

Mythical 761

Chapter 761: Old Rivals

Sun Ce thrust his spear with overwhelming force toward Taishi Ci, but the result was only a few superficial wounds on Taishi Ci. In contrast, Sun Ce suffered a severe injury from Taishi Ci's counterattack.

Taishi Ci observed the large wound on Sun Ce's chest, blood seeping out continuously. Without a moment's hesitation, he swung his Fangtian Halberd again, determined to end Sun Ce's life and rid himself of a future threat.

"This looks bad!" Zhang Xun bit his lip. As the smoke cleared and he saw the wound on Sun Ce's chest, he panicked. Without a second thought, he abandoned any notion of fairness and led Sun Ce's soldiers in a desperate charge.

Seeing Zhang Xun and the rest of Sun Ce's troops rushing at him, Taishi Ci fiercely swung his halberd once more toward Sun Ce. However, this time, Sun Ce barely managed to block the attack, though his helmet was knocked off in the process.

As Zhang Xun threw honor aside and charged with his troops, Taishi Ci's personal guards were no longer restrained and joined the battle. The clash between the two sides was fierce, with Taishi Ci's guards proving particularly valiant. But Sun Ce's soldiers, battle-hardened and led by experienced commanders, fought fiercely, protecting Sun Ce as they gradually retreated.

"Stop! Don't pursue any further!" Taishi Ci called off the pursuit after only three to five miles. He ordered his troops to fall back, knowing that if he continued to suppress his injuries, the recovery time would only lengthen.

"Why didn't General Taishi press the attack?" Yan Yan, who had come to take advantage of the situation, asked, puzzled by Taishi Ci's decision.

"Sun Ce's forces are larger, and ours are smaller. If his reinforcements arrive, we will be the ones to lose," Taishi Ci replied calmly, offering a plausible excuse without revealing his weakness.

"General, you are cautious." Yan Yan nodded in agreement, not pressing the issue. The display of Taishi Ci's martial prowess had already left him in awe. He thought to himself, The Central Plains truly are the heart of the Hua Xia, a land of talented people.

After returning to camp, Taishi Ci ordered his scouts to gather intelligence from all directions. He also inquired about Yan Yan's situation and sent a sealed letter to Zhuge Liang, who was still stationed at the rear. After inspecting the camp's defenses and giving orders to strengthen them, Taishi Ci finally deactivated his secret technique and allowed the army doctors to treat his wounds, ensuring no lasting damage.

Meanwhile, as the news of Sun Ce's injury reached Pang Tong, Zhuge Liang also received Taishi Ci's report. Both strategists pocketed the information and ordered their troops to accelerate their march, each leading their elite central forces ahead toward Yiling.

Pang Tong wasn't sure which general and strategist Liu Bei had sent, but he knew Sun Ce was wounded. If anything went wrong, it could spell disaster. On the other hand, Zhuge Liang was well aware that Pang Tong was the opposing strategist, and although Taishi Ci was careful, he wouldn't be able to match someone of Pang Tong's caliber. Zhuge Liang had no choice but to rush ahead.

Thus, while they had different goals, both strategists took the same course of action, arriving at Yiling at nearly the same time.

"Bo Fu, are you still alive?" Pang Tong asked with a frown as he saw the heavily bandaged Sun Ce.

"Haha! I'm as strong as an ox! How could anything happen to me?" Sun Ce replied with a cheeky grin, pounding his chest, which made a deep, resonant sound.

Pang Tong eyed Sun Ce up and down. "If you can't win in a fight, why not rely on your command skills? Your legion talent is also a sovereign's talent, which naturally suppresses others. Why would you insist on dueling? I heard your armor was shredded and your chest got sliced open."

Sun Ce felt embarrassed and struggled to explain. Although the wound wasn't too serious for him—something that could heal in a few days as long as the bone wasn't damaged—under Pang Tong's scornful gaze, he felt awkward. Zhou Yu had warned him countless times, but it had never made a difference.

"Forget it, it's partly my fault too," Pang Tong sighed, retracting his gaze and taking responsibility. "Just be more careful in the future. I underestimated this situation. Liu Bei's forces, huh? I wonder who they've sent this time."

"If you want to know, why don't we just go take a look? What's the point of guessing here?" Sun Ce cut in, interrupting Pang Tong's train of thought with his straightforwardness.

After giving Sun Ce a sharp glare, Pang Tong fell silent, realizing there was no point in arguing. No wonder Zhou Yu often had to suppress his intelligence when dealing with Sun Ce.

"Fine. Let's go check out Liu Bei's forces," Sun Ce continued cheerfully, completely ignoring Pang Tong's exasperated expression as he dragged him out. Sun Ce was accustomed to relying on a brilliant strategist while charging ahead himself.

It was fortunate for Sun Ce that both of his strategists were highly capable. Otherwise, with his reckless behavior, even as an Inner Qi warrior, he would have met his end sooner or later.

"I can walk on my own," Pang Tong said helplessly, but he didn't resist. His thoughts had already been interrupted, so he decided to follow Sun Ce and see the enemy's situation firsthand.

On the other side, Zhuge Liang surveyed the pale-faced Taishi Ci and inquired about the recent battle. After confirming that Pang Tong had not yet arrived, he felt a sense of relief.

"He's probably already sensed that I'm here, but with all the changes, he likely doesn't know who I am yet," Zhuge Liang mused with a faint smile, watching the three legion talents slowly approach their position.

"Though I'd rather not face him, he'll figure out my presence soon enough, given his abilities. It won't take him more than a day or two to understand the situation," Zhuge Liang remarked, his expression calm as he glanced toward the east, where Pang Tong was.

"Strategist Zhuge, do you know Pang Shiyuan?" Taishi Ci asked curiously.

"Not only do I know him, but we used to get along quite well. I once thought his wisdom would lead him to join Lord Liu Bei, but here we are on opposing sides. No matter—it gives me the perfect opportunity to settle some old scores," Zhuge Liang replied with a rare, sinister smile.

As a child, Zhuge Liang had suffered many defeats at Pang Tong's hands. Though he always appeared composed and courteous, that calm demeanor was merely a front to frustrate Pang Tong. In reality, the losses Zhuge Liang had inflicted on Pang Tong were equally matched by those Pang Tong had dealt him.

Furthermore, Zhuge Liang knew all too well why his spiritual talent came with such severe drawbacks, and this knowledge only deepened his resentment toward Pang Tong. Even though Zhuge Liang usually carried himself with great maturity, he couldn't entirely suppress his grudge against Pang Tong.

"Why do I suddenly feel a chill?" Taishi Ci muttered, glancing around nervously. Zhuge Liang's sinister smile made him feel uneasy. Though he wasn't well-acquainted with Zhuge Liang, seeing the usually calm and composed strategist display such an expression could only mean trouble.

Chapter 762: A Meeting of Equals

"Let's go and meet Sun Bofu. Shiyuan, it's been a while since we last saw each other. I wonder what it will feel like this time. During the Battle of the Yangtze, we didn't cross paths, but now that we meet again, it's time to see who's better!" Zhuge Liang spoke with calm words, but beneath them surged an intense passion. Apart from the thorn in his side, Pang Tong, no one could stir his emotions like this.

Though Taishi Ci was the army's commander, he did not rebuke Zhuge Liang for issuing direct orders. Whether it was due to Zhuge Liang's status, his ability, or his age, Taishi Ci had no intention of opposing him. After all, it was clear that Zhuge Liang's rare behavior stemmed from the deep connection he had with Pang Tong, and to Taishi Ci, this interplay of personal grievances was somewhat amusing.

As Zhuge Liang exited the tent, Zhang Song was already waiting outside. While Zhang Song had initially harbored resentment toward Zhuge Liang's earlier remarks, once events unfolded as predicted, he had no choice but to set aside his pride. A true strategist could not afford to cling to misplaced arrogance.

Upon realizing Zhuge Liang's insight, Zhang Song immediately sought to make amends. Any remaining animosity dissolved, replaced by admiration for Zhuge Liang's wisdom. He approached Zhuge Liang, bowing with respect and humility.

"Master Zhuge, I must apologize for my earlier doubts," Zhang Song said, bowing deeply. His attitude had completely changed, with none of the arrogance from before, speaking to Zhuge Liang now as an equal.

"Zhang Beijia, there's no need for such courtesy. I merely had the advantage of being an outsider to the situation," Zhuge Liang quickly sidestepped the bow, not daring to accept such formal respect, and offered a humble explanation. Whether he was right or wrong, who could truly know?

"Master Kongming, you're too modest. It was I who was careless. With Zi Chu and Zi Zhong beside me, I underestimated the talents of the Central Plains. My brother Zi Zhong has fallen to Sun Ce, and Zi Chu is lost in the chaos of battle. Alas..." Zhang Song sighed deeply, visibly frustrated. Defeat was defeat, and no excuse could change that. Three strategists against one, and they still lost.

Zhuce Liang remained silent, as there was little to add. Three top-tier strategists—though each had different areas of expertise—should not have lost so decisively. The defeat was partly due to overconfidence and a failure to remain vigilant.

"Let us not dwell on the past, Beijia. Liu Cong's fate is in the hands of the heavens, and Zi Zhong wouldn't want us to wallow in regret," Zhuge Liang gently advised, steering the conversation in a more hopeful direction.

"Rest assured, Kongming. I came here to forge an alliance with Lord Liu Bei. The three powerful clans of the Liu family must unite to restore the Han dynasty. My lord holds Yizhou, the land of abundance, and your lord controls Qing and Xu provinces. Together, we can revive the Han!" Zhang Song declared with righteousness and fervor.

Zhang Song's loyalty to Liu Bei and his vision of a united Liu family were sincere. With Liu Bei holding strategic lands and Liu Zhang governing the fertile Yizhou, Zhang Song believed that an alliance between the two would ensure the restoration of the Han dynasty.

"My lord Liu Bei is indeed committed to restoring the Han. Beijia, even without your proposal, I would have initiated the alliance. When my forces arrive, you will see the alliance formalized," Zhuge Liang responded with a slight smile.

"Then, from this day forth, our army will be at General Taishi's disposal," Zhang Song replied, bowing to Taishi Ci.

"As allies, we support each other. There is no need to speak of command, only mutual aid," Taishi Ci answered with a smile.

"General, Sun Ce's forces are approaching for battle!" A messenger rushed in, reporting to Taishi Ci.

"Zhang Beijia, would you like to accompany me?" Zhuge Liang asked with a smile, while Taishi Ci looked on in amusement.

Zhang Song, observing Zhuge Liang's demeanor, found himself deep in thought.

As Zhuge Liang and Taishi Ci led their personal guards out of the camp, Yan Yan also emerged with his soldiers. Though Yizhou's forces had been heavily pursued and scattered by Sun Ce, many soldiers had merely fled rather than perished. Now that they had re-established a camp, Yan Yan had managed to rally thousands of these scattered troops. Though their morale was low, they were once again battle-ready.

"General Yan!" Zhuge Liang greeted Yan Yan with a respectful bow as they approached the camp's gate.

"Who is this?" Yan Yan asked, looking puzzled at the young strategist standing half a step behind Taishi Ci. Though Zhang Song had mentioned Zhuge Liang, he had not given a detailed description.

"This is Master Zhuge," Zhang Song introduced Zhuge Liang with a calm expression.

"General Yan thanks Master Zhuge for his aid," Yan Yan immediately dismounted and knelt on one knee, showing great respect.

"Please, General, rise. I am unworthy of such a grand gesture!" Zhuge Liang quickly moved to help Yan Yan to his feet, uncomfortable with the excessive formality.

"Thank you, Master Zhuge, for saving my army from disaster," Yan Yan said solemnly.

"I was simply in the right place at the right time. I do not deserve such gratitude," Zhuge Liang humbly replied.

With Yan Yan's heartfelt expression of gratitude, the bond between Liu Bei's forces and Yizhou's army solidified. Yan Yan earnestly declared his willingness to join Taishi Ci in battle against Sun Ce.

Hearing this, Zhuge Liang felt reassured. He could see that Yan Yan was a man of honor, and his words carried weight. Zhuge Liang's earlier fear—that the Yizhou forces might view them as opportunists—was now completely alleviated. The situation could not have been more ideal.

Chapter 763: Clash of Beliefs

When Zhuge Liang followed Taishi Ci out of the camp with his soldiers, Sun Ce's army had already formed ranks in front of them. However, seeing that Taishi Ci's troops were advancing and retreating in perfect order, Sun Ce lost any desire for a full-on battle.

"Zhuge Kongming..." Pang Tong narrowed his eyes as he looked at the white-clad Zhuge Liang. He wasn't sure when it had started, but he had developed a distaste for white garments. Instead, he always wore dark silk robes.

"Is that guy Zhuge Liang?" Sun Ce curiously glanced at Pang Tong and asked.

"Yes, that's him..." Pang Tong stroked the few strands of his beard with excitement. "No wonder he felt familiar before. So it's him... It's been a long time..."

Sun Ce slowly edged away from Pang Tong. He sensed something was off with him. The sight of Pang Tong's ugly face combined with his strange smile sent a chill down Sun Ce's spine.

"Zhuge Kongming..." Pang Tong pressed his horse forward, his sinister smile shifting to one of joy, as if reuniting with an old friend. He charged towards the middle ground between the two armies.

"Hehehe, Pang Shiyuan..." Zhuge Liang, also smiling brightly, spurred his steed and rode out to meet Pang Tong.

"Shiyuan, it's been a while. How have you been?" Zhuge Liang asked, his face full of genuine warmth.

"I've become the military advisor to General Sun. How about you, Kongming?" Pang Tong responded with a smile, the pride evident on his ugly face. Not yet even twenty, he had become the trusted advisor of a powerful warlord, and he couldn't help but feel smug about it.

"Being younger than you, Shiyuan, I still have much to learn. Currently, I only serve under the Han, a humble post in Qing Province," Zhuge Liang said modestly. While his position as a mere official in the Han court may have seemed small, it carried more legitimacy than Pang Tong's title as a general in Sun Ce's army, making Pang Tong's face darken.

Pang Tong's pride took a hit, but his quick thinking returned as he chuckled and replied, "Well then, let me congratulate you on your official title, Kongming. But isn't your role in Qing Province? What brings you here? Aren't you worried about abandoning your position and losing that hard-earned title?"

Zhuce Liang's expression darkened. When he was dispatched to Yizhou, his official title was not revoked, leaving him in a precarious position. Technically, he wasn't yet fully part of the military.

"I came not for personal gain but to support my fellow kin. We, as kinsmen, must stand together and restore the Han," Zhuge Liang responded meaningfully, casting a glance at Pang Tong.

For a brief moment, Pang Tong felt like he had grasped something deeper in Zhuge Liang's words, but his thoughts were too preoccupied with the current conversation to fully process it.

"Supporting Yizhou, you say? That reminds me of the conflicts between Western Qin and Tian Qi," Pang Tong retorted, openly mocking Yizhou's position. "What do you think? Alliances formed from mutual benefit are nothing new."

"The Han Emperor still reigns, and my lord and the lord of Yizhou share the same bloodline. How could we act like rebels and traitors?" Zhuge Liang smiled, subtly attacking Pang Tong. No matter what Pang Tong said, Zhuge Liang's response pointed to Sun Ce's questionable possession of the Imperial Seal.

"Have you never heard of brothers turning against each other? And besides, why should I believe that your Lord Liu Bei's ambitions align with those of Liu Zhang? Their goals are entirely different. Who's to say who will end up as the rebel?" Pang Tong countered with a mocking grin.

Pang Tong wasn't one to back down easily. If Zhuge Liang wanted to talk about the past, Pang Tong was ready to challenge him with the future. After all, it was common knowledge that Liu Bei's ambitions far exceeded Liu Zhang's modest goals as a local ruler. If Liu Bei were to succeed, it would likely cause friction with Liu Zhang's plans.

"Who can truly know the future? Dragons can be great or small, rise or remain hidden; when they are great, they summon the clouds and rain, but when they are small, they hide in the depths of the waters. Do you truly know the extent of a dragon's potential?" Zhuge Liang calmly replied, his voice filled with wisdom, showing his deep belief in Liu Bei's potential.

"Enough with the jokes," Pang Tong abruptly stopped, his expression turning serious as he looked closely at Zhuge Liang. He quickly assessed the situation but felt no fear. The Yizhou army was no longer a threat, and he didn't see Liu Bei's forces as a formidable challenge. Still, he spoke with newfound gravity. "Are you here to stop me?"

"I'm simply here to guide you back to the right path," Zhuge Liang said, staring at Pang Tong, though he knew deep down he wouldn't receive the answer he hoped for.

"We're not children anymore, Kongming. What is the right path? I don't know, and neither do you. But I know this—following Bofu feels right," Pang Tong turned to glance at Sun Ce before looking back at Zhuge Liang. "Liu Bei's ideals may be noble, but Sun Bofu's honor resonates with me even more."

"Sun Bofu is indeed an outstanding leader, but one who is rigid and liable to break under pressure. Without Zhou Gongjin by his side, he will eventually fall prey to treachery. And you, my friend, are no Zhou Gongjin," Zhuge Liang said sincerely, trying to offer Pang Tong a warning.

"Rigid and liable to break? Hmph, you speak of a dragon's transformation, yet you forget that even Liu Bei would not be where he is without Chen Zichuan's support. You, Zhuge Kongming, are no Chen Zichuan," Pang Tong retorted, mentioning Liu Bei's top strategist. His expression remained calm, and he chose not to refer to Liu Bei by his title, "Lord."

The two stared at each other, knowing that their paths were set. Their choice of lord was not a matter of childish bickering; it was a decision borne out of maturity.

"My lord Liu Bei will pacify the land and restore the Han, and you, along with Sun Bofu, will stand in his way," Zhuge Liang stated firmly, his voice unwavering, brimming with conviction.

"Who's to say who's standing in whose way?" Pang Tong shook his head lightly. "There's no point in discussing this now. We both serve our masters. At least, under Sun Ce, I'm content, and Zhou Gongjin has treated me well."

"It seems we are destined to be adversaries," Zhuge Liang said quietly. "You excel at taking risks, and you've chosen a master who shares that trait. But the path to kingship is not built on schemes and tricks alone."

"Haha," Pang Tong chuckled softly but didn't offer an argument. He understood Zhuge Liang's words. "Not everyone has the resources of Liu Bei or Yuan Benchu. And though you see Liu Bei as heaven's chosen, he didn't receive all that he has from you."

"True, but does that really matter? One man's ambition pales compared to the hopes of countless commoners. I can still tell which is more important," Zhuge Liang replied, his expression calm yet glowing with the conviction of his beliefs.

Chapter 764: Public and Private

"I used to argue against you simply for the sake of argument, but that's no longer necessary. I have my own ideals, and I don't need to hide behind the will of the masses. While my lord may have many flaws, he accepts everything about me. His will is my direction, and I believe in him!" Pang Tong slowly turned to look at Sun Ce, then turned back with a resolute expression on his face.

"I expected as much," Zhuge Liang responded calmly. "I don't have many close friends, but you are certainly one of them. However, you also make a fitting opponent. If I ever meet Sima Zhongda, I will introduce you to him. Other than you, he is the only one in our generation who piques my interest."

"Unfortunately, I no longer have any interest in competing with our peers. This world's conflicts don't grant you any privileges based on your age or experience, as this situation clearly shows," Pang Tong said with a sneer, his upturned nose and twisted smile making his already unsightly face appear even more grotesque.

Though Zhang Song, standing behind, couldn't hear everything clearly, he caught bits and pieces. Pang Tong's age shocked him, and he felt a deep sense of shame, once again marveling at how remarkable the people of the Central Plains were.

"I never said I was competing with our generation," Zhuge Liang replied with his usual calm. "Perhaps one day, when you meet him, you will understand." His voice softened. "You know what my presence here means."

"You're implying that Liu Bei has marched on Yuzhou. What's there to worry about? I trust Zhou Gongjin, and I trust your brother!" Pang Tong said, showing no sign of fear or anxiety. "Even if the three Liu brothers unite, so what? Liu Bei can't afford to commit his entire force. Without him, what other warlord would dare challenge us?"

"It's a shame the Yuan family has split. Otherwise, they might have made worthy opponents," Zhuge Liang countered.

As Pang Tong had said, without Liu Bei, Sun Ce—having united Yuan Shu's forces—was strong enough to contend with any of the remaining warlords. Even excluding Yuan Shao, the combined strength of Yuzhou and Yangzhou under Sun Ce could resist any coalition. But the real advantage lay with Liu Bei, who didn't need to face each warlord individually.

"You're just one step ahead. What's there to fear?" Pang Tong retorted, his eyes narrowing as he smiled coldly at Zhuge Liang.

"One step ahead is still ahead. You don't understand," Zhuge Liang sighed. Pang Tong had never seen Mount Tai, nor did he know what it had prepared. As for his brother, Zhuge Jin, while he had tried to estimate Mount Tai's strength, his conclusions were ultimately misguided.

"You say I don't understand?" Pang Tong sneered. He didn't need to hear more about Mount Tai's current power. Besides, Yuan Shao was still in the picture. In Pang Tong's mind, the war between Yuan

Shao and Liu Bei wouldn't end in three or five years, giving Sun Ce plenty of time to solidify his foundation.

"Yes, you don't understand," Zhuge Liang repeated, shaking his head. "Just as Zhang Song and the others only see their temporary advantage and the immediate victory, they fail to notice the hidden dangers beneath their so-called success."

"Don't underestimate your comrades," Pang Tong scoffed. "As arrogant as it sounds, they aren't weak. In fact, if I hadn't made the first move, I would have lost miserably."

"You misunderstand. You wouldn't have lost miserably—just more embarrassingly," Zhuge Liang said thoughtfully. "Victory has blinded you all, Shiyuan. You don't understand the vast difference between Yuzhou and Yangzhou and Qingzhou and Xuzhou."

The two paused for a moment. Pang Tong, sensing the end of their conversation, broke the silence. "Let's end our reunion here. We can no longer debate as we once did. Public duty and personal relationships are difficult to separate, and next time, we may not even have the chance to speak so calmly."

Zhuce Liang remained silent. He understood what Pang Tong meant. The days when they could sit and debate for hours about philosophy and strategy had passed. In this new world, public duty and private feelings were forever intertwined.

"Let's remember our last parting—when you stormed off angrily. That should be the memory we hold onto. If we want to keep our personal friendship intact, the best way is to never face each other in battle. But alas..." Pang Tong sighed deeply, letting the weight of their situation sink in.

Would Pang Tong hesitate to strike down Liu Bei simply because he was Zhuge Liang's friend? Similarly, would Zhuge Liang hesitate to defeat Sun Ce for Pang Tong's sake? No. On the battlefield, both would do whatever it took. Their personal friendship was no longer relevant.

"Very well," Zhuge Liang replied, feeling a pang of sorrow. But he remained calm.

The excitement in Pang Tong's eyes dimmed as he watched Zhuge Liang. His gaze turned cold. Tugging on the reins, he turned his horse around and left without looking back.

Zhuce Liang watched Pang Tong's retreating figure, feeling the urge to reach out and stop him. But his hand remained at his side. Slowly, he too turned his horse.

Pang Tong's horse moved slowly, as if sensing its master's heavy heart. It didn't display its usual wild nature.

Taishi Ci, who had overheard the entire conversation, knew Zhuge Liang wasn't in a good mood. He approached and tried to offer words of comfort, but Zhuge Liang merely waved him off.

"Shiyuan, why break ties like this!" Sun Ce, oblivious to Pang Tong's somber mood, grabbed him roughly. "Don't worry! Next time, I'll capture Zhuge Liang alive and make him your scribe!"

"Let go of me!" Pang Tong struggled, though his feeble strength was no match for the powerful Sun Ce. However, despite Sun Ce's antics, Pang Tong found his spirits lifting.

With Jiang Qin competently leading the army, Sun Ce had little to worry about. He continued to wrestle playfully with Pang Tong.

"If you can capture Zhuge Liang and make him my scribe..." Pang Tong started to dream aloud. "That would be amazing!"

"Zi Yi, return to camp," Zhuge Liang ordered, his face dark and his voice trembling slightly.

"I think I should just fight them and capture Pang Shiyuan as your scribe," Taishi Ci replied, his eyes blazing with determination as he looked toward Sun Ce.

"A general must not go to war in anger, nor a leader lead in a fit of rage. There's no need to rush," Zhuge Liang said, his expression cold. When it came to war, he wouldn't allow for any mistakes.

Chapter 765: Misjudgment

Let's turn back time to the day when Fa Zheng flaunted his might beneath the walls of Shouchun. After retreating thirty miles with Gan Ning, Fa Zheng jumped out of the carriage, leaped onto his prized horse, and burst into laughter.

"Xiaozhi, what's wrong with you?" Gan Ning was startled by Fa Zheng's sudden outburst. From the moment Fa Zheng switched from riding a horse to sitting in a carriage, Gan Ning had sensed something was off. Now, hearing Fa Zheng's laughter, he felt even more uneasy.

"Nothing, just laughing!" Fa Zheng grinned as he waved his hand.

"This is more than just a laugh," Gan Ning muttered, his lips twitching. "What exactly is making you so happy?"

"I deliberately revealed everything to him, yet he remained completely calm. That's excellent news! Now, quickly march to the Huai River and head straight for Yicheng at full speed!" Fa Zheng laughed, excitement evident in his voice.

"What are you talking about..." Gan Ning gave orders for the march, then frowned at Fa Zheng, awaiting an explanation.

"We'll talk as we go. We can't waste time—if they decide to eliminate us, it could get bad. It was really dangerous back there. Do you remember what our objective was when we first set out?" Fa Zheng urged his horse forward, clearly exhilarated.

Fa Zheng's original plan had been to create the appearance of a full-scale Liu Bei army invasion of Yuzhou. This wasn't difficult, especially since Shouchun didn't have accurate information. Fa Zheng had blocked communications, and with him being the first to arrive, Shouchun's defenders would naturally assume that the north had already fallen.

Of course, there would be some doubts, but without evidence, they had no way to confirm it. And the real information wouldn't reach Shouchun until a few days after Fa Zheng left. By that time, Zhou Yu, worried about Sun Ce, would have already set sail downriver.

No matter whether Yuzhou had truly fallen or not, as long as the route to Runan was cut off, Sun Ce would be in grave danger. Facing the combined strength of the three Liu forces—especially Liu Biao, who would fight fiercely—Zhou Yu would have no choice but to act quickly.

Given Liu Biao's determination to reclaim lost territory, Zhou Yu could be certain that Liu Biao wouldn't hold back. As for the Liu Bei faction, it was clear they had the strength to confront Sun Ce head-on, otherwise, they wouldn't be taken seriously.

In truth, Fa Zheng owed his successful departure from Shouchun to Liao Li. If not for him, Zhou Yu—once calmed by Zhuge Jin—would have deployed his navy down the river to intercept Fa Zheng and secure Yuzhou. After all, Fa Zheng's presence in Shouchun with Gan Ning seemed too risky for a simple ruse; it didn't align with military tactics, and Zhou Yu would have been suspicious.

If it had been Taishi Ci instead of Gan Ning, or even another general of equal rank, they would have outright refused such a risky plan. As trusted deputies, they had the authority to stop such reckless actions, and that's why only two people were involved in this mission—no one else could be trusted to keep quiet.

Liao Li had sent information about the situation in Nan County, informing Zhou Yu of Yan Yan's crushing defeat of Sun Ce's army. This message was free of embellishments, containing only the harsh facts of the defeat, where Sun Ce's army of 17,000 had been broken from the center and had retreated to Yiling.

This overwhelming defeat couldn't be written off as a trap, and Zhou Yu, who had a deep bond with Sun Ce, was deeply worried. With the unfavorable conditions surrounding him, Zhou Yu's emotions were in turmoil. Sun Ce was more important to him than anyone else, and as a result, he didn't analyze Fa Zheng's behavior under the walls of Shouchun and focused solely on rescuing Sun Ce.

"My original plan was to flaunt our strength under the walls of Shouchun, then quickly retreat to Huaibei and cut off the supply lines to Yuzhou. That was the safest move. Once we left, even if Zhou Yu realized what had happened, he wouldn't be able to do anything. We could simply defend across the river," Fa Zheng said with a grin.

Gan Ning nodded, as that had been the initial strategy: after leaving Shouchun, they would move to Peiguo, where defenses were weak, and sever Yuzhou's supply lines.

"But now, I'm changing the plan. I'm not retreating to Peiguo," Fa Zheng said with a cold smile. "Zhou Gongjin was too calm, which means he has something planned for the Yuzhou army. He must have anticipated the attack on Yuzhou and knew the Yuzhou army would lose!"

"Where did you see his calmness? When he saw you, he looked completely shocked," Gan Ning protested.

"I can read people's hearts..." Fa Zheng replied with a sly grin. "If I'm right, all of Zhou Yu's navy is stationed in Shouchun. His original plan was likely to use the navy to sail downstream to Xuzhou, and whether the Yuzhou army won or lost, he'd use the navy to either retreat or seize the moment for a grand victory."

"And what does that have to do with us?" Gan Ning asked, still puzzled.

"It means I've tricked Zhou Yu into doubting the situation in Nan County. He'll lead his navy away by tonight, relying on the element of speed!" Fa Zheng said with a serious expression.

"So you're saying that by tomorrow, the lower Huai River and Yangtze River will be free of Zhou Yu's navy, and he hopes to secure a decisive victory before we can react?" Gan Ning suddenly understood.

"Exactly. If I were Zhou Yu, I'd make the same choice. His navy on the Yangtze is his greatest strength. Though they'll be sailing against the current, both Jiangling and Yiling are on the riverbanks!" Fa Zheng said confidently. "As long as he's fast enough..."

"So in your judgment, Zhou Yu's navy can wipe out Liu Biao?" Gan Ning asked.

"I don't know for sure, but that doesn't matter. What I do know is that in two or three days, the rivers will be free of his navy, and we won't need to cut off Yuzhou's supplies in Peiguo," Fa Zheng said proudly. "Zhou Gongjin is just as confident in his judgment as I am, but he's blinded by his concern."

"One question, though. What if Zhou Yu's forces are strong enough to crush Liu Biao? What will we do then?" Gan Ning asked, pointing out the possibility that Zhou Yu might have hidden resources they couldn't predict.

"Zhou Yu's forces shouldn't be enough to completely wipe out Liu Biao. The strength he commands now is essentially the same as what he and Sun Ce built together. If he had the power to completely defeat Liu Biao, he would have done so already, regardless of any concerns about Yuan Shu," Fa Zheng explained after some thought. "If Zhou Yu had such overwhelming power, he would have used it already, for Sun Ce's sake."

Chapter 766: Zhou Yu's Backup Plan

"Enough of that, there's no need to dwell on it. I was originally worried that Zhou Yu would take a few days to mobilize troops, but now, he doesn't need to. So let's get moving quickly. As long as Zhou Yu's navy isn't on the Huai River when we arrive, we'll divert to Zhongli!" Fa Zheng laughed.

"Zhongli..." A glint flashed in Gan Ning's eyes as he instantly understood what Fa Zheng intended to do.

"Cutting off the supply line is nothing compared to the thrill of personally defeating an army of 100,000 in battle!" Fa Zheng's face lit up with excitement as he spoke to Gan Ning.

"If I dared to charge into a camp with a hundred cavalry, what would stop me from leading 3,000 troops against 100,000?" Gan Ning laughed heartily in response.

"Exactly, so let's get moving. The farther we run, the less likely he is to target us first. Let's move quickly." Fa Zheng continued to laugh. As long as Zhou Yu didn't bring his navy to attack him, Fa Zheng had no qualms about leading 3,000 men to strike at the rear of Yuzhou's army. His and Gan Ning's shared love for daring strategies made them a perfect match.

"All troops, head toward the Huai River!" Gan Ning shouted with a grin.

Though Gan Ning understood that Fa Zheng's plan carried significant risk—one misstep could spell disaster for them both—he couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement stirring within him.

Whenever he ventured into perilous situations, seeking victories that bordered on the miraculous, Gan Ning's heart would surge with adrenaline. And it was precisely at these moments of peak excitement that his normally cool head would work in perfect harmony with his frenzied emotions.

This delicate balance, teetering between a miraculous victory and total defeat, was what captivated him. The feeling of personally shaping history thrilled every fiber of his being.

Likewise, Fa Zheng was also a lover of daring strategies. His plans were often ill-suited for calm and steady generals, but when paired with a fierce and wild commander like Gan Ning, their synergy was flawless.

Gan Ning had his own sharp mind and clear judgment of the situation. It was this clarity that had kept him alive through countless narrow escapes, allowing him to repeatedly achieve miraculous victories.

The thought of his 3,000 elite soldiers potentially accomplishing a legendary feat made Gan Ning tremble with excitement.

If Guan Yu lived to embody loyalty and righteousness, and Zhuge Liang lived to embody wisdom, then Gan Ning lived to savor the essence of life—walking the fine line between life and death, betting his own life to deliver victory to those who believed in him.

After Fa Zheng's departure, though Zhou Yu had his concerns about Sun Ce, and Zhuge Jin's mental talents made him aware that Fa Zheng had bluffed them, the matter of Fa Zheng was no longer Zhou Yu's primary concern. What weighed on him now was the danger Sun Ce faced in Jingzhou and Yizhou.

"Aren't we going to deal with Fa Zheng?" Zhuge Jin frowned as he asked, "Our navy is near Shouchun. We could sail downstream and have a high chance of blocking them. Moreover, we have Yuan Tan and General Han guarding Jingzhou—nothing will happen to the lord. Why rush things?"

"It's not a matter of rushing," Zhou Yu replied, pursing his lips. "Sailing downstream is fast, yes, but we may not catch up to Gan Ning and Fa Zheng in time. During the naval battle on the Yangtze River, I outmaneuvered Gan Ning, but it wasn't a quick victory. While we could block their path, capturing them would be a different story." His words left no need for further explanation.

Seeing Zhou Yu's resolve, Zhuge Jin had to admit he had a point. While it was easy to block Fa Zheng, capturing him and Gan Ning would be much harder. Without a decisive victory, there would be little benefit in engaging Fa Zheng and his forces, so Zhuge Jin dropped the idea of eliminating that particular threat.

"Ziyu, I'll lead the troops to Jingzhou today. The rest is up to you. If you can counterattack in Huaibei, do so. If not, just focus on saving as many of the 100,000 soldiers attacking Xuzhou as you can." Zhou Yu began giving orders once Zhuge Jin stopped protesting.

"I can manage that. Although the absence of the navy will make it harder for our troops to cross from Xuzhou to the south, we should still be able to withdraw around 30,000 elite soldiers. It's just a shame to lose so much armor and weaponry," Zhuge Jin replied calmly. Liu Bei was renowned for his virtue, and no one among the warlords would expect him to execute prisoners, meaning their armor would likely fall into his hands.

"Armor and weapons are nothing," Zhou Yu said, shaking his head. "Yuan Shu has stockpiled plenty of resources. Yuzhou has been the Yuan family's stronghold for decades, and they've been hoarding supplies all this time. Equipment is plentiful, and even if it falls into Liu Bei's hands, he may not even want it."

"In the future, we'll need to streamline and strengthen our forces," Zhuge Jin remarked, recalling the elite soldiers he had seen in Taishan and nodding in agreement.

As for giving up Huaibei, Zhuge Jin was disappointed but not devastated. For Yuan Shu's forces, losing Huaibei wasn't a fatal blow—just a painful one. When Yuzhou had first been attacked by Liu Bei, many scholars and officials had already been moved out, and after Yuan Shu returned to Runan, he moved the capital from Runan to Shouchun, further relocating many people southward to Huainan.

Even after Liu Bei and Yuan Shu had both meddled with the region, Huaibei still had nearly two million people. Compared to the sparsely populated Yanzhou, it was still densely inhabited.

"We can talk about streamlining the military later. If possible, I hope we can issue a recruitment decree like the one in Taishan. Take this sword of mine." Zhou Yu handed his sword to Zhuge Jin.

"Huh? What do I need this for? As for issuing a recruitment decree, that will require Lord Yuan's approval. We shouldn't provoke any conflicts with him now." Zhuge Jin accepted the sword, puzzled. He was already a trusted advisor in Sun Ce's ranks, much like Lu Su in Taishan, and had long since passed the point of needing external tokens of authority.

"The sword isn't for you. It's for you to give to one of the generals attacking Xuzhou—it's a sign from Lord Sun Ce." Zhou Yu shook his head, explaining.

"Give it to one of the Xuzhou generals?" Zhuge Jin quickly understood what Zhou Yu meant, and a strange expression crossed his face. Zhou Yu, as expected, was always full of schemes.

While Yuan Shu had granted Sun Ce considerable authority, Zhou Yu had never intended to rely solely on others and had always harbored ambitions of his own. His peaceful approach so far had kept his true intentions hidden, but now, some of those cards were being revealed.

"Exactly as you think," Zhou Yu said, exasperated. "Give this sword to Li Tong, Li Wenda, and delegate authority to him. Have him take command of the Yuzhou army and prepare for a retreat to Jiangdong, instead of focusing on Xuzhou."

Chapter 767: Yuan Shu's Request

Zhuge Jin was utterly stunned. It wasn't that he was prone to overreacting, but Zhou Yu's command was simply too shocking. This was a force of 100,000 soldiers, not some insignificant detachment, and yet it was being handed over to someone whose name he didn't even know.

Based on Yuan Shu's current military strength, there were only four people with the qualifications to command such a large force: Yuan Shu himself, Ji Ling, Sun Ce, and Zhou Yu. Even the current campaign against Xuzhou wasn't led by one person commanding the entire army, but rather split into seven separate forces.

"This is simply a matter of expedience," Zhou Yu said, shaking his head. "Among the generals attacking Xuzhou, he's the one I trust most—he has good ability, and more importantly, a good temperament. He's more reliable than Zhongye."

"If that's the case, then we have no other choice," Zhuge Jin nodded in agreement. As soon as Zhou Yu left, he planned to send someone to gather intelligence on Li Tong, as he had a strong suspicion that many capable generals who had emerged in the past two years were secretly Zhou Yu's plants within Yuan Shu's army.

"Give him my sword and have him find Huo Jun, Lai Min, Lai Jingda, Li Yan, and Li Zhengfang," Zhou Yu continued. "I have confidence in Li Zhengfang, but giving him command of 100,000 soldiers... that's a

different story." Zhou Yu seemed somewhat troubled. Of all the people he had mentioned, he had the highest hopes for Li Zhengfang, but Li Yan's personality was a complication.

These were all capable individuals Zhou Yu had recruited back when he was stationed in Jingzhou. At the time, Sun Ce's forces were weak, so Zhou Yu placed them under Yuan Shu's command, confident in his ability to control them later.

However, reality often differs from expectations. Before Sun Ce and Yuan Shu had a chance to clash, Zhou Yu had no need to activate these "pieces" he had planted. Now, however, he had no choice but to bring them into play, especially since he trusted these men more than some of the ragtag commanders currently in Yuan Shu's army.

Unfortunately, these individuals hadn't been under Yuan Shu's command for long. In this campaign against Xuzhou, the highest-ranking among them, Li Tong, commanded only 5,000 soldiers, and that was due to Zhou Yu's support.

"Li Zhengfang? If you think so highly of him, he must be someone extraordinary," Zhuge Jin commented curiously.

"Li Yan's internal energy and mental strength have both reached critical points, but breaking through in one area would hinder his progress in the other. If he continues to hesitate, he risks missing his chance, and in the worst case, he could end up with nothing at all," Zhou Yu explained, shaking his head. He had high hopes for Li Yan, but Li Yan's indecisiveness was holding him back.

"Both at the critical point?" Zhuge Jin remarked, his expression becoming more curious. "That sounds like an extraordinary talent."

"He's not exactly a genius. Back in the day, if I had wanted to, I could have reached critical points in both areas as well, but there's no real benefit to it. Human effort has its limits," Zhou Yu said, dismissing Zhuge Jin's praise. He didn't elaborate further, but no one understood the drawbacks better than Zhou Yu. You could train both simultaneously, but you had to break through your limits before a certain age, or else you'd never succeed.

Zhuge Jin didn't press the issue further, but he made a mental note to seek out Li Yan if the opportunity arose, wanting to meet the person who had managed to achieve such dual mastery.

"Give the sword to Li Wenda, and have him gather these three men under his command. If the situation becomes too dire, let him try out Li Zhengfang's plan," Zhou Yu instructed, rubbing his temples.

Zhou Yu believed that letting Li Yan act freely could complicate matters further. More concerning was the feeling that Li Yan might be even more troublesome than the petty-minded Liao Li, which is why Zhou Yu had always wanted to toughen him up. Sending Liao Li to Jingzhou was a decision Zhou Yu now regretted.

"You seem more wary of Li Zhengfang than of Liao Gongyuan," Zhuge Jin commented, intrigued. "It feels like you're even more cautious of him."

"You'll understand once you meet him. He has the potential to become a great figure, but before that happens, I hope he doesn't ruin himself," Zhou Yu replied with a hint of helplessness.

"I'm sure I'll meet him soon enough," Zhuge Jin chuckled. "But if that's the case, what about Zhongye and Derun?"

"They're more mature. The people I mentioned earlier may be highly skilled, but their temperaments are still rough around the edges. Compared to Zhongye and Derun, they may even surpass them in ability, especially Li Zhengfang, but their personalities still have issues," Zhou Yu said, shaking his head.

"Just make sure to explain everything to them clearly. Li Wenda and Huo Zhongmiao have much more stable temperaments. Write a letter explaining the situation," Zhou Yu added, smiling.

"...", Zhuge Jin couldn't help but smirk. Zhou Yu was clearly setting a trap for these people, but since it wasn't his problem, Zhuge Jin had nothing more to say.

Their conversation was quick and efficient, without the need for lengthy explanations, and soon enough, they had wrapped up their discussion. Meanwhile, Yuan Shu had just arrived at the government office in Shouchun.

While Zhou Yu enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, he still followed most of Yuan Shu's orders unless they conflicted with his goals. Even now, Zhou Yu could have simply led his troops directly to Jingzhou,

but he planned to make a show of reporting to Yuan Shu first before departing. Whether Yuan Shu approved or not, Zhou Yu would leave swiftly regardless, but it was a matter of respect.

This time, however, when Zhou Yu entered the government office, he immediately noticed something different. Instead of a large gathering of officials and generals, only Ji Ling and Yan Xiang were present. All the other officials and military officers had been sent away, and even the noble families that supported Yuan Shu were conspicuously absent.

"Lord Yuan, I intend to lead my troops to Jingzhou and resolve General Sun's return to the east," Zhou Yu said directly, not bothering to ask why there were so few people present.

"I trust that General Sun can handle his own matters. There's something more important that I need you to take care of. As for Huaibei, it can be abandoned if necessary. Gongjin, I have a favor to ask of you," Yuan Shu said as he bowed slightly toward Zhou Yu.

At the same time, Ji Ling and Yan Xiang also bowed deeply, leaving Zhou Yu no room to refuse.

"Please, there's no need for such formality, General. If there's anything I can do, I will do my utmost. There's no need to ask for a favor with such a grand gesture," Zhou Yu stammered, startled by the situation. He had no choice but to agree, but only with a promise to try his best.

Chapter 768: There's Always a Fool Who Helps You Realize...

"I want to purge the trash! Their existence sullies the concept of the noble families. I want to destroy them!" Yuan Shu was in a fit of rage, his eyes blazing with fury as if ready to explode.

As Yuan Shu continued to speak, Zhou Yu gradually understood the situation. To put it mildly, Yuan Shu had a "supreme ego," but to put it bluntly, he wanted the world to revolve around him. Indeed, some within the noble families were degenerate, but Yuan Shu's justification for wiping them out because of a few bad apples seemed rather extreme.

Zhou Yu raised his eyes to the beams overhead, contemplating what benefit agreeing to Yuan Shu's proposal might bring to Sun Ce, and what kind of trouble might arise if he didn't agree. The primary condition for his decision was whether it would be advantageous for Sun Ce.

Zhou Yu didn't take long to deliberate. He lacked Zhong Yao's ability for swift decision-making, an undeniable advantage in leadership when it comes to responding to crises. Unfortunately, this particular mental gift was something rare, possessed only by someone like Zhong Yao, whose ability, though impressive, wasn't widely applicable.

"Lord Yuan, I can understand your reasoning. The noble families have indeed strayed from their original path," Zhou Yu weighed his words carefully.

"Good, good, good! Gongjin, help me wipe them out!" Yuan Shu's eyes blazed with excitement, though his anger still seethed beneath the surface.

It was clear that Yuan Shu's anger had twisted him. He wasn't furious out of concern for the common people, but because the noble families under his command had tarnished his ideal of what noble families represented. "We are the noble families, exalted and superior! Yet, they've resorted to exploiting the people to survive—how disgraceful!"

"Lord Yuan, allow me to ask: If we eliminate these families, can we ensure that other noble families won't fall into the same corruption?" Zhou Yu asked calmly, having already reached a decision despite the limited time.

"At the very least, we'll have struck fear into them for the moment. I, Yuan Shu, have never aspired to eternity. Why concern myself with what happens after I'm gone? As long as I maintain control during my lifetime, that's enough!" Yuan Shu's words were cold and unfeeling, yet oddly reasonable. That was his nature—other than the continuation of the Yuan family line, he cared little for what happened after his death. To him, anything beyond his sight was meaningless.

"Do you not consider the future of those who come after you?" Zhou Yu asked, attempting to guide Yuan Shu's thoughts to a more stable perspective, though he found Yuan Shu's response disheartening.

"First, I have no direct heirs; second, I believe that what I can accomplish, Bofu can achieve as well. I chose Bofu as my successor not only because we share similarities but because he is stronger than I am!" Yuan Shu boasted proudly. For the first time, Zhou Yu found Yuan Shu to be a difficult character to deal with.

"It's too troublesome. I suggest allowing the people to contend with the noble families themselves. Instead of merely giving them fish, why not teach them how to fish? We don't have the resources or energy to conduct a full-scale purge of the noble families," Zhou Yu said calmly. He was confident he could convince Yuan Shu, as he had come to understand him well by now.

"Speak—what's your plan?" Yuan Shu asked immediately.

"Strengthen the capabilities of the common people. Give them the power to unite and resist, or even fight against the noble families. Elevate commoners to positions of power as officials and generals, so that they will battle the noble families for their own interests. This way, you can stand above and observe the balance of power," Zhou Yu explained, weighing his words. Directly confronting the noble families was something Zhou Yu would never do, but he admired the model established by Taishan.

"Is there a quicker way? Like bringing in the army to wipe out the noble families?" Yuan Shu was quick to jump to extremes, favoring an aggressive approach.

"Such extreme measures could lead to the fragmentation of your territory," Zhou Yu sighed. Yuan Shu's idea was reckless—openly turning the noble families against each other would only push them to form an opposition.

"Even if it leads to division, I won't tolerate such despicable behavior. They've sullied the honor of the noble families—they are a disgrace!" Yuan Shu's calm words were laced with seething anger. It was evident that he truly believed in the ideals of the noble families as recorded in ancient texts and saw them as the highest standard of conduct.

"The opportunity has passed; we'll have to proceed slowly. Our forces in Shouchun are too limited to carry out a purge of the noble families," Zhou Yu said without hesitation, choosing to tell a white lie to placate Yuan Shu for the time being.

"The opportunity has passed?" Yuan Shu asked in confusion.

"If you had told me earlier, I would have taken certain actions, like allowing Gan Ning to attack Shouchun, causing chaos within the city. In the ensuing disorder, we could have purged the noble families, thus restoring order afterward and uniting the populace against a common enemy," Zhou Yu

continued his fabrication. He knew that those present who could see through his lies would also back him up.

"Is there no faster way?" Yuan Shu asked, unwilling to accept the slow approach.

"This is the only way. If you want faster results, then I fear you'll have to endure some hardships here," Zhou Yu's eyes glinted as he realized that, although Yuan Shu was peculiar, he adhered to a personal code of conduct.

"Hardships?" Yuan Shu scoffed. "As long as the goal is achieved, any hardship is insignificant. It's a trivial matter!"

【Yuan Gonglu, sigh... those who accomplish great things are never simple. Though Yuan Gonglu has many flaws, they stem from being born with a silver spoon. Yet, he possesses his own convictions. Born, raised, and destined to die here, the honor of the noble families is everything to him!】

Zhuge Jin silently reflected on Yuan Shu's demeanor. In that moment, he found himself questioning whether his own family, the Zhuge family, could be considered a noble family.

They didn't possess the same steadfast belief as Yuan Shu, nor did they have the courage to sacrifice everything for the honor of their family. While they had inherited knowledge and land, they lacked the pride that would drive them to such extremes.

Do I have a goal worth dedicating my entire life to, something I would never regret, even in death?

Zhuge Jin silently asked himself as he watched Yuan Shu. For the first time, he recognized a shining quality in Yuan Shu, someone he had previously dismissed. Although Yuan Shu's obsession with upholding the honor of the noble families might seem foolish, his unwavering determination was undeniable.

"Please, Lord Yuan, issue a proclamation for the recruitment of talent. Do not ask for noble birth, only for ability and virtue," Zhou Yu suggested, bowing deeply.

"Not ask for noble birth, only for ability and virtue..." Yuan Shu murmured in a daze. He was the direct descendant of the Yuan family, one of the most prestigious families in the land. He commanded vast resources, expansive territories, and an abundance of talented officials and generals. Never had he imagined being forced to issue such a proclamation for talent.

"I agree..." Yuan Shu's voice came out hoarse, "Issue the proclamation. In the name of Yuan Shu, direct descendant of the Yuan family of four generations of Three Excellencies, Rear General of the Han, I call upon the talented and virtuous from all corners of the land. Even those with the skills of thieves, I, Yuan Shu, am willing to emulate the ancient Lord Mengchang!"

Chapter 769: Gongsun Bogui's Choice

Chen Xi had dealt with most of the noble families' issues in Taishan and, after sending Lu Xun and Lu Yu to Qingzhou, began handling the government affairs left behind by Lu Su. Although the details were not perfect, the overall framework had no issues—after all, when it came to vision, no one could surpass Chen Xi in foresight.

The aftermath of the recent rebellion had mostly subsided, and the noble families had understood the bottom line of Liu Bei and Chen Xi. Though not ideal, it wasn't a total disaster. At least neither Liu Bei nor Chen Xi had any intention of completely eradicating the noble families; they just hoped the families would align more with the societal structure they were building.

"What's the matter, Wenhe?" Chen Xi asked as he noticed the somewhat odd expression on Jia Xu's face. Something about Jia Xu's demeanor seemed peculiar.

"It's information about Yuan Shu. Take a look yourself," Jia Xu said steadily, handing Chen Xi a report from the intelligence officers. "Once you read it, you'll understand."

Chen Xi took the letter, glanced over it quickly, then looked up at Jia Xu. "The situation on the battlefield matches your predictions exactly, but what's with this Yuan Gonglu? It's as if he's possessed."

"Perhaps after stepping down, seeing the lives of the common people and the actions of the noble families completely overturned his worldview. Yuan Shu is a peculiar character. His principles are hard for someone like me to comprehend, but he certainly adheres to his own code," Jia Xu said calmly, quickly figuring out what had transpired.

"Yuan Shu has issued a 'Proclamation for Talent Recruitment.' He's the first to do so since we and Cao Mengde attempted it, and unlike us, he's not in as desperate a situation. In some ways, this move of Yuan Gonglu's is a true act of humility," Chen Xi remarked with a smile as he set the report aside. He wasn't worried, thinking Yuan Shu's reaction was far too late.

"Sun Ce and Zhou Yu's control over Yuzhou, Yangzhou, and the northern part of Jingzhou is steadily increasing. Moreover, Yuan Shu seems to trust these two deeply for some psychological reason," Jia Xu said with a frown. "With that, it seems planting a seed of doubt in Yuan Shu's mind won't be possible."

"The human heart is complex and elusive," Chen Xi replied without much concern. "Our objective is only the territory north of the Huai River. This way, when we launch our northern campaign, we can station defenses along the river and not worry about our rear."

"But Pang Shiyuan lost to the Yizhou army, and according to your previous analysis, that shouldn't have happened," Jia Xu said, frowning. "And the manner in which he lost was particularly miserable. More importantly, based on the information provided, I've analyzed it again, and it seems that it really was a true defeat."

"It's just a setback before future success. We know that the three figures in Yizhou are not weak. Even if it were you facing them, a decisive victory would be difficult without great caution. Given Pang Shiyuan's situation, I suspect he took a significant gamble," Chen Xi said calmly.

"I have my suspicions as well, but our focus is not on Yizhou. If my calculations are correct, Yuan Shao will move soon," Jia Xu said seriously. "Very soon, Yuan Shao will make his move, likely in the scorching heat of summer."

"He plans to feed off of us?" Chen Xi nodded slightly, feeling a bit troubled. Compared to Yuan Shao, whose rear was secure, Liu Bei's rear still had some small issues to address.

"When the time comes, I'll accompany the lord to the front, while you stay in the rear to oversee logistics and deployment," Jia Xu said, his eyes gleaming with insight. "Yuan Shao has been numbing our senses all this time. As for Gongsun Bogui, I suspect he's waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Otherwise, he wouldn't have delayed until now."

"I've already sent people to Youzhou, but I don't have high hopes. Both Lord Xuande and I have written letters to him, making the current situation clear and hoping he will take a ship to retreat to Qingzhou. As for the northern border, once we defeat Yuan Shao, Gongsun Zan can still run rampant. His presence will still be necessary to keep the barbarians in check. Unfortunately, while the letters have been delivered, we've received no reply," Chen Xi said with a sigh.

Although Chen Xi wasn't particularly fond of Gongsun Zan's extreme racial policies, from the perspective of this era, he understood that Gongsun Zan's approach was quite appropriate. Furthermore, Gongsun Zan's campaign against the nomadic tribes was indeed devoid of selfish motives. By all accounts, he was worthy of being called a hero.

"At least he agreed to send his wives and children over, entrusting them to Lord Xuande. But he himself refuses to come. That old saying, 'The rigid shall be broken,' applies perfectly to this situation," Chen Xi said helplessly. He truly wanted to save Gongsun Zan.

"There's nothing more we can do. He's made his choice," Jia Xu said, his expression indifferent. He had long foreseen Gongsun Zan's eventual demise. For some generals, death was preferable to dishonorable survival. "Once he finishes dealing with the northern frontier, his death will soon follow."

"At the very least, Gongsun Bogui has never gone against his own word. Even when he waged war in the Central Plains, he never stopped resisting the nomadic tribes," Chen Xi said calmly. "If there are no other options, living out his life in a blaze of glory is still a good way to go. At least the people of the northern frontier will remember him."

"For someone who doesn't want to live anymore, there's nothing we can do to save him. But it does lighten our burden a bit," Jia Xu sighed. It wasn't that they didn't want to save Gongsun Zan; it was that Gongsun Zan himself didn't want to be saved. He preferred to perish alongside the northern border.

"When the time comes, you can accompany Lord Xuande to the front. Although our original plan was to launch the campaign after we were fully prepared, I've made some additional arrangements. Unfortunately, fate has other plans," Chen Xi said, glancing at Li You, who was silently reviewing documents nearby. However, Li You had no intention of responding.

"We've managed to hold out until now, which is a blessing. Compared to Yuan Shao, we've made plenty of preparations. In my assessment, we can at least ensure that Lord Xuande personally commands the campaign. The other side, however, is likely moving forces on their own accord," Jia Xu said calmly. His greatest strength was his ability to "see" the future when the intelligence was sufficient.

"It all depends on Yuan Shao's temperament. But even if Tian Feng and the others have nothing but loyalty, they're probably a thorn in Yuan Shao's side. You've pushed the situation this far—are you finally ready to set it off?" Chen Xi asked with a smile, looking at Jia Xu.

The terrifying thing about strategy wasn't just battlefield tactics or overturning the outcome of a single battle. The scariest part was someone like Jia Xu, who moved each piece on the board so precisely that the enemy was led exactly where he wanted. Wars that should have been hard-fought instead became a one-sided game of chess, where there was no opponent—only one man playing against himself.

Chapter 770: Letters of Credit

Everything unfolded as if it had been written into a script—there were fluctuations, twists, and conflicts, but everything had already been arranged, and nothing could defy Jia Xu's fully activated spiritual talent. It was as if he possessed the power to write fate itself, with everything that happened already foreseen.

The so-called "overwhelming tide" could not be resisted. To Jia Xu, who had practically completed his deductions of the entire Yuan-Liu conflict, any of the smaller conflicts were mere ripples in comparison. All these ripples would eventually be swallowed by the unstoppable tide.

This was why Taishan remained a bastion of calm amidst the chaos. No matter how turbulent the events were, they could never overshadow Jia Xu's predictions for the future. The most that could be lost were resources, but never victory.

Of course, this was assuming no unforeseen accidents occurred. But unfortunately, in life, there were always situations that rendered one's preparations futile, shattering all predictions.

Leisurely completing his official duties, Chen Xi handed over the strategic plans to Wang Yi. He had to admit that Wang Yi was becoming increasingly capable, already surpassing Wang Xiu of old and striving toward the level of Lu Su when he first arrived in Taishan.

"Bernin, have you finished?" Chen Xi asked as Wang Yi poured him tea, then turned his attention to Man Chong. As for Jian Yong and Liu Yan, they had already returned to Taishan from Yanzhou, but the work was still incomplete.

"The basic laws are drafted, but there are some loopholes. The biggest issue is how to implement them. After all, some ranks are fixed, and we simply don't have the authority!" Man Chong replied, looking up at Chen Xi with a slightly stern expression.

"Have the civil law, criminal law, commercial law, and clan law been revised and compared?" Chen Xi frowned. The issue of ranks was something even he didn't have a solution for, and given the nature and intensity required, these were meant to be fundamental laws.

"Yes, civil and criminal laws are fine. But the clan law is difficult to enforce, and as for the commercial law, according to Bernin, there are already loopholes. Some are using promissory notes as collateral to complete secondary transactions. Worse yet, others are relying on their reputation, using bank notes to make initial trades and then leveraging the time gap to complete multiple trades without actual capital, effectively making profit out of thin air," Mi Zhu interjected, pointing out that the commercial law had already been exploited by some in his merchant guild.

"As I said, they should all be arrested. Families like the Shen, Han, Deng, and Song clans that exploit these loopholes should be detained!" Man Chong said, his face dark with anger. He had added his own clauses to Mi Zhu's draft regulations for the merchant guild, only to see them quickly exploited.

"Oh, someone has already learned how to use letters of credit in transactions?" Chen Xi asked, glancing at Mi Zhu.

"Letters of credit?" Mi Zhu was puzzled at first, but quickly realized that such transactions essentially amounted to using one's reputation as collateral.

If others weren't aware of your wealth, who would trust you? It was like Mi Zhu writing a note promising future payment and using that note to secure goods without actually exchanging money immediately. As long as the other party wasn't in a hurry, no one would question it. This practice was, in reality, a testament to the confidence in one's financial standing and reputation.

"Indeed, that's essentially what's happening. And everyone seems quite used to it. For example, when I recently purchased wool, the payment was 300 million coins. You don't expect me to cart that much money for payment, do you?" Mi Zhu said, noticing Man Chong's deepening scowl. "Transporting that much cash would be ridiculous."

Hearing this, Man Chong's face turned even darker, while Chen Xi nearly burst out laughing. Three hundred million coins transported by carts would require a thousand of them, each carrying about three tons.

In truth, the wealthiest merchant families, like the Mi and Zhen families, only held around two billion coins in liquid assets. The rest of their wealth was in land, properties, and servants. In the past, large transactions were usually conducted in batches, or through barter. If actual money was involved, it would indeed be absurd.

"Are your transactions becoming increasingly large? Have some already started running exclusive businesses?" Chen Xi asked, sensing that something significant was brewing.

"Yes, exclusive deals benefit us greatly. In fact, we now rely on promissory notes for any transactions over a million coins. Major merchants, like our top ten firms, essentially run exclusive businesses because we've found it's easier to manage our workforce that way," Mi Zhu explained. "If you were to abolish promissory notes now, the wealthiest families in the empire would never agree to it."

"Do the Wu and Wei families also use your promissory notes?" Chen Xi asked, curious.

"Every major merchant in the Han Empire uses our promissory notes. Who else would they turn to?" Mi Zhu responded as if it were obvious.

Chen Xi was at a loss for words. Mi Zhu had no idea of the implications of what he'd just said. The promissory notes had effectively become a form of currency in circulation, and since Chen Xi had been using the funds deposited in the banks to finance infrastructure in Qingzhou and Xuzhou, the liquid capital of the region had essentially doubled in the shadows.

"Alright then, let's legalize the use of letters of credit. But make sure to tell them that we won't guarantee secondary transactions. It's best to have a formal document drawn up at the bank for every transaction. Zizhong, you need to make sure the banks are tightly regulated to prevent any chaos," Chen Xi said, tugging at the corner of his mouth. Letters of credit could be allowed, and it might even improve the security of transactions.

"I'll ensure they don't cause any trouble and will strictly review any documents issued by the banks," Mi Zhu nodded. He assumed Chen Xi was referring to monitoring the issuance of promissory notes.

Currently, the banks operated on somewhat exploitative terms, requiring individuals to provide proof of assets when depositing money. While most merchants didn't reveal everything, they still declared a third or even half of their wealth.

As for the top five merchant families, they didn't bother hiding anything. They openly declared fifty to seventy billion coins and deposited about three billion in cash, confidently issuing promissory notes worth ten billion to conduct their business.

To Man Chong, this seemed entirely illegal. What's worse, these wealthy families didn't stop at using the ten billion promissory notes once—they used them twice or even more. Depositing only three billion in the bank but trading tens of billions? This had to be illegal, although Man Chong hadn't yet figured out exactly how.

"No, I'm not asking you to monitor the merchants. They're playing with their own money. We just need to safeguard our side. I meant ensuring the relationship between the banks and local governments is properly managed. The funds we're using to develop Qingzhou and Xuzhou come from the banks and are then reimbursed by the Taishan Bank to local branches. We need to avoid any mismanagement along the way," Chen Xi explained, feeling a headache coming on.

"That actually seems like a good system. It's helped us avoid a lot of issues," Man Chong replied, his frown easing a little. Chen Xi's methods had indeed solved many potential problems with government integrity.