

Mythical 751

Chapter 751: So-called Shame

Regardless of whether people think Yuan Shu is eccentric or believe he has issues with his thinking, Yuan Shu maintains that for the past forty years, he has adhered to the virtues he was raised with. Yuan Shu views the common people as mere ants and sees himself and all noble families as pioneers.

Because of this, Yuan Shu holds an extreme arrogance towards the commoners and those from humble origins. It is precisely this arrogance that makes Yuan Shu believe that engaging with ants is beneath him. Their duty as pioneers is to guide these ants forward, but to communicate with them is beneath their dignity!

In Yuan Shu's eyes, engaging with ants is already demeaning, so what does it mean to exploit them? Shameful? No, in Yuan Shu's view, it's disgraceful!

As pioneers, they expanded territories and created the civilization of Huaxia. For them to lower themselves to exploiting these ants—creatures whose deaths would go unnoticed—is unthinkable. Some upstarts may consider exploiting others a mark of success, but for Yuan Shu, it's a disgrace if noble families abandon the mission of expanding territories and creating civilizations to exploit the common people.

In Yuan Shu's mind, the decline in the dignity of the noble families to such a level only left him with one thought—those noble families should be purged. To Yuan Shu, the existence of such families was an insult to the noble class.

According to Yuan Shu's principles, the commoners can be trampled on, ignored, or left to their own devices, but noble families who accept the offerings of these ants must fulfill their promises. When has anyone ever seen lofty deities break their promises to mortals? The noble families have fallen!

"Come, let's go and ask the elders of my family—just how much disgrace will our noble family endure!" Yuan Shu angrily flicked his sleeve and headed straight for the Yuan family's ancestral residence.

How laughable it is! If deities must exploit mortals to exist, then what value do they have? If noble families no longer aim to create civilization, expand territories, and educate the masses, but instead turn to exploiting them, then what value do they have?

The glory of our thousand-year heritage and the brilliance of our generations—is that something gained through exploiting the people? The Yuan family's honor, through four generations of Three Excellencies, was never earned by exploiting mere ants! Could the noble family's dignity end with me?

As Yuan Shu stepped into the ancestral residence of the Yuan family, he had already drawn the sword from his waist, and Ji Ling, his loyal general, held his two-bladed spear, ready to act upon Yuan Shu's command.

"Greetings, Master," a maid immediately bowed upon seeing Yuan Shu approach. As always, Yuan Shu passed by without even sparing her a glance.

"Bang!" Yuan Shu kicked open the side door of the central hall. Though the main door of the hall was open, and inside there was singing and dancing, Yuan Shu made no effort to hide his anger. He kicked the side door open and swept a furious gaze over the high-ranking members of the Yu Province noble families and the elders of the Yuan family.

The once lively and cheerful hall suddenly fell silent under Yuan Shu's angry gaze, leaving only the maidservants performing their dance in the center.

"You may all leave," Yuan Li, one of the elders, looked at the furious Yuan Shu, turned his head slowly, and calmly instructed the maidservants and servants.

After the servants had left, Yuan Li gestured to a seat, "Sit down, Gonglu. What matter has made you so angry? For those in power, the basic principle is to not let emotions show." His tone carried a hint of reproach, implying that Yuan Shu lacked self-control.

"Report!" A pitiful cry suddenly interrupted the scene as a servant rushed in, cutting off the words Yuan Shu was about to say. Instantly, Yuan Li's face turned dark. "Drag this disrespectful wretch out and give him thirty lashes!"

"Terrible news! Liu Bei's army is attacking!" the servant shouted in despair.

"What? That's impossible!" Yuan Li and the other high-ranking noble elders were all shocked. They stood up abruptly, their previous composure vanishing. Only Yuan Shu remained cold, sweeping his gaze over the crowd, while Ji Ling stood like an iron tower, expressionless, behind him.

"Gonglu, is this the reason for your anger?" Yuan Li immediately assumed Yuan Shu's rage was related to this event. With such a major issue, it made sense for Yuan Shu to barge in with murderous intent.

"My lord!" Yan Xiang hurriedly entered and whispered urgently. Yuan Shu's words earlier had deeply shocked him, but he understood now was not the time for internal conflict.

"Indeed!" Yuan Shu slammed his sword into the table, nearly impaling one of the noble family heads, but no one dared pay attention to Yuan Shu's aggressive behavior at this moment.

"Quickly, send someone to find Zhou Gongjin! If it weren't for him, we wouldn't have provoked Liu Xuande. What should we do? What should we do!" Yuan Li frantically commanded.

"Ha!" Yuan Shu sneered, pulling his sword out of the table, mocking Yuan Li's words with a cold laugh. "Get out of the way. When was it your place to issue orders and command my generals?"

Yuan Li's face flushed red instantly. Yuan Shu had openly humiliated him in front of everyone. Originally, Yuan Li had planned to use this opportunity to establish the idea that the Yuan family could control Yuan Shu. However, he hadn't expected the once half-dead Yuan Shu to display such boldness.

"Xi Bo, go inform Gongjin and the others. I'll wait for them at the government office in Shouchun," Yuan Shu said, not even sparing a glance at Yuan Li, turning to address Yan Xiang.

"Tiger, prepare the army!" After Yan Xiang left, Yuan Shu turned to his trusted general, Ji Ling.

"Yes!" Ji Ling clasped his fist in salute and strode out. Yuan Shu, with his three-foot-long sword in hand, swept his gaze over the noble families, snorted coldly, and left the hall. After his departure, the nobles immediately erupted into a flurry of arguments. Each of them wanted to gain an advantage without making any sacrifices. For two hundred years, the noble families of Yu Province had long lost the bloodthirsty spirit they once had.

When Yan Xiang arrived at Zhou Yu's residence, there were already several people standing outside, listening attentively.

At this point, Yan Xiang couldn't be bothered by the possibility of arousing public resentment. He decisively pushed open the door, only to see Zhou Yu sitting on the ground, leaning against the main pillar of the stone pavilion, gently strumming a zither, while Xiao Qiao danced gracefully to the music by his side. The scene was one of perfect harmony between talent and beauty.

With a final resonant note, Zhou Yu slowly stopped playing, and Xiao Qiao gracefully folded her fan and stood quietly behind him.

"Apologies for disturbing you two," Yan Xiang bowed deeply toward Zhou Yu. Though Zhou Yu was not even half his age, Yan Xiang did not dare to underestimate him.

"Xiao Qiao, go accompany your sister. I have to go to the battlefield." Zhou Yu stood up slowly, without even asking Yan Xiang what had happened, smiled gently at Xiao Qiao, and spoke in a calm tone.

"Zhou Lang," Xiao Qiao responded softly and then retreated gracefully.

"Gongjin, you already know what's happened?" Yan Xiang looked at Zhou Yu, asking in disbelief. To remain so calm and play the zither when such a crisis had arisen—this level of composure was almost inhuman.

"Liu Xuande has attacked. What else could it be? How far have they gotten?" Zhou Yu asked with his eyes still closed.

"They're at the gates," Yan Xiang answered, assuming that Zhou Yu had already formulated a brilliant plan, but couldn't help but smile bitterly.

Zhou Yu's hand trembled slightly at this reply. He then slowly opened his eyes and glanced silently in the direction where Xiao Qiao had left. Turning back, he looked at Yan Xiang. "Let's go! It's time to meet them."

Chapter 752: The Powerful Aura

"Xiaozhi, why did you switch to a carriage when you were already riding a horse just fine when you approached the city?" Gan Ning asked as he rode his horse, looking toward Fa Zheng, who was seated inside the carriage, his figure obscured.

"To maintain an air of mystery," Fa Zheng replied with a smile. In reality, he simply thought that a grand entrance would be more impactful.

"That large carriage will be a prime target for attack!" Gan Ning warned. The carriage was too conspicuous, and if it were hit by a powerful crossbow bolt, the consequences could be dire.

"Don't worry, they won't leave the city to engage us. Zhou Gongjin's intelligence is remarkable. He naturally knows what choice will best serve their interests in such an uncertain situation," Fa Zheng chuckled. "Without the suppression of spiritual energy, you can block all their crossbow bolts. I trust you."

"..." Gan Ning said nothing more. If Fa Zheng trusted him, would this confident man undermine himself?

After Zhou Yu and Zhou Tai arrived at the government office, Yuan Shu didn't say much and immediately led Zhou Yu toward the north gate of Shouchun.

"Gongjin, do you have any plans?" Yuan Shu asked as they walked.

"Shouchun cannot be taken. They are merely here to flaunt their power," Zhou Yu responded without hesitation, giving Yuan Shu a sense of reassurance. "However, we must determine where Liu Bei's army came from. I don't believe that the 100,000 troops from Yu Province were defeated in Xiapi so quickly!"

Yuan Shu nodded. Although he had been somewhat anxious, his years of experience had kept him from showing it. Zhou Yu's words also fully calmed him down. Shouchun, with its high walls and strategic minds guarding it, was nearly impregnable.

While Zhou Yu spoke of confirming the source of Liu Bei's army, in truth, he already had some guesses. Just as Fa Zheng had anticipated, once Zhou Yu considered the situation, he quickly made a decision.

When Yuan Shu and his entourage climbed to the north gate tower to look out, the noble families followed, squeezing together. Seeing the relatively small army below, they began whispering nervously.

"Gan Xingba!" Zhou Tai said in a low voice.

"He's here too? Who could be sitting in that carriage beside him?" Zhou Yu muttered with a slight frown.

"Why not use crossbows to target that carriage?" The head of the Li family scoffed upon hearing Zhou Yu's question.

Many of the noble families of Yu Province believed that if it hadn't been for Zhou Yu's previous decisions, they wouldn't be in this position with the enemy at their gates. Although it was largely their own insistence that had brought things to this point, no one ever remembers their own mistakes when they can blame others.

"Gan Xingba is one of the top warriors of this era. Without the suppression of spiritual energy and in a situation like this where there's no battle, mere crossbows are nothing!" Yuan Shu gave Ji Ling a glance, and Ji Ling sneered as he swept his gaze over the noble families.

"Who dares challenge the rule of Yuan Shu!" Yuan Shu stepped up onto the wall's edge with a rogue-like demeanor and roared down at the enemy.

"I am Gan Xingba, general of Han! Here to punish the traitor!" Gan Ning shouted back, equally undeterred, and flipped the accusation on its head.

"The Emperor is still in power, yet Liu Xuande dares to wage war as a member of the imperial clan?" Yuan Shu sneered. When it came to sharp tongues, no one from a noble family was untrained in this art.

"Yuan Gonglu secretly harbors the Imperial Seal. Do you think my lord, Liu Xuande, would be unaware? I am here to reclaim the treasure of the Han Dynasty and restore it to its rightful place!" Gan Ning retorted. While Liu Bei might have his own flaws, Yuan Shu's were far too blatant to ignore.

"Return it to the Han Dynasty? Your lord Liu Xuande is merely a distant branch of the Han family, rising through the support of the Chen clan. How does that compare to my Yuan family, with four generations of Three Excellencies? I, Yuan Gonglu, openly declare that I possess the Imperial Seal. But with Dong Zhuo having seized power and Li Jue holding the Emperor hostage, at least with the seal in my hands, the people can live in peace! I have no need to steal anything!" Yuan Shu sneered at Gan Ning.

"..." Gan Ning was at a loss for words. Yuan Shu dared to proclaim in front of everyone that he had no desire to steal, and though it hinted at disdain for imperial authority, it was enough to show that he wasn't after power in that way.

Even Zhou Yu was taken aback. He had assumed that Yuan Shu restrained his greed out of a sense of honor, but now it seemed that Yuan Shu's pride simply made him disdain such actions.

In truth, only Ji Ling among them understood what Yuan Shu meant. Yuan Shu needed to steal something like the Imperial Seal? If Yuan Shu did something, it would be done openly. Sneaky, underhanded actions? The Yuan family, with its legacy of four generations of Three Excellencies, could not afford such disgrace!

"Xingba, there's no need to argue further. It seems that Yuan Shu, despite his erratic behavior, is firm in his principles. His methods may be unorthodox, but his resolve is clear." Fa Zheng's voice echoed in Gan Ning's ear, quelling his desire to continue the debate.

"General, the man in the carriage silenced Gan Xingba," Zhou Tai whispered to Zhou Yu, which made Zhou Yu's heart tighten. Gan Ning held a significant position under Liu Bei, and to be rebuked without complaint indicated the immense authority of the person in the carriage.

Crack! Fa Zheng slowly extended his hand from the carriage and opened the folding door. Standing up, he straightened his body with a calm expression, lifted his head slightly, and then, as if sensing the glare of the sunlight, raised his hand to shield his eyes. After a moment, he slowly lowered his hand.

"Yuan of Yu Province," Fa Zheng gave a courteous bow, like a noble scion, and then spoke with a calm tone, "Long time no see..."

"Who are you?" Yuan Shu's pupils contracted. He could sense the scholarly elegance of the man, reminiscent of Zhou Yu, but he had no memory of who he was. What shocked him most was how young the man appeared.

"I forgot to mention. The Governor of Yu Province may not recognize me yet, but you will soon," Fa Zheng smiled faintly, lightly shaking his sleeve. "I am Fa Zheng, styled Xiaozhi, from Yizhou, serving as Prime Minister of Qi under my lord Liu Xuande."

Zhou Yu stared at Fa Zheng's smiling expression, feeling a chill in his heart. As young as Zhou Yu was, in that moment, he saw before him a strategist even younger and equally brilliant, someone who would rise to power in Yu Province.

The walls above fell into an eerie silence. Even the clueless nobles of Yu Province quieted when they saw Fa Zheng. The psychological pressure he exuded was palpable.

It was the same kind of tension people felt when Zhou Tai unleashed his full strength. The moment Fa Zheng appeared, most of the people on the walls felt the same sense of danger.

"The previous arguments are meaningless. The Yuan family's four generations of Three Excellencies, and my lord Liu Bei's imperial lineage—right or wrong no longer matters. What matters is who writes the history." Fa Zheng's calm and confident tone sent a wave of shock through those on the walls. Even Zhou Yu, as he gazed at the figure below, showed a hint of caution in his eyes.

Chapter 753: The Three Lius Divide Yuan?

"Shouchun is right here. If you're confident, then attack." Seeing the silence of the crowd, all captivated by Fa Zheng's aura, Zhou Yu stepped forward, speaking as if he were the one in charge.

"Zhou Yu of the Song, the legendary beauty admired by all—Zhou Gongjin, is it?" Fa Zheng asked with a slight smile. Although phrased as a question, his certainty was evident in his tone.

"It is I. What of it? Shouchun is here!" Zhou Yu replied, calmly staring at Fa Zheng below the city walls.

"Zhou Yu... I came all the way from the north to the south, only to meet such a Zhou Yu. How amusing," Fa Zheng sneered, but Zhou Yu remained silent, merely gazing at Fa Zheng with steady composure.

After a long pause, Fa Zheng laughed aloud. "Such self-control! You must already know what my presence here signifies, yet you can still maintain such a calm demeanor."

"It's nothing more than the loss of Huaibei, and ten thousand troops trapped in Xuzhou. Chen Yuanlong in Xuzhou must have already prepared a scorched-earth defense," Zhou Yu responded evenly, his voice devoid of any emotion.

"Very well, then. How about we use the Huai River as the boundary? Everything north of the Huai belongs to my lord Liu Xuande, while everything south belongs to the Governor of Yu Province," Fa Zheng proposed, unfazed by Zhou Yu's insight into the situation. His appearance here had already made the situation clear, and Zhou Yu's deduction was only logical.

This was the ultimate slap in the face. On one hand, Fa Zheng addressed Yuan Shu as the Governor of Yu Province, while on the other, he proposed dividing the land at the Huai River. A glance at the map would show that much of Yu Province lies south of the Huai River. What's more, Fa Zheng wasn't even speaking directly to Yuan Shu—he treated the governor as though he were irrelevant.

"Tiger, stand down!" Yuan Shu, naturally enraged by Fa Zheng's words, immediately saw Ji Ling preparing to leap off the city wall to fight. The code of honor dictates that a subject dies to defend their lord's honor, and Ji Ling didn't hesitate for a moment. But Yuan Shu stopped him just as he took his first step.

"My lord!" Ji Ling's eyes were filled with determination as he looked at Yuan Shu. While others might fear Gan Ning, Ji Ling had no such fear. As long as Yuan Shu still believed in him and stood behind him, he would fight without hesitation.

"Stand down," Yuan Shu commanded softly. He understood Ji Ling's strength—it wasn't extraordinary, but when fighting for Yuan Shu, Ji Ling wouldn't be easily defeated unless the opponent was overwhelmingly stronger.

Ji Ling cast a furious glare at Gan Ning below but slowly retreated, saying nothing. However, his knuckles turned white as he gripped his spear, his expression far from calm.

"Before we talk about dividing at the Huai River, let's see if the Prime Minister of Qi has the ability to enforce it!" Zhou Yu's eyes showed no hesitation as he glared coldly at Fa Zheng, sneering at the proposal.

"Then there's nothing left to discuss. Let's see whose skills prevail. I'm only here to send a message. Rest assured, you'll have time to consider my proposal later." Fa Zheng showed no fear of Zhou Yu's murderous gaze. Instead, he wore a faint smile. His ability to taunt Zhou Yu without fear, even as his opponent burned with anger, was itself a skill.

"Xingba, let's go." After speaking, Fa Zheng paid no further attention to those on the city wall. He smiled as he returned to his carriage, gesturing to Gan Ning.

Watching Fa Zheng retreat into the carriage and Gan Ning lead Liu Bei's army in a well-formed retreat, Yuan Shu and the others on the wall exchanged puzzled glances. The enemy left no openings, maintaining a tight formation, which left them unsure of how to react.

"Send someone to follow and test them. Letting them retreat so easily will damage our morale," Zhuge Jin suggested as he watched the army's orderly withdrawal.

"No, there's no point. Their formation is solid. Even if we tried to swallow them up, it wouldn't be easy. Judging by their current retreat, they've likely prepared for any pursuit," Zhou Yu shook his head, rejecting Zhuge Jin's proposal as it had little strategic value.

"Lord Yuan, please have the city defenses fortified while we await more accurate intelligence," Zhou Yu said respectfully to Yuan Shu. The remaining forces in Shouchun were not large, and Zhou Yu would not squander such an opportunity unless necessary.

"Come to my residence. I have something to ask you." Yuan Shu didn't turn his head, his eyes still fixed on Liu Bei's army retreating in perfect order. Their discipline was beyond his expectations.

"Ziyu, come with me." Zhou Yu nodded, then turned to Zhuge Jin.

Zhuge Jin asked no further questions, silently following Zhou Yu down the stairs. He had already guessed what Zhou Yu wanted to discuss.

"Ziyu, where do you think Liu Bei's army came from?" Zhou Yu casually plucked a leaf from a tree, unaware of the irritation growing in his heart.

"They came from Yanzhou, likely pushing through in one decisive strike," Zhuge Jin remarked with a sigh. "I met Fa Xiaozhi once before. I didn't expect his brilliance to shine so brightly today!"

"Do you think Pingyu has fallen?" Zhou Yu tossed the leaf aside, turning to Zhuge Jin with a question.

"Doesn't Gongjin already have an idea?" Zhuge Jin replied. Although his own mind was in turmoil, he wasn't as flustered as Zhou Yu, who was worried about Sun Ce.

"Should we attack Pingyu or sweep through Liu Biao's forces?" Zhou Yu asked with a bitter smile.

"Why ask me when you've already made up your mind, Gongjin?" Zhuge Jin replied, looking at Zhou Yu.

"If we don't counterattack Pingyu, the fate of everything north of the Huai is sealed. Moreover, the ten thousand troops trapped in Xuzhou will be abandoned. If we can recover Runan, our territory will be whole again." Zhou Yu spoke quietly. Though his analysis was thorough, his tone revealed his uncertainty.

"Pingyu in Runan is a well-fortified city. Without special means, it's impossible to take it in less than a month. Even if we capture Runan, our forces would still be spread thin. We must abandon that idea," Zhuge Jin reminded him.

"I know. My real concern is Bo Fu in Jing and Yi Provinces. If I were Fa Xiaozhi, I would certainly divide my forces to attack Bo Fu!" Zhou Yu's face darkened. This move was forcing him to abandon everything north of the Huai, including the ten thousand troops in Xuzhou. His opponent had perfectly judged his priorities. In Zhou Yu's heart, none of these things were more important than Sun Ce.

"The Three Lius dividing Yuan—how ironic. The Yuan family once sought to divide the Lius, and now their retaliation comes swiftly. No need for conspiracies or negotiations; the situation will naturally unfold. I hate playing this kind of game, especially when I'm forced to move according to someone else's plan!" Zhou Yu's usually refined face twisted with frustration.

"Liu Xuande claims Huaibei, Liu Jingsheng takes Jingbei, and Liu Jiyu restores Hanzhong. What a brilliant plan!" Zhuge Jin, despite the dire situation, couldn't help but praise the mastermind behind this strategy. Should the scenario unfold as predicted, the imperial clan would rise again in power.

Chapter 754: Wish Fulfilled

"Ziyu, you still have the heart to joke!" Zhou Yu said with a displeased look at Zhuge Jin.

"Gongjin, your mind is clouded! The situation isn't as dire as you think," Zhuge Jin responded with a kind smile, trying to calm Zhou Yu.

"It's bad enough," Zhou Yu shook his head, not saying more, only gazing westward, where Sun Ce was fighting against the forces from Yizhou. "I've given in to Fa Xiaozhi's wish, I've compromised. Next, I will launch a grand campaign in Jingxiang. I trust Shiyuan will not disappoint me."

"Send Deren and Zhongye to Xuzhou," Zhuge Jin suggested. Originally, he himself was the most suitable to lead the retreating troops to Jiangdong, but given the current murky situation, with Zhou Yu unable to stay in Shouchun, he had no choice but to remain behind to keep internal matters in check.

"Very well..." Zhou Yu hesitated for a moment before agreeing.

Since the battle of Jiangxia, where Zhou Yu had orchestrated a decisive victory over Wang Wei and captured Wen Pin, Wen Pin had remained in Shouchun under Zhou Yu's command. Because there had been no major battles for him to showcase his skills, his name remained largely unknown throughout the land.

As a true internal energy master, Wen Pin could be considered one of the most low-key experts in the current era. Moreover, he possessed considerable military leadership abilities, making him a hidden trump card.

As for Deren, mentioned by Zhuge Jin, he referred to Kan Ze, another figure with little renown. In Zhuge Jin's understanding of the current situation, he had wisely chosen these two relatively unknown but highly capable individuals—Wen Pin and Kan Ze—for the mission, seeing it as a calculated move.

"It's a pity that General Cheng is currently focused on making a breakthrough in his internal energy training with Daoist Yu Ji's guidance. Otherwise, sending him to command the army in Xuzhou would have been the ideal choice," Zhou Yu sighed. Now, however, they were at a critical juncture.

Although Zhou Yu had initially been suspicious of the Daoist Yu Ji, he had found no evidence to support his doubts. Furthermore, Yu Ji's guidance had indeed significantly improved the cultivation progress of Cheng Pu and the others.

For some, breaking through to the internal energy realm might be a matter of understanding one's heart and mind, while for Cheng Pu, it was about mastering the control of his internal energy. As for his heart and mind, Cheng Pu was already steadfast enough.

Because of this, Zhou Yu, though wary of Yu Ji, never revealed his concerns to anyone. Instead, each time he met Yu Ji, he greeted him warmly. This forced Yu Ji to suppress his anger and curiosity about Sun Ce, not daring to act rashly.

Yu Ji's original plan had been to form a bond with Cheng Pu and, through him, learn about Sun Ce's routine in order to find an opportunity to shift Sun Ce's destiny. However, before he could act, Zhou Yu had caught on. Compared to Sun Ce's recklessness, Zhou Yu, in Yu Ji's eyes, was far more cunning.

Moreover, Yu Ji could sense Zhou Yu's suspicions. No matter how cautious Yu Ji was, Zhou Yu always seemed nonchalant, yet Yu Ji's calculations revealed that Zhou Yu had never stopped doubting him. This persistent suspicion was the reason Yu Ji hadn't dared to make a move.

"Yu Ji..." After a long pause, Zhuge Jin finally decided to address the issue openly, given the precarious situation. "There's something wrong with him, though I can't pinpoint exactly what it is. Once you leave, I'm afraid I won't be able to keep an eye on him."

"If you can't keep an eye on him, isn't that proof enough that something is wrong?" Zhou Yu stared directly at Zhuge Jin. "It's better to confront the issue head-on than let it fester like this."

"Let's not disturb General Cheng. Neither General Wen, General Cheng, nor Deren would likely be a prime target for attention. If we don't overestimate ourselves, I believe we can save half of our forces." Zhuge Jin shook his head.

In Zhuge Jin's view, the battle for Xuzhou, whether led by Wen Pin or Cheng Pu, wouldn't hinge on their capabilities. The outcome would depend on how seriously their opponents regarded them.

"We need to choose the right moment for action in this battle," Zhou Yu nodded, agreeing with Zhuge Jin's assessment. The success of evacuating their forces from Xuzhou would depend more on Chen Deng, Zhang Fei, Fa Zheng, and Gan Ning's evaluation of Yu Province's troops than on their own abilities.

It could be said that if their enemies misjudged their forces, there might even be a slim chance of turning the tide. But such an outcome was so improbable that it wasn't worth considering.

"Now, it all depends on Shiyuan. I hope he won't let me down!" Zhuge Jin said, looking westward as Zhou Yu had done earlier, though his expression was tinged with more melancholy.

When Fa Zheng appeared outside Shouchun's walls, Zhuge Jin had understood something that Zhou Yu hadn't fully grasped—his younger brother, Zhuge Liang, had also arrived. Knowing Zhuge Liang as he did, Zhuge Jin was almost certain that the mysterious sub-army would likely be led by his brother.

Zhuce Jin withdrew his gaze, his expression calm. He had long since mentally prepared himself for this.

While Zhuge Jin and Zhou Yu waited with anticipation for Pang Tong's bold actions, Sun Ce was in the middle of fleeing desperately with Pang Tong, who had been struck by several arrows. Along with Jiang Qin, Yang Xun, and Li Xin, they were running for their lives. They had already been defeated in thirteen engagements, fleeing from the Jing-Yizhou border all the way to the Yiling region. Behind them, Yan Yan's army pursued relentlessly, seemingly never tiring.

To be honest, in an era like this, for a top strategist to be struck by arrows was a disgrace, yet this very disgrace had occurred.

Zhang Song had drawn fire, engaging in a direct clash with Pang Tong. Liu Ba provided cover, while Yan Yan and Zheng Du led a direct assault. The archers targeted Pang Tong, and without being able to fully defend himself, Pang Tong was struck twice by arrows.

The Yizhou army, now exhilarated by their pursuit, fought with renewed vigor. Zhang Song, Liu Ba, and the others employed dangerous strategies that completely blindsided Pang Tong. What had initially been a feigned retreat by Pang Tong quickly turned into a real defeat, with 17,000 troops routed in an instant.

As they continued their retreat, the Yizhou army, showing no signs of exhaustion, relentlessly pursued Sun Ce's fleeing forces. After a chase spanning hundreds of miles, they had almost driven Sun Ce's army to total collapse, nearing Yiling.

"Shiyuan, are you alright?" Sun Ce anxiously asked the weakened Pang Tong, who had been hit by arrows. He wasn't too concerned about the rout of the county troops. Ever since Pang Tong had explained his plan to him, Sun Ce had already relocated all his elite soldiers for an ambush against the Yizhou army, though the ambush hadn't yet been triggered.

"I'm fine," Pang Tong, pale-faced, grabbed a waterskin and took several large gulps. "Those four relentless ghosts behind us... just 30 more miles, and I'll make sure they understand that this young master isn't someone to be taken lightly!"

Chapter 755: A Single Decisive Battle

"Bo Fu, don't strike first when the time comes. Let Gong Yi intercept Yan Yan, and then you lead your personal guards to deliver the final blow. Yan Yan's legion talent is too strange. Neither you nor Gong Yi can take him down in just three or five moves," Pang Tong warned, taking several large gulps of water before looking at Sun Ce and coughing lightly.

"I understand," Sun Ce replied, gripping his spear tightly before slowly relaxing. Pang Tong was right; even if he and Jiang Qin joined forces, they wouldn't be able to defeat Yan Yan in a few moves.

"What you must do is lead your personal guards to break through Yan Yan's vanguard. Even though Yan Yan's legion talent is bizarre, it has its limits. You must shatter it in one go—we only have one chance!" Pang Tong handed the water pouch to a nearby soldier, his expression solemn.

"Alright, I understand. I can do it!" Sun Ce answered firmly, his face serious. After fleeing for so long and seeing his strategist wounded, the rage within him had already reached a boiling point. If he weren't aware of the bigger picture, Sun Ce would have already turned back to fight Yan Yan head-on.

"Good, let's go. Those four are less than ten miles away now; we should leave," Pang Tong said, a sly smile crossing his face.

People like Yan Yan and Zheng Du, who didn't hide their abilities, were easy targets for Pang Tong's spiritual talent, which allowed him to sense them from over thirty miles away. Ironically, when they got closer, it became harder for Pang Tong to pinpoint their location, but from afar, they were as visible as torches in the night.

"Retreat, all forces!" Sun Ce shouted, and without waiting for the anguished cries of the local troops, he led his men in a retreat. Another few hundred county soldiers abandoned the pursuit. From an original 17,000 troops, only around 800 remained loyal to Sun Ce.

"Go!" Zhang Xun, Li Feng, Le Jiu, Yang Xun, Li Xin, and Liang Gang all shook their heads. At this point, they no longer cared about the county troops.

The group stood and continued to follow Sun Ce in retreat. Though they doubted Pang Tong's ability to devise a strategy that would decisively defeat Yan Yan, the resolve of Zhang Xun and Li Feng to protect Sun Ce was enough to ensure the others followed without question, if only to give Yuan Shu an explanation.

Pang Tong glanced back at the few generals following Yuan Shu. He couldn't help but be curious. Despite the situation, these people remained loyal and refused to abandon Sun Ce. Along the way, many of Yuan Shu's officers who were dissatisfied with Sun Ce had deserted, including major generals like Lei Bo and Chen Jian, who had defected to the Yizhou army.

This made Pang Tong all the more intrigued by the six generals who had remained. After all, they had fled for so long, and those who had stayed were all high-ranking officers crucial to the planned counteroffensive. The escape had effectively weeded out those lacking the resolve to continue.

"Shiyuan, what are you looking at?" Sun Ce turned to see Zhang Xun and the others and casually asked.

"They will become the foundation of the army's future. Aren't you curious why I used the pretense of troop rotation to transfer soldiers under my command?" Pang Tong said calmly. "I knew from the beginning that some officers would defect to the Yizhou army. Those who remain after such defeats will form our core."

Pang Tong silently added to himself.

"Lei Bo, Chen Jian..." Sun Ce gritted his teeth, his eyes nearly burning with golden flames. Not only had they fled, but they had also turned against him!

Pang Tong glanced at Sun Ce. He fully understood the concept of legion talents, and Sun Ce already met all the necessary conditions. Why hadn't he developed one yet? After pondering for a while, Pang Tong concluded that what was missing was willpower. As long as Sun Ce's will could resonate with that of his soldiers, he would awaken a legion talent!

Turning away, Pang Tong dismissed these thoughts. He was accustomed to planning for multiple outcomes, but he was uncertain if his final plan would succeed. It was critical to his campaign against Yizhou.

"Charge!" Yan Yan roared, and his soldiers responded in unison, pressing forward. Zheng Du, Zhang Song, and Liu Ba, though exhausted, were filled with excitement.

The Yizhou army had started with only 30,000 troops, yet their forces had grown as they captured more prisoners along the way. Even Liu Ba couldn't believe that the enemy still had any combat strength left.

"Push forward! Finish it all in one battle! Even if we have to cross Yiling, we must destroy them!" Yan Yan shouted, his face glowing with determination.

Yan Yan's momentum was incredibly strong. Victory after victory had elevated his prestige to its peak. In every city where he appeared, the enemy would open the gates and surrender. He now fully understood what it meant to be a great general!

"General, the strategist has sent a message. Our lord will reach the Yiling region in another 30 miles. The strategist says we must be ready. The terrain here is narrow, and we must break the enemy in one fell swoop from beginning to end," a soldier reported to Jiang Qin.

"I understand," Jiang Qin took a deep breath and gave orders to his troops. There were fewer than 3,000 soldiers hidden in ambush at Yiling, divided into six groups. The remaining 10,000 had already been spread out according to Pang Tong's plan, as the goal was to capture enemy officers after a decisive defeat.

"We've finally arrived!" Pang Tong's lips curled into a cold smile as he looked toward the treacherous valleys of Yiling. He had already tested it earlier. Relying on his spiritual powers alone wouldn't work, as the enemy's three commanders could summon rain to douse any fires he might set. So, they had taken a circuitous route, stretching the enemy's forces to their limit.

"Generals, prepare yourselves. The next phase is up to you," Pang Tong turned and glanced at the remaining ten or so officers, including those originally under Sun Ce as well as some from Yuan Shu's forces.

None of the generals responded. After fleeing for so long, their trust in Pang Tong had worn thin. They paid him little attention, and Pang Tong didn't seem to care about their attitude either.

"Everyone, follow Shiyuan's strategy!" Sun Ce glared angrily at the group of generals.

"We've been defeated over and over again, with heavy losses. How are we supposed to fight the tens of thousands of troops chasing us?" Li Feng retorted in frustration.

"Who said we had no troops?" Jiang Qin appeared at that moment. "I've already brought the main force. The 10,000 elite soldiers we deployed at the beginning are all here. As for the others, they were just local troops."

Chapter 756: Zhuge Liang Has Arrived

"Everyone, take charge of your own forces and prepare to annihilate the Yizhou army. Although they've been victorious during this pursuit, they've now grown bloated by constantly receiving new soldiers and have no time to reorganize. They've reached their limit, and a single blow will lead to their collapse!" Pang Tong said calmly.

Initially, Pang Tong hadn't anticipated that Yan Yan would take in all the defeated soldiers he had abandoned. However, the reality turned out to be even more extreme than he expected. After five consecutive victories, Yan Yan had started accepting Pang Tong's routed soldiers, and the further they went, the more outrageous it became—Yan Yan even began taking in city garrisons.

Of course, as long as they continued the chase and maintained momentum, there wouldn't be any issues with an oversized force. Victory can solve all problems. But under Pang Tong's careful calculations, a single decisive blow would crush Yan Yan, and the Yizhou army would be left in utter ruin.

The swelling ranks, unclear command, and disorganized structure were all fatal weaknesses. However, these issues were concealed by Yan Yan's series of victories. While Zheng Du and Yan Yan were aware of the problems, they chose to ignore them, trusting that continuous success would carry them through.

Sun Ce appeared to be on his last legs. The belief was that once they defeated him and took control of half of Jingzhou, they could reorganize after crossing Yiling. To focus on these organizational issues now would allow Sun Ce to escape, so the order was: chase, chase, chase!

With this mentality, neither Yan Yan nor Zheng Du gave the existing issues any attention. Confident that Sun Ce had no strength left to resist and that reinforcements couldn't arrive in time, they pressed forward.

Victory can sometimes blind even the wisest. Though Liu Ba sensed something was wrong, the consecutive victories drowned out his concerns, leaving his voice barely audible within the army.

Whether the generals still following Sun Ce believed in Pang Tong or not, the moment they received the elite troops assigned to them, all doubts vanished. These were indeed Yuan Shu's seasoned veterans. With these soldiers under their command, they finally had a clear goal in mind: victory, which everyone longed for.

"Everyone, you already know the enemy generals after all these engagements. The ones you hate the most—deal with them yourselves and vent your rage!" Pang Tong stirred up the generals' anger.

"I will kill Lei Bo!" Zhang Xun's eyes flared with fury as he growled.

"Chen Jian, that traitor—I will personally deal with him!" Li Feng said angrily.

"Li Yi is ours!" Yang Xun and Li Xin exchanged glances and agreed on their target.

Soon, Sun Ce's generals had each chosen their opponents. After so much running and retreating, every one of them was filled with anger. They had all faced these enemy generals before and knew exactly who their targets would be.

"Don't any of you dare die!" Pang Tong cast a glance at the group. "I'm waiting to throw you all a victory feast in Jiangzhou!"

The group was momentarily stunned but then burst into laughter. Zhang Xun stepped forward and cupped his fist. "Strategist, I will definitely make it to that victory feast in Jiangzhou!"

"Go and prepare. They will be here within the hour!" Pang Tong waved his hand, signaling them to get ready.

On the other side, Liu Bei's army, led by Taishi Ci with Chen Dao as his deputy, had successfully crossed Nanyang and reached Nan Commandery.

Though Nanyang was technically under Cao Cao's control, his influence south of Wan City was nearly nonexistent. Likewise, Yuan Shu hadn't ventured south of Wan City, instead holding New Ye as the boundary.

Because of this loose control, Zhuge Liang easily passed through and reached the edge of Nan Commandery. There, he encountered Zhang Song, who was preparing to seize the opportunity to meet with the most powerful member of the imperial Liu clan after what he believed would be a decisive victory.

"Are you saying that Sun Ce has suffered defeat after defeat, losing more than ten consecutive battles from Badong all the way to Yiling?" Zhuge Liang asked incredulously.

"Zhuge Zhizhong, you're still so young. When I was your age, I was merely a county magistrate in Langzhong," Zhang Song said with a sigh, though his words carried a tinge of jealousy.

"Lord Liu Bei has entrusted me with the position of Administrative Assistant, but I still lack experience and often make mistakes in governance. How could I compare with your esteemed position, Zhang Biejia?" Zhuge Liang quickly caught the jealousy in Zhang Song's tone and shifted the conversation away from military matters, speaking instead in a self-deprecating manner to soothe Zhang Song's ego.

In the late Han Dynasty, under the regional governors and inspectors, the next highest rank was the Administrative Assistant. Zhang Song, being over thirty, held the same rank as Zhuge Liang, who was not even half his age. Naturally, this would stir feelings of envy in Zhang Song.

"Lord Liu Bei, having risen to power from the small region of Mount Tai, clearly knows how to recognize talent. Don't belittle yourself, Kongming," Zhang Song's ugly face softened into a smile as he praised Zhuge Liang, though his jealousy lingered.

Zhuce Liang's youthful and handsome appearance continued to be a sore spot for Zhang Song, who couldn't maintain his smile for long before his jealousy resurfaced.

"Zhang Biejia, could you recount the details of the recent battles? It would put our minds at ease. When Lord Liu Bei heard that Governor Liu of Yizhou was launching a campaign against Yuan Shu, he recalled the former Yizhou governor's kindness and sent me to assist. Unfortunately, I haven't been much help, but it only shows how valiant the soldiers of Yizhou are," Zhuge Liang spoke with a mix of flattery and fabrication.

There's a saying: "Your rival knows you best." Zhuge Liang and Pang Tong had been lifelong rivals, and that's why, when Zhuge Liang heard that Pang Tong, as the strategist, had led Sun Ce's army into disaster, his first instinct was that the Yizhou forces had likely fallen into a trap. Pang Tong wasn't someone who could be easily outwitted.

However, Zhuge Liang kept these thoughts to himself. Saying such things aloud would insult all of Yizhou, and Zhang Song might storm off in anger. After all, who would believe that three highly capable strategists could be bested by a sixteen-year-old youth? Zhuge Liang could tell from Zhang Song's tone that these men held themselves in high regard.

"Hmm..." After listening to Zhang Song's explanation, Zhuge Liang had only one thought: the strategist behind this plan must be insane. To employ such a dangerous strategy was unthinkable.

The Battle of Badong was so precarious that even the slightest miscalculation could have led to a devastating loss. But with great risk came great reward—Yizhou had attacked on multiple fronts, and their final strike in the center had likely shattered Sun Ce's forces into fragments, assuming Zhang Song hadn't exaggerated.

A chill ran through Zhuge Liang. He understood that Zhang Song, along with his fellow commanders, all possessed spiritual talents. But even so, the reckless danger of this plan was difficult to stomach.

Chapter 757: A Clash of Words

Zhuce Liang quietly activated his spiritual talent. With his intelligence now surpassing 100, he began to analyze from the Yizhou army's perspective, incorporating Fa Zheng's understanding of human nature and Jia Xu's skills in deduction.

As Zhang Song continued his narration, Zhuge Liang's understanding of the Yizhou army became increasingly accurate. When Zhang Song mentioned that Pang Tong had once foolishly planned to set the mountain on fire, Zhuge Liang instantly realized that Pang Tong had his own schemes in play.

Zhuce Liang silently analyzed the situation. He was now almost certain that Sun Ce's defeat was genuine, but he also knew that Pang Tong had carefully laid plans. Knowing Pang Tong as well as he did, Zhuge Liang was sure that if Pang Tong were to act, it would be in a stunning and decisive manner.

Zhuce Liang's familiarity with Pang Tong was deep enough that even with just a few clues, he could guess at Pang Tong's true intentions.

Zhuce Liang couldn't help but smile bitterly to himself. When it came to Zhang Song, Zheng Du, and Liu Ba, he found it difficult to say anything. These men had pinned all their hopes on a string of victories, but all it would take was one small mistake to turn all their triumphs into illusions—beautiful yet fragile like reflections in the water or flowers in the mirror.

"Zhang Biejia, I fear the situation may not be as simple as it appears. Pang Shiyuan is known for his bold and dangerous strategies," Zhuge Liang hinted, not wanting to outright say that Zhang Song and his comrades had fallen right into Pang Tong's trap. Instead, he subtly tried to caution Zhang Song.

"Hahaha, no need for concern, Kongming! Just speak plainly," Zhang Song laughed off Zhuge Liang's concerns, completely disregarding his subtle warning.

Zhuce Liang's eyes narrowed slightly, feeling a wave of irritation. If Pang Tong were just a mere novice, then what did that make him, Zhuge Liang?

"Since you already have a plan in mind, I'll say no more," Zhuge Liang replied coldly, his face expressionless. Zhang Song's dismissive response had left him quite displeased.

"Haha," Zhang Song chuckled, completely unconcerned with Zhuge Liang's advice, and continued chatting idly. Seeing that his words were falling on deaf ears, Zhuge Liang decided not to press the matter further.

It became clear to Zhuge Liang that Zhang Song harbored a deep resentment towards him, likely due to his rapid rise to high office at such a young age. Knowing that any further suggestions would be futile and unable to argue convincingly with Zhang Song based on mere speculation, Zhuge Liang opted to maintain a surface-level cordiality.

After their conversation, Zhang Song, too, felt a growing disinterest. His original intention of visiting Mount Tai to meet Liu Bei began to wane. Zhuge Liang was simply too young—and too powerful.

That was Zhang Song's impression: Zhuge Liang's strength wasn't limited to just one aspect. He was strong in every way—astronomy, geography, culture, military strategy, governance. In every field, Zhuge Liang was a force to be reckoned with, which left Zhang Song feeling helpless, as though he had no advantage over him aside from age and experience.

This overwhelming sense of defeat left Zhang Song feeling disheartened, as if all his years of effort had amounted to nothing.

With these thoughts weighing on him, Zhang Song's interest in going to Mount Tai diminished further. He needed a powerful lord who could fully utilize his talents, but after seeing Zhuge Liang, he abandoned that hope.

Zhang Song was the kind of man who preferred to be a big fish in a small pond rather than a small fish in a big ocean. If his prospects in Mount Tai were no better than where he currently was, then what was the point?

"Ziyi, take 5,000 troops and head to Yiling. Do your best, but by the time you arrive, the Yizhou army may already be defeated. Help them if you can; if not, retreat," Zhuge Liang instructed Taishi Ci after Zhang Song's carriage had departed.

"Has it really come to that?" Taishi Ci asked, looking at Zhuge Liang. He wasn't very familiar with Zhuge Liang yet.

"I fear it's even worse. The Yizhou army has been infiltrated by too many of Shiyuan's schemes, and the root of their force is already compromised. If my calculations are correct, Shiyuan will soon deliver a crushing blow," Zhuge Liang said calmly, gazing toward the south as if the battle had already begun.

After sending off Zhang Song, Taishi Ci led his 5,000 fully armored infantrymen on their march. Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang continued his steady advance, maintaining a formation that exuded no hostility as they moved toward Nan Commandery.

"Report, General! Our scouts have spotted campfires from Sun Ce's army three miles ahead!" a scout reported to Yan Yan.

"Good! Full pursuit!" Yan Yan roared, charging ahead, followed closely by his personal guards. The rest of his troops, stretching for miles, surged forward in response.

"They're coming!" Jiang Qin muttered to himself, a mocking smile on his face. "Marching all the way from Yizhou to Yiling in a month—quite impressive. Let's see if we can drive you back to Jiangzhou in the same time."

Yan Yan, leading the charge, entered the valley of Yiling, only to be greeted by a rain of arrows. Instead of fear, Yan Yan's face lit up with joy, and he laughed, "Sun Ce, you finally have the guts to face me!"

Clang! A flash of blue light struck Yan Yan's spear, forcing him back. Then, a large group of soldiers rushed down the hillside, shouting their battle cries as they charged. Seeing the well-armed soldiers and their determined expressions, Yan Yan's heart sank.

"Yan Yan! I, Jiang Qin of Jiujiang, have waited a long time for this!" Jiang Qin shouted as he forced Yan Yan back with a sword strike. "Now, everyone, if not now, then when?"

"Now!" came the thunderous reply from the surrounding valley, the echoes bouncing off the mountainsides. Soldiers hidden within a ten-mile radius sprang from their positions almost simultaneously. In an instant, the cries of battle filled the air, and the Yizhou army, caught off guard, descended into chaos.

Chapter 758: The Crushing Defeat

"Prepare to die, Yan Yan!" Jiang Qin roared as he thrust his sword toward Yan Yan.

"You think such a minor trick can break my army?" Yan Yan bellowed, and a golden light flashed. The once-scattered troops seemed to be infused with a renewed fighting spirit, stabilizing their formation. With a surge of strength, Yan Yan charged at Jiang Qin.

"As expected, Yan Yan's army won't crumble easily. Even under ambush, fire, and attacks from all sides, they can still maintain a basic level of combat power," Pang Tong muttered to himself from atop a cliff, licking his lips.

The battle between Yan Yan and Jiang Qin was evenly matched, with neither able to gain the upper hand. Meanwhile, Yan Yan's forces began to adjust to the chaotic attacks from all directions, slowly regaining their composure and fighting back with more stability.

"Bo Fu, it's up to you now!" Pang Tong called to Sun Ce, who stood nearby, his eyes burning with rage.

"All soldiers, listen to me! Victory is certain in this battle—charge!" Sun Ce shouted as he mounted his horse, leading his remaining 2,000 troops in an all-out assault.

At that moment, Sun Ce's eyes burned with fire, and the inner energy in his body manifested like solid armor, with beams of golden light radiating from him.

As Sun Ce charged down the mountain toward the valley, his momentum reached its peak. His spear thrust forward, and flames of energy erupted, clearing a massive swath through the Yizhou army, as though piercing through the very heavens.

"Break through!" Sun Ce's spear shot toward Yan Yan, his spirit, energy, and mind reaching their apex. Yan Yan tried to block with all his might, but the force sent him flying dozens of meters away, crashing to the ground and coughing up blood.

"My path is unstoppable! Break!" Sun Ce roared, and a golden radiance burst from his body, enveloping his soldiers.

Yan Yan's troops, seeing Sun Ce first send their general flying and then suddenly unleash a powerful legion talent, fell into despair. They no longer fought with the same tenacity and began retreating, their confidence shattered.

"Kill!" Sun Ce, unaware that he had activated his own legion talent, felt the flames of his anger dissipate with that single spear thrust. Overwhelmed with joy, he wielded his spear and charged toward Yan Yan.

"Retreat!" Yan Yan shouted in terror. Sun Ce's strength had reached another level with that strike, a level Yan Yan could no longer contend with.

Sun Ce led his troops in a furious assault, slicing through the Yizhou army, who fled before him in fear. Yan Yan's legion talent, which had kept his army from collapsing, was completely overpowered by Sun Ce's own burgeoning talent.

"I will capture you today!" Sun Ce bellowed as he leaped forward, feeling a surge of power. He now believed he could fly just like Lu Bu had, a skill he had once admired but now possessed himself.

"Come down here!" Zheng Du, realizing the army's collapse, knew he had fallen into Pang Tong's trap. But defeat was defeat. He could already guess what Pang Tong had planned with this massive scheme.

In an instant, thoughts raced through Zheng Du's mind. His loyalty to Liu Zhang spurred him to charge toward Yan Yan's direction.

Sun Ce reached Yan Yan first, but Zheng Du was only a few steps behind. Seeing Sun Ce raise his spear to strike Yan Yan, Zheng Du unleashed all of his mental energy in a desperate attempt to stop him.

"Ah!" Before Sun Ce could land the blow, Zheng Du's mouth filled with blood, but he kept his eyes fixed on Sun Ce, refusing to back down.

Expending one's mental energy in this way was a last-ditch effort for top strategists. It was a move that could only be used once and usually at the cost of one's life, with the hope of taking down a single opponent. But clearly, Zheng Du was not as skilled as Li Ru had been—he was already injured before even affecting his target.

"General Yan, retreat now!" Zheng Du shouted, his eyes unblinking as he faced Sun Ce.

"Zizhong, what are you doing?" Yan Yan asked, standing with the support of his spear. Even Sun Ce eyed Zheng Du warily.

"Retreat now. I can't hold this for long," Zheng Du replied coldly. "We were outwitted from the start. General Sun, you have an exceptional strategist. We were doomed from the beginning."

Sun Ce said nothing, his gaze locked on Zheng Du. Being forced into a standoff like this enraged him, but there was no way to avoid the mental assault—speed was useless against such an attack. Thus, Sun Ce could only glare coldly at Zheng Du without responding.

Yan Yan gritted his teeth, realizing that Zheng Du was sacrificing himself to give him a chance to escape. Without hesitation, Yan Yan turned and began rallying the remnants of his troops, trying to escape while the enemy pursuit was temporarily halted.

"Why doesn't General Sun have that brilliant strategist of yours show himself?" Zheng Du taunted as he glared at Sun Ce, knowing full well his mental energy could only render Sun Ce unconscious for a month at most—it wasn't enough to kill him, especially from a distance greater than five paces.

"You want to see me?" Pang Tong stepped forward without fear, coming within five paces of Zheng Du. The nearby threats had already been eliminated by Jiang Qin's men.

"How bold!" Zheng Du exclaimed, staring at Pang Tong's homely face. "Though you're quite ugly, there's no denying the brilliance within."

"I don't need your compliments. Even if Yan Yan escapes, it won't matter. Our victory in Jiangzhou is already assured," Pang Tong replied dismissively, waving his sleeve as if accustomed to such remarks about his appearance.

Zheng Du hesitated for a moment, noticing the youthfulness in Pang Tong's voice, but none of that mattered now. What mattered was that soon, Sun Ce would be crippled.

"Come die with me!" Zheng Du roared, ready to unleash his final attack.

"Such anger is bad for your health. You should rest instead!" Pang Tong replied calmly, expanding his spiritual energy far beyond Zheng Du's. In an instant, he effortlessly suppressed Zheng Du's mental assault and knocked him out with a single strike.

"Phew, that's done. I told you not to get too close to enemy strategists, especially the top ones. Even for me, a close-range mental attack could be deadly. If you were within five steps, you'd definitely be killed," Pang Tong said, feeling slightly dizzy but otherwise unharmed.

Zheng Du's mental energy had been strong, but Pang Tong had fought mental battles alongside Zhou Yu and Chen Xi before. In comparison, Zheng Du was an inexperienced strategist from the countryside—no match for Pang Tong.

"Are you alright?" Sun Ce asked, slightly concerned.

Chapter 759: Encounter Again

"After some sleep, he'll be fine. He's not dead. The clash of mental energy involves injecting one's spirit into the other's mind, seeking mutual destruction. In this case, it was just an external release, and after some rest, he should recover," Pang Tong explained, "But in the future, don't get too close."

"As long as he's fine. But I can't believe Yan Yan escaped! I wanted to capture him alive," Sun Ce said, frustrated. "As a general, he abandoned his comrades. Next time, I'll finish him off."

"If you chase him now, you might catch up," Pang Tong murmured, his eyes half-closed.

"Let's focus on wiping out the Yizhou army first. Yan Yan may be a powerful Inner Qi warrior, but all he wants now is to run. We missed the best chance; there won't be another opportunity like that," Sun Ce said with a dark expression.

"By the way, what's your legion talent?" Pang Tong asked curiously. He had anticipated that after being pushed to the brink, Sun Ce would likely break through his limits. But such a powerful strike, enough to defeat an Inner Qi warrior who had been evenly matched with him earlier, wasn't just a simple burst of strength.

"It seems to make the enemy hesitate and makes our side brim with a domineering aura. It also seems different from other legion talents since it can affect me personally. During Yan Yan's defense, there was a clear problem," Sun Ce replied uncertainly, still trying to understand his new ability after using it for the first time.

"A talent of dominance?" Pang Tong muttered to himself, thinking it over before saying, "Your legion talent might be both a legion and a sovereign's talent. Try using it on me."

Sun Ce nodded and activated his talent, but it didn't extend to Pang Tong.

"As I thought, a sovereign's talent," Pang Tong said with a nod. "Very well, Bo Fu. It seems following you still holds great potential. Now, take 3,000 men and charge as fast as you can into Yizhou!"

"Just 3,000 men..." Zhang Xun, who had just arrived carrying Lei Bo's head, overheard and commented, "That's a bit too few, isn't it?"

"We need speed, not numbers. But, who is this?" Pang Tong asked, turning to see Zhang Xun with the severed head. He quickly turned back, feeling queasy—already dizzy, seeing a decapitated head didn't help.

Li Feng snatched the head from Zhang Xun's hands and tossed it aside.

"My head!" Zhang Xun exclaimed, moving to retrieve it, but was immediately tripped by Jiang Qin. They had seen clueless people before, but none quite like him.

"Tie him up," Pang Tong ordered. "Bo Fu, pursue Yan Yan. You don't need to capture him, but you must shatter his forces completely. As for the routed soldiers, don't worry about them—I'll gather them later. Gong Yi, you stay behind as well." With that, Pang Tong dragged the bound Zheng Du to Yiling to rest, fighting off his dizziness and nausea.

Just as Yan Yan had relentlessly pursued Sun Ce, Sun Ce now gave chase in return. But this time, the tides had turned. Sun Ce attacked Yan Yan's fleeing forces with overwhelming strength.

As Pang Tong had predicted, Yan Yan's legion talent did indeed prevent his army from completely collapsing, but it had its limits. Sun Ce's powerful assaults gradually wore down those limits.

The collapse of an army is like a snowball rolling downhill, and Sun Ce's relentless pursuit acted like a powerful force pushing that snowball. Yan Yan's army fell apart piece by piece, with little time to recover.

Yan Yan, leading his personal guard, retreated without daring to stop. By the time they reached the place where Yan Yan had once crushed Sun Ce with great pride, his army had dwindled to a mere few hundred men. Of his many commanders, only a handful remained, and of the three key strategists, Zhang Song was absent, Liu Ba was lost among the routed forces, and Zheng Du had been captured by Sun Ce's army.

Looking back at his exhausted soldiers, Yan Yan's eyes filled with tears. Once, they had been fierce and unstoppable, but now, they fled in fear of Sun Ce. They had lost—completely and utterly.

"Report, General! There's a camp five miles ahead!" a scout reported to Yan Yan. By now, the range of their reconnaissance had shrunk to just five miles due to their constant retreat.

"Pang Shiyuan even predicted this..." Yan Yan muttered bitterly as he looked up at the blazing sun.

"Report, General! Sun Ce's army is only five miles behind us!" another scout reported.

"Blocked in front and pursued from behind... it seems my end has come here!" Yan Yan glanced back at his demoralized soldiers, their weapons and armor in disarray. How could they possibly stand against two armies from both sides?

"Is that you, General Yan?" came a sudden voice from one of the scouts.

"Who's there?" Yan Yan turned to see a figure in silver armor wielding a Fangtian halberd—Taishi Ci, who had suddenly appeared before him.

"I am Taishi Ci of Lord Liu Bei's forces, here to assist. Zhang Biejia has also arrived. Please retreat, General Yan, and leave the enemy to me," Taishi Ci said, saluting Yan Yan with his halberd. His guards soon arrived, and Zhang Song followed on horseback.

"Yan Yan, you old traitor, don't you dare run!" Before Yan Yan could exchange words of defeat with Zhang Song, he heard the infuriating voice of Sun Ce behind him. Throughout their retreat, Yan Yan had heard that voice far too often.

"General Yan, please return to camp and rest. I will handle this!" Taishi Ci said, spurring his horse forward. His soldiers quickly moved to form a defensive line, shielding Yan Yan's routed troops from the coming battle.

As Sun Ce charged forward, he saw not Yan Yan, but a heavily armored army, well-prepared and in formation. His expression grew serious. Encountering such a force here was far from ideal.

"Who are you, daring to block the path of Sun Bo Fu!" Sun Ce pointed his spear at the enemy forces. Not seeing Taishi Ci, he unleashed his sovereign's talent, aiming to induce fear in his opponents. He had grown confident that his power was enough to make others falter.

"Sun Bo Fu?" Taishi Ci raised an eyebrow. "Well, this is the best news I've heard today. Prepare to lose your head!"

"Taishi Ci! Do you think I'm afraid of you?" Sun Ce laughed, spurring his horse toward Taishi Ci. He was eager for a rematch after nearly losing to Taishi Ci before, and this time his fighting spirit was even higher.

Taishi Ci didn't back down, immediately charging forward to engage Sun Ce in battle. Zhang Xun and the others knew well that Sun Ce loved to fight, so they ordered their troops to pull back, giving Sun Ce plenty of space. They cheered him on, for by now, Sun Ce had earned the admiration and respect of all his men.

Chapter 760: Battle Once Again

A deafening explosion of spear shadows enveloped Sun Ce, and the blinding golden light flashed like the sun itself. Taishi Ci's immense strength was only partially revealed, yet it was already overwhelming.

"Perfect timing!" Sun Ce's battle spirit surged as he charged head-on into Taishi Ci's spear shadow, his body glowing with a brilliant golden radiance like molten gold.

Boom! Taishi Ci staggered back three steps, but Sun Ce didn't escape unscathed either. He was flung backward, though the excitement on his face never faded. He had just broken through, and now he had found the perfect opponent.

"Since we last parted on the Yangtze River, I've grown much stronger," Sun Ce said, steadying himself as he smiled at Taishi Ci. He had been yearning for a worthy adversary.

"Last time you slipped away. This time, I won't go easy on you!" Taishi Ci spun his Fangtian Halberd with one hand, his expression brimming with confidence.

"Go easy? Hahaha! Let's see what you've got. Come on, fight me!" Sun Ce laughed, his powerful inner energy surging as he rushed toward Taishi Ci.

While Taishi Ci was glad to face Sun Ce again, he wasn't as reckless. Sun Ce had clearly become much stronger, and as Sun Ce unleashed his full strength, Taishi Ci's expression grew more serious.

A golden glow burst from Taishi Ci's body as well, though it wasn't as blinding as Sun Ce's. Nonetheless, the pressure emanating from Taishi Ci was no weaker than Sun Ce's.

"Let's fight!" Sun Ce, laughing wildly, thrust his spear at Taishi Ci, unleashing his battle-hungry spirit. He finally had a chance to fight with everything he had.

Unlike his previous encounters—whether it was his initial meeting with Lu Bu before mastering his inner energy, his duel with Huang Zhong in Jiangling, or his clash with Zhao Yun on the Yangtze—this was different. Sun Ce had now pieced together enough strength to rival the greatest of warriors. What he craved was a fierce, exhilarating battle.

"Die!" Taishi Ci coldly targeted the flaws in Sun Ce's technique. Unlike Sun Ce, who had only recently reached this level of power, Taishi Ci had long surpassed the stage of arrogance. He could now control every ounce of his inner energy with precision, unleashing devastating attacks.

As Taishi Ci swung his Fangtian Halberd, it seemed to lengthen by several feet. Sun Ce, who had intended to counterattack after dodging the initial strike, suddenly sensed danger. He pulled back just in time, but not before his armor was sliced off.

"Impressive!" Sun Ce laughed, showing no fear. Instead, he used the opportunity to charge forward, his spear aimed at Taishi Ci's waist. The move wasn't flashy or quick, but it was powerful and imposing.

"Break!" Taishi Ci rotated his halberd, slamming it against the tip of Sun Ce's spear. In an attempt to disarm him, he tried to lock the spear with his halberd, but Sun Ce used the momentum to swing the spear in a wide arc, aiming it back at Taishi Ci.

The two clashed fiercely, their golden auras colliding violently. After being flung off their horses, they leaped into the air, continuing their battle mid-flight. Both were encased in golden armor, their weapons gleaming with the same radiant light.

"Fall!" Taishi Ci roared, unleashing a massive golden slash with his halberd, sending it hurtling toward the airborne Sun Ce.

"The same move again? Break!" Sun Ce's spear glowed with a brilliant golden hue as he shattered Taishi Ci's energy slash. He then shot toward Taishi Ci like a lightning bolt.

"Perish!" Taishi Ci drew an invisible bowstring in the air, summoning countless golden beams of light. These thousands of razor-sharp energy strands shot toward Sun Ce like a rain of needles.

"I knew you'd use that move!" Sun Ce laughed wildly, switching the spear to his other hand. Leaving a golden afterimage in his right hand, he hurled the spear with all his might. The spear tore through Taishi Ci's energy strands as if they were nothing. "I've been waiting for this moment—take my spear!"

Boom! Just as Taishi Ci released his arrow, Sun Ce's spear hurtled toward his chest. Forced to react, Taishi Ci summoned all his strength to deflect the spear with his halberd. However, upon contact, the spear exploded into a brilliant burst of golden flames, engulfing Taishi Ci in a fiery cloud.

The explosion roared, shaking the battlefield and deafening the soldiers below. Sun Ce's men erupted in cheers, while Taishi Ci's personal guards watched anxiously as the golden light filled the sky.

"Why hasn't he been blasted out of the sky?" Sun Ce squinted at the golden light in the sky. The brightness was so intense that even he found it hard to look at directly.

The light dissipated quickly, but Sun Ce saw no sign of Taishi Ci plummeting from the sky. The idea that Taishi Ci had been vaporized was laughable. Sun Ce knew Taishi Ci well enough to understand that any attack incapable of killing himself wouldn't kill Taishi Ci either.

As the smoke cleared, Taishi Ci appeared, standing calmly in midair, shielding his eyes with his right hand. Although his body was covered in deep gashes, some of which were severe, Sun Ce noticed that Taishi Ci wasn't bleeding.

Lowering his hand, Taishi Ci gazed down at Sun Ce, his eyes cold. That last attack had nearly claimed his life, but fortunately, he had a secret technique to fall back on. Ever since being severely injured by Yan Liang in Jizhou, Taishi Ci had developed a method to sustain himself in prolonged battles.

"Sun Ce, in such a short time, you've already grown so strong," Taishi Ci said, his secret technique rapidly healing his wounds. His energy continued to rise, surpassing even his previous peak.

"How... how is this possible?" Sun Ce muttered in disbelief.

"Impossible?" Taishi Ci scoffed. At this level, what was or wasn't possible no longer mattered. Suppressing his injuries, Taishi Ci regained his strength, now stronger than ever.

"Possible or not, the injuries you've inflicted today—I will repay them all!" Taishi Ci roared, surging forward with lightning speed. His Fangtian Halberd descended with overwhelming force, striking Sun Ce and sending him crashing to the ground.