

Mythical 101

Chapter 101: The Zhen Family Enters the Game

The Zhen family has recently been overwhelmed with happiness. With the New Year approaching and the ongoing conflict between Gongsun Zan and Yuan Shao, many merchants doing business in Jizhou have become disinterested. They also heard that the Zhen family had made a significant profit recently, so many merchants, fearing the spread of war to Jizhou, sold their goods to the Zhen family at prices far below market value, nearly at cost.

The Zhen family, being wealthy and powerful, welcomed this windfall with open arms. Other merchants worried that the flames of war might reach Jizhou, so they quickly offloaded their inventories to the Zhen family.

As a prominent family in Jizhou, the Zhen family knew far more than the average merchant. They were well aware that the conflict would not reach Jizhou. Although Gongsun Zan had impressive military achievements against the Wuhuan in the north and the Yellow Turbans in the south, the Zhen family understood that this was superficial. They knew that as long as the Yuan family's extensive resources were directed towards Jizhou, the tide of the war could easily turn.

Thus, the Zhen family began a sweeping acquisition campaign across Jizhou. Confident in their eventual victory, they did not fear significant losses to their business. They continued to purchase all available goods from merchants who wanted out, at cost price, and often at the raw production cost.

Despite this, most merchants in Jizhou sold their entire inventories, including land, to the Zhen family at rock-bottom prices. The land was sold at break-even, but the inventory was offloaded at cost, leading to significant losses for the merchants.

Jizhou, being a large province with a population of five million during relatively peaceful times, provided a robust base for Yuan Shao, making him second only to Dong Zhuo among the regional lords. With Jizhou's stabilization, Yuan Shao's power quickly rose, rivaling his brother Yuan Shu.

A province with such a large population naturally had numerous shops. Many merchants fled, leaving the Zhen family to purchase everything. After acquiring a significant portion of Jizhou's commercial

assets, the Zhen family realized their funds were running low. However, anticipating a prosperous future, they decided to use their reserves to continue buying.

The Zhen family's longstanding reputation and creditworthiness in Jizhou allowed them to negotiate favorable terms. Some merchants agreed to delayed payments, trusting in the Zhen family's promise, while others demanded immediate cash or requested to exchange their Jizhou properties for Zhen family holdings in other provinces.

In this way, the Zhen family managed to acquire almost all commercial properties in Jizhou. This enormous windfall even tempted Yuan Shao. However, knowing that the Zhen family specialized in commerce and considering the complexities of direct intervention, Yuan Shao decided to indirectly benefit from the Zhen family's ventures.

Meanwhile, Mi Zhu was hosting a tea gathering with trusted members of his commercial association. Recent dealings had gone smoothly, with minimal losses, allowing them to acquire desired properties from the Zhen family at favorable terms. The association's strategy of spreading disinformation helped conceal their true intentions, and they managed to earn a tidy profit.

One elderly member, Zhao Zun, praised Mi Zhu's leadership, expressing gratitude for the profitable guidance and support they had received. Mi Zhu, aware of the delicate balance between personal gain and collective trust, accepted the accolades modestly. He then presented a sample of wool yarn, sparking immediate interest among the merchants.

"How is this made?" an elderly merchant asked, inspecting the yarn with a keen eye.

"This is wool yarn, made from sheep's wool," Mi Zhu explained, understanding the immense potential of this new material.

The merchants, recognizing the massive profit margins compared to traditional linen and silk, were eager to explore this new venture. Wool yarn, with its versatility and high demand, promised substantial returns.

Mi Zhu revealed the different types of wool yarn produced from coarse, fine, and combed wool. This innovation, though initially met with skepticism, quickly garnered excitement as merchants envisioned the lucrative opportunities ahead.

The Zhen family's current acquisitions in Jizhou had inadvertently created an advantageous position for Mi Zhu and his associates. As they continued to expand their operations and explore new markets, the potential for significant financial growth became increasingly apparent.

With the Zhen family deeply involved in consolidating their gains, Mi Zhu's association seized the opportunity to capitalize on their strategic position, setting the stage for future success in the ever-evolving landscape of regional commerce and power.

Chapter 102: Too Expensive, Better to Rob the Robbers

"This item was developed under the command of General Liu Bei by Chen Zichuan. So, please calm your family's desires," Mi Zhu clearly saw the greed in everyone's eyes. Vast wealth can be tempting, but only those with sufficient strength or heritage can suppress such greed, and Liu Bei happens to have an imperial lineage. This lineage is enough to make northern aristocratic families cautious.

With Mi Zhu's warning, the merchants reluctantly suppressed their greed. Liu Bei's name still carried some weight; after all, only Liu Bei and Cao Cao had the courage to pursue Dong Zhuo, and they both hailed from Yanzhou, earning them considerable reputation.

"However, since I've brought this item out, it means I don't intend to monopolize it. You are all representatives of northern aristocratic families, so I propose we join forces to control the wool production in the north. General Liu will take half the profit, and the rest is for you to divide among yourselves. I have other matters to attend to, so any further issues should be directed to Kexing (Zhao Zun)." With that, Mi Zhu left, effectively endorsing Zhao Zun's position as vice president. However, whether Zhao Zun could secure the role depended on his ability, as many others eyed the position. Mi Zhu could only assist up to this point.

Once Mi Zhu departed, the merchants exchanged glances, pocketed the wool samples, and prepared to report back to their respective families. They were only representatives, and the real decisions would be made by their families. Mi Zhu was well aware of this, hence his decision to hand over the wool samples directly to them.

This move ensured that no single family could monopolize the wool industry, leading them to form alliances instead. Chen Zichuan was curious to see if these aristocratic families would collude to usurp Liu Bei's share. If they didn't, it indicated a potential for peaceful coexistence; if they did, it meant that relying on the aristocracy was a bad idea.

Historically, difficult transportation made it easy for officials and factions to form region-centric groups. The Han Dynasty saw persistent conflicts between the north and south, and Chen Zichuan wouldn't mind some infighting to weaken both sides. Even if they did seize Liu Bei's share, the loss wouldn't be significant.

Chen Zichuan suspected they wouldn't easily replicate the wool processing technique. While they were told the wool was sheep's wool, it was actually made from high-quality cashmere. Once they realized they couldn't duplicate it, they would likely settle for being distributors rather than producers, which suited Chen Zichuan perfectly.

By offering the northern families a carrot and the southern families a sweet reward, Chen Zichuan hoped to incite conflict and create opportunities for Liu Bei to consolidate power. Mi Zhu understood this, trusting that Chen Zichuan wouldn't let their wealth be usurped.

The Zhen family was already in a precarious position. If Mi Zhu's merchants sold goods in Jizhou at prices lower than the Zhen family's, they could bankrupt the Zhen family within months. By April, the promissory notes would be due, and the Zhen family could be driven to ruin.

While there might be some political maneuvering, Yuan Shao would be reluctant to confront Liu Bei, knowing the latter's strength and potential alliance with Gongsun Zan. In a few years, Liu Bei could control the entire Qingzhou region, gaining enough power to challenge Yuan Shao directly.

Gongsun Zan was a formidable opponent, especially with Liu Bei's logistical support. This could extend Gongsun Zan's resistance from three to five years, giving Liu Bei ample time to solidify control over Qingzhou and prepare for further expansion.

"Zizhong, you're back," Chen Zichuan greeted the travel-weary Mi Zhu, who had just returned in time for the New Year.

"I've completed the task you set, but it's a shame about the Zhen family," Mi Zhu sighed. "I plan to move my family to Taishan. As for the salt trade, I'll gradually shift it to the hands of southern and northern merchants. The price shouldn't be too low."

“How about 800 coins per stone? That's five times the price of millet here in Taishan. For internal use in Taishan, the price will match that of millet, but limited to a month's supply per purchase,” Chen Zichuan suggested, ensuring that no one could profit excessively from reselling salt.

“That’s reasonable. By the way, I received news from my trade association about 3,000 to 4,000 warhorses up for grabs at 30,000 coins each. I’ve paid a deposit, but it’s risky to transport them. Do you have any ideas?” Mi Zhu shared some promising news.

“30,000? That's incredibly cheap, even for border horses, which usually cost 60,000 coins each,” Chen Zichuan was astonished. “Whose horses are these?”

“They belong to Dong Zhuo. The northern traders fear repercussions, and neither Yuan Shao nor Cao Cao can afford them right now. They’re asking for cash or grain in return,” Mi Zhu explained.

“How much was the deposit?” Chen Zichuan asked.

“One million coins,” Mi Zhu replied nonchalantly, as if it was a trivial amount.

“I’ll write to Hua Xiong and have him take the horses by force,” Chen Zichuan decided, seeing an opportunity in the desperation of Dong Zhuo’s forces.

Mi Zhu felt a bit uneasy, fearing this might tarnish their reputation. “Are you sure about this?”

“We’re just recruiting the sellers, who happen to be former comrades of Hua Xiong. It’s not robbery,” Chen Zichuan assured, though the moral ambiguity was clear.

Realizing the practicality, Mi Zhu agreed. They couldn’t afford to let this opportunity slip, especially with the horses being critical for their military.

Thus, plans were set in motion to seize the warhorses, using Hua Xiong’s influence and the pretext of reunifying former allies. It was a bold, albeit morally grey, strategy to secure the much-needed resources for Liu Bei’s burgeoning power.

Chapter 103: The Curtain Rises

In Chen Xi's opinion, Dong Zhuo would die in a few months, and the Xiliang army would fall into chaos. The reorganized Xiliang army led by Hua Xiong was not to be trifled with. If they went to purchase the horses now, they'd be lucky if they didn't get ripped off. Who dared to take advantage of the Xiliang army now would quickly learn who controlled Yongzhou!

A few months later, after Dong Zhuo's fall, if Hua Xiong went to seize the horses, the Xiliang army wouldn't even bother. However, Chen Xi wondered if the sellers could wait three to four months before making a move.

"Is it really necessary to do this?" Mi Zhu tried to reason. For a law-abiding merchant, such actions were too damaging to their reputation.

"The Han and traitors cannot coexist," Chen Xi invoked a powerful argument, leaving Mi Zhu speechless.

With that, the plan was set. Without money, their only option was to seize the goods. In Chen Xi's eyes, once Dong Zhuo was dead, those goods would become unclaimed assets. As a member of the imperial family, it was only right for Liu Bei to take them.

As the New Year approached, the festive atmosphere was noticeably absent. There were no red papers, no couplets, no firecrackers—just small wooden plaques with writing hung on doors. At most, households prepared some extra food. Other than that, there was no difference from usual days. The end of the Eastern Han Dynasty saw such a stark New Year celebration among the lower classes.

Chen Xi's household had slightly more liveliness now. However, the only family members he truly acknowledged were Old Master Chen, Chen Lan, and Fan Jian. Surprisingly, Fan Jian, the pampered young lady, could prepare some New Year dishes like lotus root slices and various types of meatballs, and she did them quite well.

Looking at the table filled with sweet and sour meatballs, steamed meatballs, braised meatballs, tofu meatballs, fried meatballs, and more, Chen Xi suddenly felt that Fan Jian might turn him into a meatball.

Seeing Fan Jian's slightly bashful expression, Chen Xi sighed. He knew he had to eat them, or she would be upset.

"Jian'er, did you make all these?" Chen Xi asked, tasting each type of meatball. Except for a few that tasted peculiar, the rest were surprisingly delicious.

"Yes!" Fan Jian nodded repeatedly, her face showing a hint of pride as she watched Chen Xi expectantly.

When someone shows initiative, it's always worth praising. Chen Xi could see that Fan Jian was confident in her culinary skills.

"Try some yourself," Chen Xi said, placing the odd-tasting meatballs in a small bowl. "Here, open your mouth."

Fan Jian was taken aback, her face flushing red, but she obediently closed her eyes and opened her mouth, waiting for Chen Xi to feed her.

Just then, Chen Lan appeared at the door. Seeing the scene, her face turned red as she tried to quietly close the door and leave.

"Come over here," Chen Xi called out, stopping Chen Lan.

Reluctantly, Chen Lan walked over and sat beside Fan Jian, closing her eyes and waiting to be fed as well.

Chen Xi was at a loss, unsure who to feed first. Fan Jian was already peeking at him with half-closed eyes, her face still blushing.

Chen Xi sighed and ate all the odd-tasting meatballs himself, chewing hard and swallowing the strange mix of flavors. The combination of sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, and salty was overwhelming.

"Husband seems to really like these meatballs," Fan Jian said happily, quickly filling Chen Xi's bowl with more. Chen Lan followed suit, adding more as well.

Looking at the bowl full of dubious meatballs, Chen Xi smiled wryly. "Alright, Jian'er, Lan'er, let me feed you both. You remember which ones you picked, right?"

As spouses, they should share both good and bad times. After feeding each of them a few meatballs, Chen Xi forced himself to eat the rest. Watching the two women struggle with the taste made him feel better.

"Are my meatballs really that bad?" Fan Jian's previously cheerful demeanor quickly turned teary.

"Just eat," Chen Xi said, stuffing another meatball into Fan Jian's mouth. "Considering this is your first time making so many, it's already impressive that only a few taste bad."

"Eat up. Afterward, I'll make some jewelry for you both. Mi Zhu told me his family makes jewelry, so we'll go and get some custom-made. It's always better to have unique pieces than common ones," Chen Xi said, comforting Fan Jian. He recalled his own first attempts at cooking were far worse.

In this plain New Year without couplets, firecrackers, incense, or dumplings (which Chen Xi had to make himself), as he held Fan Jian while falling asleep, Chen Xi felt that the pain in his heart had faded considerably. Perhaps time really was the best healer.

The New Year was uneventful yet warm. For the first time, Chen Xi felt he had more to strive for in life beyond his distant ambitions.

The days passed quietly, and everything in Taishan was routine after the New Year. Chen Xi continued his practice of gathering refugees, always believing that in this era, population was the fundamental factor influencing everything.

Chen Xi had accepted Fan Jian, and unlike his indifference in Yingchuan, now she mattered greatly to him. She could almost overshadow the memory of the girl buried in the grave. However, what is deeply etched in one's heart is often what is lost. Fan Jian could never surpass the girl who lay beneath the wild grass and grave mound.

As April's sunlight warmed his body, Chen Xi took the reports from Liu Ye and sighed. It had finally begun. The warlords and ambitious men of the world were all stepping onto the stage of the late Han Dynasty.

On that day, Chen Xi received continuous reports from all directions, as if the heavens were orchestrating the grand opening of this chaotic drama.

In April of 192, Gongsun Zan marched into Jizhou, and Yuan Shao prepared for battle. Yuan Shu moved into Yangzhou, facing off against Yuan Yi. Meanwhile, news came from Yongzhou that the Emperor would soon abdicate in favor of Dong Zhuo, and the latest intelligence reported that a million Qingzhou Yellow Turbans were marching on Yanzhou.

The grand drama of the chaotic times had finally begun!

Chapter 104: The Rampant and Troublesome Yellow Turbans

"Finally, everything has begun. After so much preparation, this day has finally arrived," Chen Xi said, holding the bamboo slip. His face flashed with excitement before calming down again.

Under the leadership of Yellow Turban leaders Chen Bai, Hou Qian, and Fu Yun, more than a million Yellow Turban soldiers surged out of Qingzhou and moved towards Yanzhou in search of food.

"Although we were mentally prepared, this number is just too much," Chen Xi said, staring at the intelligence report in disbelief.

"Over a million Yellow Turbans," Lu Su remarked, his expression tense.

"If we try to swallow them whole, we'll choke," Liu Ye added.

"If we don't, we'll be beaten to death later," Chen Xi responded, turning his head. "Let's do our best. We need to take as many as we can."

"Yellow Turbans, huh? I captured a lot when I was in Qingzhou," Fa Zheng said dismissively, feeling no pressure from the Yellow Turbans.

"Ah, still too naive," Guo Jia sighed with a lonely expression, placing a hand on Fa Zheng's shoulder. "Young man, you still need more training!"

"I'm already of age!" Fa Zheng angrily brushed off Guo Jia's hand and shouted.

"Maturity on the outside doesn't mean maturity in the mind," Guo Jia replied with a melancholic look, as if he were saying, "I failed to educate you properly; I failed your father." This deeply stung Fa Zheng.

"Leave it to me. I can handle these Yellow Turbans. Give me fifty thousand troops, and I can devour them all," Fa Zheng, provoked by Guo Jia, spoke with some mania. It seemed he had forgotten the previous lessons learned from being repeatedly bested by Guo Jia. His impulsiveness was about to get him into trouble again.

Chen Xi glanced at Fa Zheng, wondering why he still acted so impulsively around Guo Jia, while being relatively composed at other times.

Lu Su and Liu Ye exchanged looks and sighed. They couldn't rely on those two at the moment. Guo Jia had done all he could, but Fa Zheng still lacked caution in his actions, taking too many risks.

"Report! News from Dongjun!" A messenger shouted, presenting the latest intelligence.

Chen Xi casually opened the report and then smiled bitterly. Liu Dai was dead. He had lasted only three days against the million Yellow Turbans before being killed. As a man neither accomplished in literature nor martial skills, Liu Dai, a Han royal, had led his troops in a reckless charge. It took a special kind of fool to do something like that.

The group read the report and immediately had a better understanding of the Yellow Turbans' combat capabilities—definitely enhanced by sheer numbers.

At first, Chen Xi had thought that the Yellow Turbans, being undisciplined and without formation, would be easy to deal with. In this world, top-tier generals had little trouble breaking scattered troops but struggled against organized formations.

Once soldiers formed a battle array, their energies synchronized, creating a barrier that could mitigate the impact of a general's inner energy. This diffusion worked similarly to how a force spread across multiple points, weakening its overall effect. Closer soldiers absorbed more impact, while those farther away took less, but it was all about neutralizing the internal energy.

An excellent commander leading a thousand elite soldiers with interconnected inner energy could render even a top warrior like Guan Yu helpless if he charged alone, facing certain death.

However, this diffusion was not entirely reliable, as soldiers near the point of attack absorbed more energy. Thus, even in formation, the soldiers' collective energy could only partially offset a general's inner energy. Physical attacks like arrows or spears were barely affected by this thin layer of energy, which offered minimal protection.

Chen Xi had long since figured out the mechanics of inner energy. Essentially, anyone could develop a small reserve of energy if they had enough food. Starvation precluded any such development, which explained why the vast majority of people lacked inner energy—they simply didn't get enough to eat.

The main difference between those with and without inner energy lay in their potential for explosive strength. A person with inner energy could momentarily surpass their normal capabilities, like lifting a several-hundred-pound rock. Normally, though, they were just slightly stronger than average.

In a battle formation, soldiers with inner energy provided significantly better defense than those without.

Chen Xi's initial assessment was that the Yellow Turbans in their current state had neither inner energy nor organized formations, making them easy targets.

But the current situation showed Chen Xi that even without inner energy or formations, the sheer number of Yellow Turbans made a significant difference.

Liu Dai had died because he underestimated the potential of a large, disorganized force. Even without proper food and energy, the sheer number of Yellow Turbans allowed them to manifest a thin but noticeable aura, forming a yellow cloud above their heads, mimicking the effects of a battle array. Liu Dai, not expecting this, was easily cut down.

Realizing this, Chen Xi knew the Yellow Turbans wouldn't be easy to handle. With their aura, they were far more dangerous. Without it, Guan, Zhang, and Zhao could charge in with three thousand men and emerge unscathed. With it, those three thousand men might be overwhelmed and wiped out.

"The Yellow Turbans truly are a troublesome group," Chen Xi thought, frowning. But at least their strength was tied to their numbers. Split them up, and they'd be easy prey.

Weaknesses made things easier. If they were truly invincible, strong attacks would be the only option, which would be much more difficult. Given that the Yellow Turbans needed large numbers to maintain their aura, Chen Xi decided on a strategy: split them up.

Chapter 105: The Terrifying Elite Troops

Huaxiong threw a handful of money and swaggered through the gates of Chang'an. His current appearance was so changed that no one could recognize him unless they were old acquaintances. After hearing that Emperor Xian was to abdicate in favor of Dong Zhuo, Huaxiong understood that the time had come. He also realized that the abdication period would be the death knell for his former lord, Dong Zhuo.

Since arriving in Yongzhou last November, Huaxiong had spent four months consolidating the bandits of Yongzhou and placing his trusted guards among them. They might not yet be able to form a proper military formation, but they could at least put on an intimidating display. As for actual combat strength, he still relied on his 4,000 well-trained troops.

Interestingly, Huaxiong now commanded not only a cavalry unit but also an elite infantry unit trained in the mountainous regions of Taishan, bringing his total force to 7,000 men. In comparison, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei each led a mixed troop of 4,000, and although Zhao Yun commanded over 10,000 men, only 1,500 elite cavalry and 2,500 mixed infantry were truly battle-ready. The rest were just over a thousand basic infantry.

This situation left Huaxiong puzzled. His force, though labeled as a mixed unit, could actually split into two distinct units. Additionally, his deputy Zang Ba had another 1,000 men under his command, forming two solid mixed units.

Huaxiong initially thought the troops trained in Taishan would turn into farming soldiers after the battle, but Liu Bei assigned an entire reconstituted infantry unit to him instead. This filled Huaxiong with confusion, especially when Liu Bei supplemented the unit's ranks. The new recruits, under the guidance of veterans, became steadfast and fiercely loyal to Huaxiong.

Though confused, Huaxiong felt grateful for Liu Bei's trust. His straightforward nature meant he didn't dwell on things he couldn't understand. He simply followed orders.

Grateful for Liu Bei's trust, Huaxiong intensified the training of his men. Passing through Bingzhou camps, he often envied the fearsome dead-eyed soldiers of the Trap Formation led by Gao Shun. Even Lu Bu, riding his Red Hare, was once routed by these 700 soldiers, reportedly only because Gao Shun showed mercy.

Huaxiong aspired to such levels of excellence, so he secretly asked Gao Shun for advice. Gao Shun had replied, "Absolute obedience is the key to elite troops." Initially, Huaxiong thought it was a joke, but after rigorous training, he realized it was a formidable task. However, he believed his current troops might achieve it.

Realizing the significance of military formations, Huaxiong started studying military strategies like the Xuanxiang Formation. He had mastered the basic level and aimed to advance to the upgraded Eight Gates Golden Lock Formation and the ultimate Eight Trigrams Formation.

Currently, Huaxiong's mastery of the Arrowhead Formation allowed him to distribute his unit's energy to the soldiers on the formation's edges, albeit inconsistently. But this only worked with his infantry. When commanding cavalry, Huaxiong laughed off the idea of sharing energy during a charge, knowing it was beyond his current capability. Properly distributing energy during an attack would enable his cavalry to pierce through enemy lines effortlessly.

Despite his success, the more Huaxiong learned, the more he feared Gao Shun. Huaxiong could barely redistribute energy among his troops, while Gao Shun could likely do so with precision, adjusting for attack and defense dynamically. This understanding made Huaxiong realize why the Trap Formation suffered few casualties in battles.

Though Huaxiong doubted he could defeat Gao Shun's Trap Formation, he believed his 4,000 loyal infantry would fight to the death, potentially decimating Gao Shun's unit, albeit at great cost.

Having scouted out the necessary locations, Huaxiong waited for the right moment. The kidnapping would occur the night before Emperor Xian's abdication, as Chen Xi had instructed.

For safety, Huaxiong decided to handle the operation personally. However, he noticed that his infantry became undisciplined without him, transforming back into elite soldiers upon his return.

Sitting in the corner of a tavern near Jia Xu's residence, with windows open on both sides, Huaxiong watched the comings and goings. No one would suspect this single-clad man from the West of closely monitoring Jia Xu's and Li Ru's households.

"Hmm..." Huaxiong observed Jia Xu's garden being filled with dirt. It soon became clear to him what was happening.

[Jia Xu, always looking out for himself, fleeing without informing Li Jue and others despite having the power to prevent this mess. Dong Zhuo treated him well, yet Jia Xu did nothing to repay that favor, choosing instead to run away at the crucial moment.]

Anger flickered within Huaxiong, but he quickly calmed down. He was no longer the same man from Xi Liang. However, his disdain remained evident. Failing to repay one's lord despite receiving favor marked one as a traitor, no matter how talented.

[Forget it. Let's rescue the strategist first. As for Jia Xu, count yourself lucky. Chen Xi ordered us to bring you back alive.] Huaxiong ordered some pork legs and other food, keeping a watchful eye on Jia Xu's and Li Ru's residences.

On the borders of Yongzhou, the market for Xi Liang's horses already had 4,000 horses, including many wild ones yet to be tamed. The horses, fed by the Yongzhou bandits, waited as the bandits claimed they were still gathering funds. Even with some spare cash, bandits couldn't afford so many horses.

Chapter 106: Returning Gifts and Setting Out

The soldiers of the Xi Liang army were happily feasting on the provisions provided by the bandits of Yongzhou while waiting for them to bring money or grain to buy the horses. In truth, the Xi Liang

soldiers had planned from the beginning to double-cross the bandits. With their leader Dong Zhuo about to ascend the throne, they had nothing to worry about.

While the Xi Liang soldiers were boasting and chatting with the bandits, they were also preparing to wipe them out. After all, it was only natural for government troops to eliminate bandits. On the other hand, the bandits were also planning to kill these Xi Liang soldiers. They didn't have enough resources for themselves, let alone to share with the soldiers. If it weren't for the Xi Liang soldiers' constant raids, they wouldn't have turned to banditry in the first place.

The bandits intended to strike as soon as they got the signal from their leader, turning the Xi Liang soldiers into mincemeat. They planned to escape with the 4,000 horses, which they could trade for a good future with another warlord. Both sides were preparing for the same goal: a double-cross.

Meanwhile, Gongsun Zan had received supplies and a letter from Liu Bei. The letter was short and to the point.

One part briefly explained Liu Bei's current situation, mentioning that he was dealing with the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou and couldn't directly assist Gongsun Zan against Yuan Shao.

The other part expressed Liu Bei's brotherly support, stating that he had managed to gather 100,000 shi of grain, a shipload of refined salt, and ten million coins for Gongsun Zan. He assured Gongsun Zan that he could send more if needed.

Gongsun Zan was deeply moved upon receiving the letter and supplies from the Lu family's fleet. His frustration from his recent encounter with Liu Yu dissipated instantly. It was evident that his brother Liu Bei, despite having been in the poor region of Taishan for just over half a year, was already sending such substantial support. This was true brotherhood.

With his brother's support, Gongsun Zan felt invincible. Yuan Shao, who had initially agreed to split control of Jizhou but now sought to monopolize it, needed to be taught a lesson. Gongsun Zan, the White Horse General, would make sure of it.

"Guorang, how many horses do we have in our stables?" Gongsun Zan asked, feeling elated by Liu Bei's letter.

“After our recent raids on the Wuhuan and Xianbei tribes, aside from the white horses we have integrated into the elite cavalry, we still have a significant number of mixed-color horses. We originally planned to sell them at 70,000 coins each to the Yuan family in Yuzhou, the Zhen and Cui families in Jizhou, and the Zhang family in Qinghe. But since we are now at war with Jizhou, the horses are still with us,” Tian Yu replied calmly. He knew that Gongsun Zan’s old habits were resurfacing.

Having followed Gongsun Zan for a long time, Tian Yu understood his temperament well. Gongsun Zan favored those he liked, and no amount of flattery could win him over if he disliked someone. For some reason, Liu Bei had managed to gain Gongsun Zan’s favor, and as a result, Gongsun Zan was very considerate of his old classmate.

In the past, Tian Yu had thought this behavior was foolish. But after seeing the supplies Liu Bei sent to Liaoxi, he began to appreciate Gongsun Zan’s approach. Although most people might turn out to be ungrateful, having even one or two reliable allies like Liu Bei made it all worthwhile. Therefore, Tian Yu did not dissuade Gongsun Zan from sending gifts to Liu Bei this time.

Tian Yu and Gongsun Zan shared the view that Liu Bei, having been in the impoverished region of Taishan for just over half a year, was likely giving everything he could. For a wealthy warlord like Gongsun Zan, the supplies Liu Bei sent were significant mainly for the salt. However, the gesture of support was what mattered most.

“Give all the mixed-color horses to Xuande. Didn’t we capture some near-peak strength wild horses? Send all of them to Xuande, except for the white ones,” Gongsun Zan instructed. His stables, filled with white horses, left him feeling agitated at the sight of mixed-color ones. It was better to give them away or sell them.

Chen Xi looked at the appointment letter from Liu Bei and rubbed his temples. Should he refuse? After all, he was about to get married, and accepting this task meant postponing the wedding. Facing the massive Yellow Turban rebellion, even though he was confident in managing it, the sheer number meant it wouldn’t be a quick battle.

“Is there a problem, Zichuan?” Liu Bei asked, puzzled.

“Nothing major. I just wondered if I could have Ziyang assist me,” Chen Xi replied.

“You are the commander this time, so you can choose whoever you need, as long as enough troops are left to defend Taishan,” Liu Bei said with a smile.

“Alright, leave it to me,” Chen Xi nodded, accepting the appointment letter. He planned to hand over his administrative duties to Lu Su and then head to Qingzhou to deal with the Yellow Turbans. However, before that, he needed to inform Fanjian and Chen Lan. This was an official military campaign, and bringing along his wives would attract resentment. He wasn’t too worried about their safety but preferred to be cautious.

Chen Xi didn’t consider himself a military strategist. His strengths lay elsewhere, but as a commander, he could manage. He had the necessary insight and knew how to utilize his generals effectively. If he lost despite this, it would be due to sheer force, not his command skills.

Moreover, this was a campaign against the Yellow Turbans, not against Cao Cao, who had strategists like Xun Yu, Xun You, and Cheng Yu. With a group of skilled subordinates, handling the Yellow Turbans should be manageable. Even dragging out the battle could starve them into submission, yielding plenty of merits.

Chen Xi thought it wise to write a letter to Tao Qian, requesting additional grain. Since Taishan was the gateway to Xuzhou, if Taishan fell, Xuzhou would suffer too. Sharing the burden was only fair.

Stepping out of the administrative hall, Chen Xi looked up at the sky. Setting out on a campaign for the first time didn’t excite him. The Yellow Turbans, despite their numbers, were a mere nuisance compared to fighting other warlords. Moreover, the troops he commanded were practically invincible.

Chapter 107: Mobilizing Troops

Chen Xi took the military orders and went outside the city to mobilize troops. Before he even arrived, he saw a cloud of dust and smoke in the distance. Soon after, a horse charged forward and stopped right in front of him. Zang Ba dismounted and saluted Chen Xi.

“Greetings, Governor!”

“That’s enough, Xuanguo. No need for formalities. I want to know if you still have agents in Qingzhou.” Chen Xi asked straightforwardly.

“Yes!” Zang Ba hesitated slightly before responding.

“Good. Select your men and infiltrate the Yellow Turbans. Await my orders. I refuse to believe that over a million Yellow Turbans would all know each other.” Chen Xi said with a mischievous smile. “If you succeed, the troops you capture will be yours to command, forming an independent unit. Are you confident?”

Zang Ba hesitated this time. Having followed Hua Xiong for a long time, he envied him. When they first met in Taishan, Zang Ba thought Hua Xiong was just a commander of infantry. But once he became Hua Xiong’s deputy, he learned that Hua Xiong also commanded three thousand elite cavalry. Six months ago, when Hua Xiong left to undertake military duties, he entrusted the three thousand cavalry to Zang Ba. Used to leading cavalry, Zang Ba found it hard to return to commanding infantry.

“Is there a problem?” Chen Xi asked, puzzled. Normally, forming an independent unit was a boon for any commander. Why was Zang Ba reluctant?

“Well, I feel I can command cavalry better.” Zang Ba cautiously replied, not intending to take over Hua Xiong’s troops but hoping his unit would include cavalry. It was clear Taishan had no more horses, and each cavalry unit had specific allocations.

“That’s not impossible. Mixed units of infantry and cavalry are better for dealing with unexpected situations and less likely to be countered by a single type of force. I’ll approve your request. Once Ziyang returns to Taishan, there will be more horses. But remember, training cavalry is different from training infantry. They are two completely different concepts.” Chen Xi thought for a moment and agreed to Zang Ba’s request. Since they hadn’t expanded their forces yet, resources were still somewhat available.

“Thank you, Governor!” Zang Ba bowed deeply.

“No need for thanks. When I discussed military organization with Xuande Gong, we noted that single-type units are easily countered. Each unit should include infantry, cavalry, and archers. Mixed units have varied strengths and weaknesses, making them more adaptable. That’s why each unit has cavalry, though the numbers vary.” Chen Xi shook his head, indicating this decision wasn’t solely his. “If there’s nothing else, hurry to Qingzhou and contact your agents. I’ll summon you when necessary.”

“Yes, sir!” Zang Ba responded loudly before quickly departing for Qingzhou.

After arranging things with Zang Ba, Chen Xi proceeded to Yu Jin's camp. The vast expanse of the camp made Chen Xi wonder how many trees had been felled to build it. Of course, that was just a jest. In this era, trees were far more abundant than people, and wild animals outnumbered humans. The crocodiles south of the Yangtze River were impossible to eradicate.

"Halt! Who goes there?" A soldier approached Chen Xi as he neared the camp. Noticing Chen Xi's carriage and his silk robe and jade belt, the soldier refrained from driving him away but asked him to stop.

"Wenzu is training, right? Take this to him and have him come out." Chen Xi beckoned for the military token to be brought forward and handed it to the soldier without expression.

Although many of the soldiers were illiterate, they could recognize the "令" (command) character on the token. Taking the token with both hands, the soldier bowed to Chen Xi. "Please wait a moment, sir. The general will be out shortly!" With that, he ran into the camp holding the token.

Chen Xi stood at the camp entrance. While disregarding rules in other places might merely offend people, doing so in the military could be fatal. Despite his high rank, Chen Xi didn't want to set a bad example for those who followed.

"Greetings, Governor!" Yu Jin emerged from the camp, bowing to Chen Xi. "I cannot give a full salute in armor. Please forgive me."

"I'm here to mobilize troops." Chen Xi replied, adopting a businesslike tone with the stoic Yu Jin, who rarely interacted with civil officials and focused solely on his duties.

"There are currently 56,000 new recruits in the Taishan camp, including 12,000 intended for regular army service. The remaining 44,000 are rotation-based soldiers from other areas, currently undergoing training." Yu Jin responded efficiently, without hesitation.

"Select 6,000 strong soldiers from the rotation-based troops to be added to the regular army. Reassign 3,000 of the weakest from the regular army to the rotation-based group. Assign 5,000 infantry to Tai Shici. The rest remain under your command to defend Fenggao. While I'm in Qingzhou dealing with bandits, should an enemy attack..." Chen Xi looked up at Yu Jin.

“Destroy them!” Yu Jin declared resolutely.

“I believe you understand the nature of the incoming threats. The Yellow Turbans are not a significant problem, but if the new Yanzhou Inspector is appointed as Taishan Governor...” Chen Xi made a slashing gesture and smirked. “Xuande Gong will guard against stragglers from Qingzhou. Your task is to secure the northwest!”

“Yes, sir!” Yu Jin bowed deeply. After training for so long, he was eager for battle. Among Taishan’s forces, the largest contingent wasn’t commanded by Guan, Zhang, or Zhao, nor by Hua Xiong, but by Yu Jin, who oversaw training in Taishan’s camp.

“Focus on stability. Just hold the line between Taishan and Shanyang.” Chen Xi nodded. Speaking with Yu Jin required maintaining a serious demeanor, which Chen Xi found tiring. While he generally appeared grim in solitude, he usually kept a slight smile when around others, unlike Yu Jin’s perpetually stern face. It seemed those skilled in training troops often had a rigid and orthodox lifestyle.

After arranging matters with Yu Jin, Chen Xi, wearing the Taishan Governor’s seal, went to see Lu Su to relay some instructions. Liu Bei personally defending Taishan and the borders of Jinan and Qi wasn’t an issue. Chen Xi had already prepared for this, and Xu Chu was there as Liu Bei’s bodyguard. Having experienced many battles, Liu Bei wouldn’t find it difficult to defend.

Chen Xi’s concern was Cao Cao. After this, Cao Cao would become the Yanzhou Inspector with the strong support of Bao Xin and Chen Gong. As part of Yanzhou, Taishan was vulnerable to Cao Cao’s tactics. Ultimately, it would come down to a test of strength.

Setting other factors aside, Cao Cao was in a dire situation. Last year’s summer planting was missed. With Xun Yu’s help, Cao Cao had scraped through three months, planting crops for the following year. But with the Yellow Turbans now invading Qingzhou for sustenance, Cao Cao was left with no choice but to fight. Last year’s harvest offered no hope. Now, he had to either borrow or seize grain.

Jizhou and Youzhou were at war, leaving Yuan Shao too preoccupied to care about Cao Cao’s plight. In fact, Yuan Shao’s confidence didn’t match that of Jizhou’s families. He wasn’t sure he could defeat Gongsun Zan. Frankly, if Gongsun Zan proposed a peace settlement, Yuan Shao would likely accept it.

Chapter 108: The Path of Kingship Needs No Allies

Yu Jin was steady, Lu Su was patient and capable, with ten thousand men stationed at the border, firmly entrenched. Even with Xun You, Xun Yu, and Cheng Yu, it wouldn't be easy for Cao Cao to capture the territory. Defense has the upper hand over offense. As long as the border could be held until Chen Xi returned from subduing the Yellow Turbans, the situation would reverse.

As for the trouble Cao Cao might cause upon becoming the Inspector of Yanzhou, stirring up conflict might happen, but ultimately it would come down to a contest of strength. If Cao Cao wanted to seize grain from Xuzhou, with Taishan as the gateway, he'd have to fight his way through. Any other method was out of the question.

Chen Xi had already anticipated this, so whether Liu Bei liked it or not, they were now in an alliance with Tao Qian, Yuan Shu, and Gongsun Zan. Conversely, Yuan Shao, Cao Cao, and Liu Biao were in their own alliance.

Whenever Chen Xi thought of this alliance, he felt his face twitch. He wanted to ask why all his allies were so unreliable. If Gongsun Zan fell and Yuan Shu took the Imperial Seal to proclaim himself emperor, Liu Bei would be left with no choice but to fight the world alone. But joining Yuan Shao's alliance? That was a pipe dream!

Given this predestined situation, Chen Xi's only course was to quickly develop Qingzhou with Xuzhou's support, rising swiftly under the protection of Gongsun Zan, the mightiest warlord in the northeast, and the granaries of Xuzhou. At the very least, they needed enough strength to protect themselves before Gongsun Zan fell. Otherwise, they would end up wandering aimlessly.

Lu Su might have already sensed this, which explained his recent troubled expression. Liu Bei treated him well, but Lu Su had no faith in their allies. Gongsun Zan was passable, but Tao Qian was old and lacked strength. As for Yuan Shu, Lu Su had met him. If continually oppressed, Yuan Shu might still act like a hero, but once he gained power, Lu Su believed he could create endless trouble. This alliance seemed doomed to fail.

Another reason Lu Su lacked faith in this alliance was the intelligence from Yuan Shao and Cao Cao, which left Lu Su cold with fear. They were too wise and heroic, able to adapt and dominate, fit to be overlords. Looking at Liu Biao, who had entered Jingzhou alone and brought peace, Lu Su was speechless. Any one of these three had the makings of a hegemon.

Lu Su was conflicted. He didn't want to leave because he genuinely admired Liu Bei after spending time with him. Liu Bei had the demeanor of a benevolent ruler. Because of this, Lu Su wracked his brain daily, trying to carve a path through the thorns to a bright future. With unreliable allies and strong enemies, Lu Su was overwhelmed.

Truthfully, Lu Su didn't believe Chen Xi was unaware of these issues. Liu Ye might lack long-term vision, and Guo Jia, being nonchalant, might not bother discussing it, but Lu Su couldn't believe Chen Xi hadn't prepared for it. Chen Xi was always forward-thinking; it was inconceivable that he wouldn't have a plan.

"Zijing!" Chen Xi pushed the door open and entered. Unless summoned by Liu Bei, Lu Su seldom went to the administrative hall now, preferring to handle affairs from home, just like Chen Xi. Consequently, Chen Xi hadn't seen Lu Su much recently.

"Zichuan," Lu Su straightened up but didn't rise to greet him. Formalities were unnecessary between them. "What brings you here?"

"I'm giving you this. While I'm gone, you'll temporarily act as the Governor of Taishan." Chen Xi casually placed his seal on Lu Su's desk.

"You're going to fight the Yellow Turbans?" Lu Su frowned.

"If not me, then who? Among us, I'm the only one with enough prestige to command the likes of Second Master." Chen Xi found a spot and sat down cross-legged. Sitting in the formal kneeling position often made it hard to stand up afterward.

"True, only you can command Yun Chang and the others." Lu Su nodded. "What's your plan for dealing with the Yellow Turbans?"

"No big problem. Since Fengxiao has set up the frontier farming points and mixed in plenty of spies, I reckon he's already screened the various Yellow Turban factions. With so many informers leading the way, the Yellow Turbans will inevitably fall into chaos just to secure food." Chen Xi said nonchalantly. Guo Jia's arrangement was a blatant scheme. The Yellow Turbans would have to fight for food, leading to inevitable internal strife.

Lu Su nodded. He was aware of Guo Jia's arrangement, having placed many second-rate ruffians and Yellow Turban remnants among the frontier farming soldiers and stocked the points with grain.

This was a dual-purpose move: using the Yellow Turbans to eliminate these ruffians and forcing the Yellow Turbans into chaos. Even if they killed all the frontier farmers, it would benefit Taishan.

“Indeed, the Yellow Turbans aren’t a big issue, but what about the others?” Lu Su looked up at Chen Xi, demanding a more concrete answer this time. He was tired of guessing.

“You and Wenze defend against Cao Cao’s incursions. Though he was once a friend in the alliance, now that he’s hungry, talk is cheap.” Chen Xi instructed directly, not overthinking it.

“Zichuan, Cao Mengde isn’t the main issue. His ministers and generals might be formidable, but Taishan is no pushover. If he tries to plunder Taishan to feed his own, I, Lu Zijing, will ensure he gains nothing.” Lu Su said confidently before turning serious. “I can’t believe you don’t see the potential downfall of Taishan!”

“Downfall?” Chen Xi was puzzled for a moment before realizing Lu Su’s concern. He nodded. “You mean Yuan Benchu, Cao Mengde, and Liu Jingsheng being stronger than Gongsun Bogui, Tao Gongzu, and Yuan Gonglu, right?”

Relieved by Chen Xi’s acknowledgment, Lu Su nodded.

“Don’t worry. Gongsun Bogui won’t lose to Yuan Benchu in the short term. As long as there’s no ceasefire between Youzhou and Jizhou, we won’t face any major trouble. Over three to five years, even if Yuan Benchu wins, we’ll have solidified Qingzhou by then. With a whole province’s resources, what is there to fear from Yuan Benchu?” Chen Xi shook his head. “As long as nothing unexpected happens, we won’t have to worry about any challenges.”

“Is that truly the case?” Lu Su asked, astonished.

“A king walks his path alone, needing no allies. We can defeat all our enemies on our own.” Chen Xi said proudly. “The path of kingship needs no allies, only enemies!”

Lu Su smiled wryly. The man before him was sometimes a complete madman, making it hard to get practical answers. However, despite his occasional bouts of arrogance, Lu Su had to acknowledge his capabilities.

Chapter 109: Necessary Actions

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Chen Xi ultimately disclosed his general strategy to Lu Su, as two heads are better than one, and Lu Su, being a strategic expert, could help Chen Xi identify any flaws.

"Now I see. At first glance, this strategy seems hard to implement, but upon careful consideration, it actually fits perfectly. Once achieved, your status will undergo a significant transformation, and by formally joining Lord Xuande, the northern aristocratic families will likely have to reconsider their alliances," Lu Su acknowledged after contemplating Chen Xi's strategy.

"That's precisely why I must suppress the Zhen family. Beyond immediate concerns, the Zhen family holds significant sway. The Qinghe Zhang family and the Jizhou Cui family are also viable targets, but there's no pretext to act against them. Moreover, the Zhen family is easier to handle," Chen Xi nodded. He wasn't targeting the Zhen family for mere petty gains; their suppression was crucial to his overarching plan.

Chen Xi wasn't pursuing a minor profit by clashing with the Zhen family. Taishan and the Zhen family's prior grievances were merely over some financial disputes. Mi Zhu had already mentioned that the investment amounted to around a billion coins, a sum that wasn't worth Chen Xi's elaborate schemes.

Taishan wasn't short on money. Whether through the salt industry, papermaking, or wool textiles, any single venture's profits far exceeded the Zhen family's small benefits. If it was merely about money, Chen Xi's resources would suffice.

What Chen Xi sought was the Zhen family's network. As a centuries-old family, the Zhen family's connections in Jizhou were what Chen Xi needed. If he wasn't plotting the grand strategy, Chen Xi wouldn't persist against the Zhen family. For any stable ruler, their wealth alone surpassed the Zhen family.

When Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan were embroiled in a critical conflict, Mi Zhu would play his card. For the sake of the larger picture, Yuan Shao would abandon the Zhen family. This abandonment, contrasted with Liu Bei's compassion, would create the desired scenario for Chen Xi. He needed a family to infiltrate, and the higher their status, the better.

"Did you plan this strategy back when you returned to Yingchuan? Was the Zhen family's downfall orchestrated by you?" Lu Su's face showed a hint of bitterness. If Chen Xi had foreseen this, he must have already selected the talents needed for each phase. Compared to such far-sighted planning, what role was Lu Su playing?

"The Zhen family was an unexpected variable, but it opened up other opportunities. Without the Mi family, I couldn't have maneuvered as I did. As for the larger scheme, I began planning when Tao Gongzu and Kong Wenju recommended Lord Xuande for the position of Taishan Prefect. Naturally, I had already identified the necessary talents," Chen Xi smiled, recalling Liu Bei's reluctance at Hulao Pass, his smile broadening. "I had several contingency plans."

"Did these plans include me and Xingba?" Lu Su asked, his voice trembling.

"Yes, you were part of my blueprint. Once my two friends arrive, even if this setup isn't perfect, it will suffice to endure the toughest period. Once we survive that, we—" Chen Xi's eyes gleamed with determination.

"—can expect great things. Reaching that stage would mean the situation is essentially secured. Your strategy is audacious; I doubt anyone but you would think of it. Even Xun Wenruo's strategies aren't as astonishing as yours. You always claim to be inferior to Xun Wenruo, but I'm not so sure anymore," Lu Su said, trembling slightly as he forced himself to calm down, realizing Chen Xi's strategy was highly feasible.

"Xun Wenruo is an all-rounder. I can ensure my overarching strategy surpasses his, and my governance can overshadow his. However, he can unify all his subordinates' strengths, which I can't. I know what needs to be done, but I can't do it myself. I need others to help. Even in administration, I write the plans and hand them to you. If I had to do it myself—" Chen Xi glanced at Lu Su.

"This..." Lu Su hesitated, realizing Chen Xi indeed rarely handled matters personally. He either gave tasks to Lu Su or Xianhe. Apart from making tea and eating snacks, Chen Xi seldom engaged directly.

"My hands-on ability is poor, but I know what needs to be done. My habit is to delegate tasks to those proficient in them," Chen Xi said nonchalantly. His knowledge was vast but superficial, relying on sharp insight and unique thinking, along with experiences from over two millennia. These sufficed to resolve most issues, but practical execution wasn't something insight and experience alone could achieve.

"Let's not dwell on this. Just remember, a noble family's scion doesn't do everything himself; he strategizes," Chen Xi said, waving off further questions. He didn't want to revisit certain unpleasant memories.

"Heh, I almost forgot you belong to the Gui clan of Chen. Going back a few hundred years, you're essentially royalty, descending from Emperor Shun, Yao Chonghua," Lu Su's face showed discomfort but refrained from asking more. This also explained why, even as a collateral branch, Chen Xi was referred to as "young master."

"Those details aren't important. What's crucial is my current status. In my plan, my status will be legitimized. Once successful, my bloodline will necessitate taking over as the head of the Chen family, consolidating it," Chen Xi shook his head. He knew the significance of his bloodline.

Bloodlines were paramount in aristocratic families. Marrying within one's rank ensured the purity of lineage. In the late Han era, bloodlines were the essence of these families. Yuan Shu's claim to be the Zhong Emperor was essentially a nod to his ancestors. Besides official positions, power, and wealth, lineage was a major point of comparison among families.

If Chen Xi's plan succeeded, becoming the family head would drastically shift the balance. His allegiance to Liu Bei would mean a top-tier family like the Chen clan firmly backing Liu Bei, reshuffling the aristocratic landscape.

This was the crux. Taking this step would change the nation's dynamics. Aristocratic families would have to reconsider their moves. The biggest obstacle—opposition from other families—would be mitigated. At least in the short term, these families would no longer pose a problem, allowing Chen Xi the respite needed. After that period, many issues would no longer be issues.

Chapter 110: Everyone Overthinks

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Chen Xi left, leaving Lu Su with a bitter expression. Lu Su was a noble, while Chen Xi was from a prominent family. To Lu Su, it was just that simple.

Picking up the seal left by Chen Xi, Lu Su felt for the first time that his fate had long been determined. For the first time, he felt the terror of a thousand-year-old family. He had previously thought he wasn't far off from Chen Xi, but this time he realized that some people are the ones moving the chess pieces, while he was just a piece on the board.

"So, this is the power of a thousand-year-old family? Separating the best and the strongest to gamble, the one who leaves gains freedom, the one who stays gains the family, and the one who survives becomes the head! No wonder a thousand-year-old family has such audacity!" Lu Su muttered to himself, then shouted out loud, venting his inner dissatisfaction.

Chen Xi didn't know that his words made Lu Su feel like he was not an abandoned child of the Chen family but a young master chosen to demonstrate the grandeur of a thousand-year-old family. To Lu Su, Chen Qun, as the head of the Chen family, seemed to have chosen the family, while Chen Xi chose freedom. The clash between the best and the strongest, with the survivor becoming the patriarch—this was Lu Su's impression.

Lu Su quickly adjusted his mindset. Even if he felt like a pawn in Chen Xi's grand scheme, the overall strategy had no flaws, and he couldn't let personal grievances affect public duty.

I am Lu Zijing, my intellect is not inferior to anyone. I will break through these constraints! Lu Su's eyes gleamed with determination, his spirit reignited by the pressure and shock Chen Xi's plan had given him.

Chen Xi had no idea that his words had led Lu Su down this path, but even if he knew, he wouldn't explain. The beginning and the end were already set; the process might change, but not the conclusion. Words were less effective than actions. Lu Su, being perceptive, would eventually see the purpose behind his actions.

Chen Xi went to find Liu Ye with the transfer order, but Liu Ye suggested that instead of going to Qingzhou with Chen Xi, he should stay and manage the aftermath of the battle with the Yellow Turbans. Liu Ye believed that defeating the Yellow Turbans wasn't the goal; it was about turning them into population for Taishan. He expressed confidence in Chen Xi's success, indicating he didn't plan to go.

"Fine." Since Liu Ye was unwilling, Chen Xi had to abandon the idea of Liu Ye's help. "Stay with Lord Xuande and guard the Qingzhou-Yanzhou border."

"Chen Xi, you know what I mean, right?" Liu Ye said, half-jokingly, "You cleared the border, so there's no major trouble. You placed Lord Xuande there as a fallback in case of failure to defend against Cao Cao, right?"

"Come on," Chen Xi rolled his eyes. "You're overthinking this. Do you think Cao Cao can defeat us? He can't spare the effort."

"What's strategic depth?" Liu Ye caught on to the unfamiliar term.

"It means the breadth, the distance that can be used for evasion, withdrawal, and movement," Chen Xi waved it off. "Stop overthinking. Cao Cao is formidable, but he can't easily defeat Yu Jin and Lu Su."

"Chen Xi, you're from Yingchuan. You should know their capabilities. Although I don't want to admit it, they are each on par with me," Liu Ye said, pulling at his hair with a wry smile. He knew his own talents, but facing someone as nearly perfect as Xun Yu, he realized the gap between him and the top talents of the world.

"I have a rough idea of their capabilities. They are among the top figures of our time," Chen Xi nodded. "But if Zijing is just defending, they can't do much."

"Zijing is too rigid," Liu Ye directly expressed his opinion.

"You may not believe it, but Zijing's ability is not inferior to theirs. He reacts slower but is very stable. He's not good with cunning strategies, which is why I don't leave you, Guo Jia, and Fazheng with him. Your cunning plans might be countered, but Zijing and Wen Ze are steady and seek victory through stability," Chen Xi waved off Liu Ye's concerns. "But since you don't want to go, just make sure to follow Zijing's command. If you disobey and he punishes you, don't blame me."

"Alright," Liu Ye agreed after some thought. He still had doubts about Lu Su's capabilities. Lu Su seemed wooden, rarely showcased his talents, and apart from his strong judgment, he hadn't demonstrated much.

Having given his instructions, Chen Xi turned to leave. Since Liu Ye was uneasy, he wouldn't take him along. Taishan had other strategists. Guo Jia staying with Liu Bei ensured there was no trouble. Chen Xi's only choice left was Fazheng.

"Xiaozhi, wake up!" Chen Xi called outside Fazheng's room, discarding any semblance of formality.

"What's up, Chen Prefect?" Fazheng, with disheveled hair and wrinkled clothes, poked his head out of the window, groggy and disoriented.

"I'm going on an expedition. I need a strategist. Do you dare?" Chen Xi asked.

"What? What, what?" Fazheng was initially confused but quickly woke up, shouting, "Say that again, say that again! I'll be right down, wait for me!"

A series of clattering sounds followed from the second-floor loft, then the thud of footsteps on the stairs.

With one boot on, Fazheng, looking disheveled, stood before Chen Xi, excitedly asking, "Say that again, what do you need me to do?"

"Alright," Chen Xi ignored the excited Fazheng grabbing his sleeve, and repeated slowly, "I'm going on an expedition. I need a strategist. Do you dare?"

"Dare!" Fazheng exclaimed excitedly.

"Then let's go. If we don't capture Qi and Jibei counties, you'll be held accountable," Chen Xi looked down at the excited Fazheng. "Sigh, I don't know if you're on par with Guo Jia."

"I won't lose to him!" Fazheng, like a cat whose tail had been stepped on, retorted.

"Oh, I hope so," Chen Xi turned to leave. "We depart tomorrow. If you're not at the north gate by the hour of the dragon, I'll leave without you. Understand the consequences of violating military law."

"I'll be there! Don't worry!" Fazheng shouted excitedly, "I'll prove that choosing me as your strategist is your best decision this expedition. Hahaha, I, Fazheng, finally have my chance."

"Though I hate to burst your bubble, the others find this task so easy they didn't want to come. So, don't get too excited. Wash up and continue your nap. Choosing you as a strategist, I'm speechless..." Chen Xi yawned, pouring cold water on Fazheng's enthusiasm.