin Qi, Lian Yue, He An, the four of you, each lead a hundred men. Show them that numbers aren't everything!" Man Chong ordered after killing another armored Yuan Shao soldier with a crossbow bolt.

"Yes, sir!" Zhao Yue and the others saluted, their expressions impassive as they lowered their large shields and charged into the enemy ranks.

"Die!" Qin Qi roared, sweeping his spear in a wide arc, sending several enemies flying. A faint silver glow appeared on his body, the embodiment of the military spirit, despite their reduced numbers.

"Strike!" Lian Yue slashed diagonally, severing the arms of several opponents before thrusting his sword into another's chest.

"Kill!" He An, wielding twin blades, led his soldiers into the fray, slashing fiercely at the enemy. His comrades covered his flanks, blocking enemy attacks as he cut down foes with brutal efficiency. The four of them, leading their teams, carved through the central avenue, cutting down the opposition with surgical precision, unscathed despite the rain of arrows, swords, and spears.

Soon, more city management troops joined in, driving the Yuan Shao soldiers and rebellious private soldiers back toward North Street with relentless force.

"It has begun," Li You observed the flames in Fenggao from ten miles away. "Leave six hundred men here. The rest, move out. Kill all rebels without mercy!"

"Yes, sir!" The elite city management troops saluted and quickly disappeared into the night, weapons at the ready.

"Follow me. We'll start raiding homes. Any family with well-guarded gates but no private soldiers is to be seized!" Li You commanded coldly, leading the remaining veterans toward Fenggao's eastern gate. The southeast housed the aristocratic shops, while the northeast was where the aristocrats lived.

"Simaling, what brings you to the Zhen family?" Madam Zhang sneered at Simaling.

"I'm here on behalf of my lord, Yuan Benchu. He requires your assistance," Simaling replied with a slight bow.

"Not interested. The Zhen family only deals in trade and does not involve itself in the struggles of lords," Madam Zhang said dismissively, her eyes narrowing as she refused Simaling outright.

"I'm afraid it's not up to you," Simaling replied, drawing his sword to seize her. But before he could move, a flash of red filled his vision, and then there was nothing.

"Hmph, after what happened with Zhao Zilong, did you think the Zhen family wouldn't be cautious? How dare a mere brute threaten us," Madam Zhang scoffed, glancing at her maid, who had just slain Simaling. Though not at the level of an inner energy master, a fighter capable of reaching the Refinement Realm could certainly be hired if one had the wealth.

"Seal the gates. Kill anyone who dares to intrude tonight!" Madam Zhang ordered sternly. Despite being a woman in charge, she carried the authority needed to lead.

"Hmph, do you think a mere few hundred soldiers can stop my army?" Gongsun Du sneered, surprised that a mere handful of silver-armored troops were pushing back his much larger force.

"Everyone, it's been a while since we've been in a real battle. How about we see who can take down that commander with the red-tasseled helmet first?" He An shouted, pointing his blade at Gongsun Du.

"That head is mine!" Qin Qi roared, spear in hand, charging toward Gongsun Du.

"Ridiculous! I'll repay the general's honor and rank with that head!" Lian Yue charged as well, and the soldiers behind them unleashed a fierce tiger-like aura. Shields and swords in hand, they mowed down the enemy ranks with ease, like tigers among sheep.

"As expected, my most elite troops!" Liu Bei watched with pride as his city management troops, vastly outnumbered, tore through the enemy ranks with the ferocity of a tiger surveying its territory.

"I'll personally drum up support!" Liu Bei rolled up his sleeves, grabbing a drumstick and striking the drum hard. "Boom! Boom! Boom!"

The deep sound of the drum echoed throughout Fenggao, answered by a surge of silver-white cloud energy that grew denser by the second. At the same time, an even larger cloud appeared in the north—reinforcements had arrived!

"Brothers, crush these traitors!" He An shouted, "The lord himself is cheering for us. Kill!"

The reinforcements surged forward, inspired by the drumbeats, their strength amplified. Swords and shields in hand, they cut through the enemy ranks like a hot knife through butter, quickly reaching Gongsun Du's rear and killing him before he could react.

"How unlucky!" He An spat, his sword not long enough to land the killing blow before others took down Gongsun Du.

"There's still a big fish left. Some of them are setting fires, hoping to scatter you. Let's split into teams of ten; kill any arsonists on sight!" Man Chong ordered, unfazed by the spreading flames. Chen Xi had anticipated such scenarios when the city was built.

"Good, I haven't had enough killing! Ten-man teams, led by their leaders—kill all arsonists!" He An ordered coldly.

Over the years, Taishan's enforced veteran retirement policy ensured that those who stayed behind were ruthless veterans. Tonight, they finally demonstrated their terrifying power.

Chapter 729: The People's Counterattack

Xun Yue watched as the city management troops cut through the enemy ranks like a hot knife through butter. His eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. Though Man Chong had often boasted about the strength of his troops, Xun Yue had never had a direct impression—until now.

"This is ridiculously strong..." Xun Yue felt his tongue tying up as he tried to process what he was witnessing. The sheer strength of the troops seemed almost unnatural.

"Heh, this is perfectly normal. Every soldier in the city management unit has survived at least fifteen battles. These veterans are hardened warriors who know nothing but killing," Jia Xu said, doing his best to maintain a calm demeanor, though even he was somewhat taken aback.

"But this is too much. I haven't seen a single soldier fall," Xun Yue stammered, unable to believe his eyes. It truly was like slaughtering chickens.

"That's because of their army soul. In battle, as long as their blood hasn't all been spilled, they won't fall. They will fight to the death to defend this place. And this place, which they have always defended, resonates with their will, making this their ideal battlefield," Liu Bei, who was beating the war drum, answered in Jia Xu's stead.

"With every enemy they kill and every comrade they lose, their strength increases. Buried here are countless of their fallen brothers, and each time they pay their respects, they connect with this place. Here, they are the strongest army in the world," Liu Bei's deep voice explained the entire phenomenon.

"Does this only happen in Fenggao? In other places, their strength probably only spikes when their comrades die in battle. So, this is what an army soul is... No wonder Chen Xi said that an army soul is the manifestation of will. Here, they have inherited the will of the fallen, making them incredibly powerful," Jia Xu murmured, watching the city management troops engage in relentless slaughter. Here, they were indeed invincible.

"So, we really can't tell just how strong our most elite troops are," Chen Xi remarked as he stepped out of the shadows. Although he had anticipated the strength of their elite unit, seeing it in action was beyond what he had imagined.

"To gauge the strength of our elite troops, we'd likely need to pit them against an equally elite force, perhaps something on par with the first-rank armies," Jia Xu replied, taking up the conversation. "Our backup plans have become a joke—an army with a soul is a monster!"

"They're likely only this powerful within Fenggao. Outside of this city, their strength would decline with distance, though they'd still be formidable—just not to the extent of being invincible in battle," Chen Xi added, his tone a mix of awe and resignation.

"Their will, fortified by the army soul, enhances their defense, while the resonance with this place amplifies their combat ability. The manifestation of their will to fight until the last drop of blood is spilled gives them unmatched resilience. No army can defeat them here," Liu Bei said solemnly, though he omitted that his presence was also significantly boosting the unit's effectiveness.

Liu Bei's innate ability was terrifying in that it amplified the strength of those who shared his ideals. Since the city management troops were fundamentally aligned with Liu Bei's beliefs, his direct command significantly increased their power.

"This is good. These three thousand soldiers are enough to ensure the safety of Fenggao," Chen Xi said calmly. "After this battle, we can abandon the first-class fortifications I had built for the city's defense."

"They will be my penultimate line of defense," Liu Bei said, drumming with a grave expression as he watched the city management troops continue their relentless pursuit of the enemy.

The moment Liu Bei began drumming, the situation reversed. All over the city, other drums responded in kind, and the soldiers who had taken shelter in the homes of the citizens sprang into action.

Rewinding to the moment Liu Bei first struck the drum, in one of Fenggao's homes, a soldier clad in armor quietly waited by the door.

"Ermu, why aren't you out patrolling? What are you doing in my house?" Li Tiao asked, twirling a pair of iron balls with an irritated expression.

"Man Chong ordered us Fenggao soldiers to return to our homes tonight. I don't have a home, so I came to yours, big brother," Li Ermu replied with a grin.

"Go cut a piece of meat and slice it up for some drinks," Li Tiao said to his wife, shooting a glare at Li Ermu.

"No need, sister-in-law. I'll be heading out again soon," Li Ermu waved his hand, signaling that he wasn't here for a meal.

"Is something wrong?" Li Tiao asked, his brow furrowing.

Li Ermu hesitated before speaking, "Big brother, there's going to be a rebellion against Lord Xuande tonight. I came back to prepare for it."

"Explain clearly," Li Tiao demanded, his tone darkening as he stopped twirling the iron balls.

"Big brother, don't ask too much. Just by telling you this, I'm already breaking military discipline. Most soldiers don't even know what's happening," Li Ermu said, growing more anxious.

Before Li Tiao could ask further, the sounds of battle reached them from outside, and even the somewhat dim-witted Li Tiao understood what was happening.

As three drumbeats echoed through the night, Li Ermu tied a yellow cloth around his head, opened the door, and charged out with his spear. At the same time, every soldier hidden in the citizens' homes burst into the streets.

"How dare they rebel against Lord Xuande?" Li Tiao's eyes darkened as he pulled out the spear he had used for over a decade from beneath his bed. Wrapping a yellow cloth around his head, he prepared to head out.

"Husband..." His wife, gripping a kitchen knife, looked at him with a mix of worry and sorrow.

"Stay at home. I'm going to kill those bastards. I've only enjoyed a few years of good life under Lord Xuande, and now someone dares to rebel!" Li Tiao shouldered his spear and rushed out, not daring to meet his wife's eyes.

"Make sure you come back..." Her voice, tinged with sorrow, lingered in the air.

"Don't worry. Lock the door behind me, and don't open it unless I knock," Li Tiao called back as he left.

"Be careful..." Her voice faded as the door closed.

Once outside, Li Tiao saw Liu Bei's soldiers clashing with a group of well-armored enemies. He hesitated for a moment but quickly understood the situation and thrust his spear forward, skewering two of the enemy soldiers like they were nothing.

"Ermu, didn't you say there was a rebellion? Why are there Yuan Shao's soldiers here? Don't tell me Yuan Shao's army has arrived!" Li Tiao exclaimed as he continued to thrust his spear, killing several more Yuan Shao soldiers with ease.

"How should I know? Just kill them all! But big brother, you're way too strong!" Li Ermu reflexively responded before realizing how effortlessly Li Tiao was dispatching the enemy, like he was slaughtering chickens.

Chapter 730: The Hidden Experts Among the People

"Mere foot soldiers!" Li Tiao growled as he continued to cut down enemies, his face a mask of grim determination. By now, he had spotted several familiar faces—former Yellow Turban leaders like himself who had returned to farming but were now back in action.

"All those who've reached the Qi Refinement stage, follow me! We need to protect Lord Xuande in the city center!" After slaying a dozen soldiers, Li Tiao noticed more and more acquaintances joining the fray. He quickly assumed command, rallying the others with the authority of a former leader.

Responding to Li Tiao's call, over a dozen Qi Refinement-level warriors joined him as they charged toward the city center.

The people of Fenggao were primarily law-abiding citizens, but their past told a different story. A few years ago, most of them were either ruthless bandits from Mount Tai or desperate Yellow Turbans. Now, having finally gained some semblance of peace and stability, these citizens were determined not to let anyone take it from them. Grabbing their old weapons, they poured into the streets, joining the battle against Yuan Shao's soldiers and the private troops of the rebelling noble families.

The Yellow Turbans, fighting for their beliefs, were no less formidable than any trained elite soldiers. Many of Fenggao's residents were former leaders of the Yellow Turbans who had grown tired of war and returned to farming. But now, as they took up arms once more to defend their homes, their fighting spirit burned as fiercely as ever. In no time, they cleared the streets of the enemy.

The people of Fenggao may have appeared to be ordinary citizens, but beneath the surface, they were anything but. Many of them were seasoned warriors who had fought as Mount Tai bandits or Yellow Turbans. Though they had spent the last few years living peacefully, they had not forgotten how to fight.

And in this era, where almost anything could be fashioned into a weapon, most households had a stockpile of swords, spears, and other arms.

As the city's 300,000 inhabitants rose up, over 100,000 of them became combat-ready soldiers. In an instant, the bustling city of Fenggao transformed into a massive military camp, revealing the true ferocity of its people.

Faced with this overwhelming force, Han Xun's private troops and Yuan Shao's soldiers were quickly reduced to a joke. The elite city management troops outmatched them in skill, and the sheer numbers of the citizens-turned-soldiers overwhelmed them. Even the noble families' elite soldiers, who had been caught up in the rebellion, were no match for the sheer determination of the people.

"Brother Li, I saw someone commanding these rebels," one of the Yellow Turban veterans, his head wrapped in a yellow cloth, reported as he scanned the battlefield and spotted Han Xun. Having once led the Yellow Turbans, he recognized the telltale signs of a commander at work.

"A commander?" Li Tiao sneered. "Where? Brothers, let's take him out, no questions asked."

With that, a group of Yellow Turban veterans sprang into action. Armed with an assortment of weapons—swords, spears, and even makeshift arms like bricks, clubs, and farming tools—they climbed onto the rooftops and crept toward Han Xun. Once they were in position, they launched a coordinated attack, pummeling Han Xun with a barrage of weapons. Despite his formidable martial skills, Han Xun was caught off guard by the sheer ferocity of the assault. Before he could react, he was knocked unconscious and bundled into a sack.

The soldiers guarding Han Xun were taken completely by surprise. Before they could mount a defense, the veterans had already cut them down.

"No doubt about it, this one's a big fish. Look, his guards are wearing armor underneath their clothes," Li Tiao grinned, quickly stripping the armor from the fallen soldiers. Years of scavenging had honed his instincts to perfection.

"Time to scram!" After looting the bodies, the veterans made a hasty retreat, carrying their unconscious prize. With their commander taken out, Yuan Shao's troops were thrown into disarray, their cloud of morale shattered.

"Stop right there!" A group of ten Yellow Turban veterans charged down the street, shouting and waving their weapons. They attacked any Yuan Shao soldiers or rebelling noble troops they encountered, making their way toward the city's center. However, they soon found themselves face-to-face with the elite city management troops.

"These guys look like the patrol unit," remarked Xue Zhou, who wielded two sickles. After a brief clash, he quickly retreated, recognizing the formidable opponents before him.

"Yeah, I think you're right," Chen Hong, who was armed with a rake, agreed as he backed off.

The two groups eyed each other warily, weapons ready.

"Who are you? I don't recall any soldiers in our ranks with such skills, and your weapons..." Qin Qi, leading a hundred city management troops, demanded as he stared down Li Tiao and his group of Yellow Turban veterans.

"That guy looks like Qin Qi. I saw him at the market a couple of days ago," Zhang Du, who was holding a hoe, whispered to Li Tiao.

Unlike the neatly uniformed city management troops, Li Tiao's group was a ragtag bunch, armed with a bizarre assortment of weapons ranging from farm tools to improvised arms. Despite their odd appearance, they were all Qi Refinement-level warriors, capable of holding their own in battle.

"Commander, these folks are just city residents. The guy with the hoe is old Zhang from the market, the one with the sickles is Old Man Xue from the teahouse, and the one with the spear in front is Li, the construction worker," one of the city management troops identified the group.

"Hey, Old Qin, let me ask you something—Lord Xuande, is he alright?" Li Tiao called out after confirming the identities of the city management troops.

"He's fine. We're clearing out the rebels. What about you guys?" Qin Qi responded tersely, keeping his eyes on Li Tiao.

"Anyone who dared to rebel against Lord Xuande—we've killed them all! Nie Ying, toss that sack over," Li Tiao ordered one of his men, who was carrying a large sack and a club.

"Thud." Fan Zhe didn't hesitate, tossing the sack over.

"What's this?" Qin Qi asked.

"The enemy's commander," Li Tiao replied, his expression unchanging.