

Mythical 121

Chapter 121: I am Chen Zichuan, You are Fa Xiaozhi

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"Strategies are such a hassle. I wonder if Zang Ba managed to bring my two friends back?" Chen Xi glanced at Fa Zheng, who remained silent. Chen Xi chuckled, knowing very well how much this victory would shock the world and elevate his reputation. After this victory, he would stand on par with the likes of Xun Yu and Chen Qun, the sons of noble families.

In this era, Chen Xi had the lineage, the capability, and the background. The distinction between main and collateral branches in a family wasn't very clear during chaotic times. With his bloodline established, it was all about competence. After April, under Chen Xi's planning, Liu Bei would have the power to rival the lords of the realm. Chen Xi's status would rise accordingly, allowing him to look down on someone like Chen Qun.

"You have two other friends!" Fa Zheng instantly snapped back to reality.

"Who doesn't have one or two friends? Don't you?" Chen Xi gave Fa Zheng a disdainful look. "Guo Fengxiao, that wanderer, is friends with Ji Cai, Wen Ruo, Gongda, and Zhongde. So, why can't I have two or three friends?"

Fa Zheng knew everyone had one or two close friends. He was concerned that if Chen Xi's friends arrived, his future prospects would dim further. Friends meant comrades with similar abilities and mutual understanding. Those who could befriend Guo Jia were all of his caliber. Even if they had their shortcomings, they would excel in other areas; otherwise, they couldn't be in the same league.

Now, with Chen Xi planning to bring his friends over, Fa Zheng felt his future darkening. There were already too many formidable people above him. How would he ever rise to the top? Judging by Chen Xi's caliber, it was likely his friends would be as capable as Guo Jia.

Guo Jia's scheme had split the Yellow Turbans into three large groups, further divided into smaller factions. These smaller factions formed the foundation for Zang Ba's snowball tactic. The snowball grew larger, and by the time it encountered the main Yellow Turban forces, it was already unstoppable.

Although Guo Jia hadn't anticipated Chen Xi using such a method to defeat the Yellow Turbans, splitting them up was the right choice. Otherwise, dealing with over a million Yellow Turbans gathered together would have been much more challenging.

"You needn't worry, Xiaozhi. Each of us will mentor you for a while. You must learn from us all and then surpass us. We are pretty much set in our ways with little room for growth. You are still young; the future belongs to you." Chen Xi stood bathed in the morning light, placing a solemn hand on Fa Zheng's shoulder.

At this moment, Fa Zheng's chest swelled with confidence, and his eyes sparkled. Unlike Guo Jia, who constantly berated him, Chen Xi always comforted his fragile heart. Fa Zheng resolved to absorb the best from each mentor and strive to improve, determined not to waste Chen Xi's efforts.

"Alright, Xiaozhi. Keep working hard. I'm off to check if the grain, seeds, and tools delivered by Ziyang's men are sufficient. Zhang Shiping and Su Shuang couldn't even manage to turn oxen into plow animals. They need someone to teach them how to fit nose rings. Such a hassle! The south sure is wealthy; they've managed to buy so much grain." Chen Xi patted Fa Zheng's shoulder and then sighed helplessly.

From Chen Xi's perspective, Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping were useless. Didn't they know to fit nose rings on the oxen they bought from the north? Bringing back thousands of fat, strong oxen without nose rings—what a hassle! They needed oxen for plowing, not for eating. Without nose rings, how would they plow fields? Trying to lead them by their heads—did they think they were Xu Chu? If they had that kind of strength, they wouldn't need oxen.

In this regard, the Lu family was much more reliable. Previously, when there was no grain transported, as soon as it was needed, the Lu family began shipping grain non-stop, without any delays. The quality was good, and the price was fair, with rice costing just 150 coins per shi, the same as Taishan millet.

Given this, Chen Xi didn't hesitate to engage in commercial transactions with the Lu family. As for Tao Qian's strategic investment, he used it sparingly, relying on his own efforts as the mainstay. Liu Bei now governed over two million people. Relying solely on others was not sustainable.

Unlimited grain purchases were made. As many books as needed were exchanged for grain. Liu Bei's generosity pleased the Lu family, who delivered three thousand books without naming a price, just asking for grain.

The Lu family appreciated this trust and reciprocated Liu Bei's generosity by actively procuring grain in Jiangnan, Jing, Yang, and Yuzhou regions. The Jiangdong Five Great Families were not just for show; motivated by the book-for-grain exchange, southern families brought out their reserves, as grain was something they did not lack.

"Wait, so you bought cattle not for eating?" Fa Zheng asked, snapping back to the topic.

"Do you think I need to buy cattle for meat?" Chen Xi rolled his eyes. "I bought them for plowing."

"Northern oxen can plow fields?" Fa Zheng asked, his expression skeptical. If northern cattle could plow fields, their value wouldn't just be around 3,000 coins. An ox in the central plains could sell for 20,000 coins. In the borderlands, killing cattle for meat was common, but try that in the central plains, and you'd be fighting people to the death.

"Put away that look. I'm Chen Zichuan, you're Fa Xiaozhi. We can question everything, but don't show surprise. Even if you don't know, ask in private. As strategists, if we panic, who will the generals rely on? When necessary, even if you're clueless, act profound. Don't shake the army's morale." Chen Xi glanced at Fa Zheng before turning his head and continuing his lecture.

"You're Chen Zichuan," Fa Zheng said sternly. "That's all you needed to say. Spare me the rest."

"...Let's go." Chen Xi glanced at Fa Zheng, thinking, "I'm still too young. Maybe Zang Ba is cursing me out right now. If I were thirty, after this victory, I could rightfully call myself 'Old Master.' But at that age, I probably wouldn't have this sharpness..."

Meanwhile, Liu Bei had received the full battle report. At almost the same time, Cao Cao received an identical report: Chen Zichuan led 30,000 Taishan soldiers in the Battle of Zhangqiu against 300,000 Yellow Turbans, utterly defeating them. He pursued them for hundreds of miles, decimating Chen Bai, Fu Yun, and Hou Qian's forces, killing 50,000, capturing a million, with almost no losses on his side.

Chapter 122: The Noble Sacrifice of the Grand Leader

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Upon seeing the battle report, Cao Cao was utterly terrified. Unlike Liu Bei, who was elated, Cao Cao was paralyzed with fear. He immediately halted his original plan to attack Taishan. Until he understood how Chen Xi managed to capture over a million Yellow Turbans within a month, Cao Cao wouldn't dare to make any move against Taishan. It was simply too dangerous.

Liu Ye, after reading the report, was left speechless. Didn't this guy claim his military strategy was mediocre? If this is mediocre, how should others survive?

Over a million Yellow Turbans, despite Guo Fengxiao's arrangements, were handled too smoothly. The battle was over in just over half a month, and it even aligned perfectly with the summer farming season. All strategic goals were achieved, all disobedient elements were eliminated, and new troops were seamlessly selected. By the time Zang Ba puts on a performance, all captured Yellow Turbans will be under control, securing both military and civilian loyalty.

"Ziyang, what do you think?" Liu Bei asked, overly excited. Two million Yellow Turbans leaving Qingzhou had made nearby warlords, including Yuan Shao, feel immense pressure. Yet, Chen Xi resolved it in just over half a month, capturing over a million Yellow Turbans almost bloodlessly and securing a third of Qingzhou.

"Ancient generals and sages could do no better," Liu Ye said with a wry smile. He couldn't find the right words to describe it. This man's performance was simply extraordinary.

"Hahaha, I think the same!" Liu Bei said proudly. "By the way, Zichuan mentioned going to the border of Jizhou to demonstrate our military might and put pressure on Yuan Benchu. What do you think of this plan?"

"It's to show our military prowess and pressure Yuan Benchu into abandoning the Zhen family. Given that the Mi family has already started attacking the Zhen family, it will soon bear fruit. Zichuan probably wants to expedite the process. Even if he can't attend the wedding, he will try to return as soon as possible. Although Zichuan seems indifferent, he cares deeply for his family. Chen Lan and he are close friends from times of hardship," Liu Ye hinted, suggesting the need to formalize Chen Lan's status.

Liu Bei understood Liu Ye's hint. After some thought, he said, "Write a letter to the Chen family in Yingchuan, asking them to give Chen Lan a proper status. This is the most appropriate course of action."

Liu Ye nodded in agreement. This was indeed suitable, and getting the Chen family's acceptance shouldn't be too difficult. Chen Xi's performance had certainly earned their attention.

"Alright, I'll draft a letter to the Chen family. They should be willing to grant Chen Lan the status of a concubine's daughter, though becoming a legitimate daughter is impossible," Liu Ye said after some thought. In noble families, legitimate daughters were well-documented. Concubines' daughters were often seen as secondary, primarily destined to be dowry attendants. Even if the Chen family wanted to bet on Chen Xi, Chen Lan's status couldn't change to that of a legitimate daughter unless the Chen family was willing to offend the Fan family. With the marriage contract already in place, neither the Chen family nor the Fan family could afford to lose face.

"Has Zichuan's request for supplies been met? Also, he mentioned trying to fit nose rings on the cattle from the north. If successful, we won't lack plow oxen in the future," Liu Bei said with a smile. In his experience, Chen Xi's requests were always well-calculated and never trivial.

"I had already instructed Zhang Shiping and Su Shuang to try fitting nose rings when the first letter arrived. If it works, we'll be informed soon," Liu Ye replied with a smile. In this era, farming was paramount. As long as the land could yield crops, even if the economy collapsed, stability could still be maintained.

Meanwhile, Zang Ba was earnestly persuading the remaining Yellow Turbans.

"Grand Leader! You will definitely lead us to break out successfully. Under your leadership, we have already raided several farming points. We will definitely escape Taishan and return to Qingzhou!" A fanatically devoted Yellow Turban spoke up before Zang Ba could finish hinting for the undercover agents to speak.

"Returning to Qingzhou offers no survival. Two million Yellow Turbans left Qingzhou, and now only over ten thousand of us remain. Over a million brothers are gone, starved, fallen behind, killed. Don't we Yellow Turbans want a better life!" Zang Ba roared, his eyes bloodshot as he glared at his subordinates.

"Continuing to flee leads only to death! Commander Chen is dead. I have led you through countless dangers, barely finding a way out, but now we face too many enemies. We cannot break through!" Zang Ba shouted. "Do you know? To return to Qingzhou, we must defeat that army, and we cannot. Staying here means death!"

"I don't understand, but Grand Leader, you cannot die! We can die, but not you! You've led us through countless dangers, found food for us. Every time we got food, you ate last! Grand Leader must not die!" A Yellow Turban knelt, banging his head on the ground.

"Get up!" Zang Ba pulled the Yellow Turban up by his arm.

With bloodshot eyes, Zang Ba stared at those blocking him. "Remember, I lead you to get you food. We are bandits. Once a bandit, always a bandit. No one will forgive us. This time, General of Pacification Liu Xuande doesn't want more killing, so he gave us a chance! Have you forgotten Changshe? How many brothers were slaughtered after surrendering? We won't get another chance like this!"

The Yellow Turbans fell silent. They knew about Zang Ba's deal with Taishan. Their grand leader, much like the legendary Heavenly General Zhang Jiao, planned to sacrifice his life for the Yellow Turbans' survival. Zhang Jiao had failed, but now a new hero emerged among the Yellow Turbans, willing to die for a million Yellow Turbans.

"I am leaving. Stay here. After I die, someone will come to take over the camp. Do not resist. Live well, no more banditry. Marry, farm, raise children. They will treat you as ordinary people, not look down on you. Heavenly General, I have fulfilled your last dream. Allow me, Xuangao, to join you after death!" Zang Ba said, turning desolately to leave the camp. His solitary, emaciated figure stretched long in the sunset.

As Zang Ba stepped out of the camp, a Yellow Turban leader fell to his knees, weeping. Soon, the entire camp was filled with sobbing.

In late April 192 AD, the Grand Leader of the Yellow Turbans, disciple of the Heavenly General—Xuangao, sacrificed his life to secure the integration of the Yellow Turbans into Taishan. Paving the way with his blood, a million Yellow Turbans wept in unison, marking the end of the Yellow Turbans as they joined Taishan.

Chapter 123: Pressuring Jizhou with Troops

"Well, well, isn't this the grand leader himself?" Chen Xi greeted Zang Ba with a teasing smile as he entered the tent. Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and others also laughed heartily.

"Mission accomplished without fail!" Zang Ba said, clasping his hands in salute.

"Good. I've already had Fazheng prepare a coffin, a body double, and a eulogy. Your substitute will be buried as a hero," Chen Xi said with a broad smile. They had been searching for a suitable substitute for half a month; after all, they couldn't actually bury Zang Ba.

"Ah, the Yellow Turbans haven't had it easy," Zang Ba said, tossing the yellow cloth wrapped around his head onto the table and sighing.

"Rebellion forced by oppression. What we did is a good deed; at least I won't harm them. For now, you should stay out of sight. Let your skin lighten, gain some weight, and grow a beard. Don't show up until you're unrecognizable," Chen Xi said with a smile.

The new grand leader of the Yellow Turbans left the camp for Taishan's main camp. Shortly after, Taishan soldiers brought a coffin with the substitute's body, along with a large amount of grain and clean water. They announced that, moved by the grand leader's spirit and loyalty, any Yellow Turban except those with severe crimes could come to Taishan and be given a fresh start, with their past misdeeds forgiven.

"It's done. From now on, Qingzhou is our backyard. Once we free up some resources, Qingzhou will be ours! Let's drink to this!" Chen Xi poured some alcohol for everyone, filling his own cup with rice wine, and spoke excitedly.

"This is all thanks to you, Zichuan!" Guan Yu praised, drinking the strong liquor, his face unchanged despite the burning sensation in his stomach.

"Good wine!" Zhang Fei downed his cup in one gulp, then looked longingly at the wine jar by Chen Xi's feet.

"Alright, that's enough. This kind of wine is okay occasionally, but it's too wasteful of grain to drink regularly. Once we have more food, I'll get you some. For now, don't even think about it," Chen Xi said with a laugh, then ordered the wine jar to be taken away. The wine was mainly for disinfecting purposes.

"I'll wait until then," Zhang Fei said joyfully.

"The Qingzhou-Yanzhou border is secure. I no longer need to lead these soldiers. Zilong, Ziyi, hear my orders!" Chen Xi set down his cup and spoke seriously as the others finished their drinks.

"At your command!" Zhao Yun and Taishi Ci stood up and saluted.

"I order you two to take your respective troops, select ten thousand Yellow Turbans, and garrison them in Licheng to guard against Yuan Shao. Zilong, you will also continue overseeing the Qingzhou-Yanzhou farming affairs," Chen Xi handed them their prepared orders.

"Understood!" Zhao Yun and Taishi Ci responded loudly.

"Zhongtai, you will lead Botai and Wenhou to assist Qingzhou's refugees in farming. Accept all refugees, and if you have any questions, consult Zilong. You may select up to fifty thousand troops for farming, treating local people equally," Chen Xi handed another set of orders to Sun Guan, Sun Kang, and Wu Dun. The internal affairs of Qingzhou would be managed by these three, with no government established until after the summer harvest, as food was the priority.

"Understood!" The three stood and bowed.

"Yunchang, Yide, lead the troops north with me to pressure Jizhou!" Chen Xi's eyes gleamed. Though they couldn't challenge Yuan Shao directly yet, their forces were strong enough to influence the balance of power in the land. With their recent victory, they could pressure Jizhou. Even Yuan Shao would have to reconsider his strategy, as Gongsun Zan was currently on the offensive.

"Understood!" Guan Yu and Zhang Fei stood up and responded loudly.

"Grand Leader, what about me?" Zang Ba stood up and asked, seeing everyone else assigned tasks while he had none.

"Xuanga, return to Fenggao with three thousand cavalry. If Cao Cao makes any moves, attack Chenliu directly and show him our strength. We don't need to worry about his feelings now, and he won't be on our side anymore. Warn him not to cause trouble. If Cao Mengde stays put, just keep him under

pressure," Chen Xi handed Zang Ba his final orders. It would be best if Zang Ba stayed out of Qingzhou for the rest of the year to avoid complications.

"Understood!" Zang Ba said excitedly, clasping his hands. Suppressing a rival warlord sounded very appealing.

After distributing the tasks, Chen Xi patted Fazheng, signaling for him to bring in the performers. As for the rules against drinking and women in the camp, as long as they kept winning, such regulations could be flexible.

The next day, the army split up. Chen Xi led Fazheng, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, and Taishi Ci north. If this lineup were in place during their later fame, Yuan Shao would be terrified. For now, Yuan Shao didn't yet grasp the situation. However, news of Chen Xi's victory over the Yellow Turbans would soon spread throughout the Han.

Meanwhile, Hua Xiong had been learning an obscure formation for over ten days. Despite his efforts and those of his soldiers, Jia Xu could arrange ants into an Eight Trigrams diagram on the carriage shaft, creating a yin-yang energy shield. Watching this made Hua Xiong want to slit his throat out of frustration. He still hadn't mastered the formation.

"Sigh, my two-part yin-yang isn't bad," Jia Xu said, arranging the ants into the Eight Gates Golden Lock formation, then switching to the Heavenly Lock and reverse-engineering it into the Five Elements before forming the Yin-Yang Head-Tail Great Kill.

"What do you think?" Jia Xu asked Li Ru, who was resting with his eyes closed.

"Useless. Besides you, who can use it, and who will pass it on?" Li Ru said, not even opening his eyes.
"Pour me some tea."

Jia Xu poured tea into a white porcelain cup and handed it to Li Ru.

These white porcelain cups were tributes originally intended for Emperor Xian. During the chaos in Chang'an, Hua Xiong happened upon the tribute convoy and offered to help, keeping the cups for Li Ru's use. These flawless, white porcelain cups were now a rarity.

As for Li Ru, he had completely disregarded the imperial authority. Being near death, he had nothing to lose. He wasn't opposed to offering tributes to Emperor Xian, but for now, he intended to enjoy them first.

However, Hua Xiong secretly sent a letter to Chen Xi, asking him to prepare a set for Li Ru. He dared not tell Liu Bei, knowing he would be furious. Chen Xi, however, likely had some stock and could send a set either for Li Ru's use or as a tribute to Emperor Xian, saving face for everyone involved.

Chapter 124: A Strategic-Level Talent

Chen Xi led an army of twenty thousand infantry and cavalry toward the border between Jizhou and Qingzhou. As they approached Jizhou, he realized it was already May, and his wedding would likely need to be postponed.

"Sigh, ending this chaotic world is truly difficult," Chen Xi mused, gazing at the clouds in the sky. He had been using his mental talent continuously, though he still wasn't entirely clear on its precise nature. However, he had a general understanding. Historically, Taishan had a minor bumper crop in 191, but under his influence, it had become a major bumper crop. Now, he hoped to enhance the good weather of 192 to even better conditions.

In Lujiang, a Daoist dressed in rough cloth, known for his knowledge of celestial phenomena, curiously observed the sky. Although it was daytime and stars couldn't be seen, Zuo Ci noticed a change in the celestial signs in the north, particularly around Taishan and Qingzhou.

"Who's crazy enough to alter the celestial phenomena on such a large scale and for so long? Let me see," Zuo Ci wondered aloud. Changing the weather wasn't difficult, but doing so over a large area was challenging. To do it for an extended period essentially meant altering the climate for the year.

"What's going on?" Zuo Ci was stunned as he calculated. The overall timing of rain, sunshine, and wind hadn't changed.

Zuo Ci carefully observed the celestial phenomena over Taishan. Finally, he sighed, recognizing the work of a formidable individual. Although he couldn't understand how it was done, this person hadn't changed the overall climate. They had merely adjusted it slightly, making an already good year even

better. The minor irregularities in the weather had been smoothed out, turning the conditions ideal for crop growth.

"This will turn an originally good year in Taishan and Qingzhou into a bumper crop year. How is such a degree of climate modification even possible?" Zuo Ci pondered, intrigued by the direction. "It's probably some individual's mental talent, but it must have significant limitations."

"Let me deduce this extraordinary mental talent," Zuo Ci muttered, beginning a detailed calculation to uncover the mental talent of the person altering the climate on such a large scale.

"A mental talent that naturally enhances favorable weather conditions?" Zuo Ci concluded, finding the result surprising. "The Han dynasty has so many people with unusual talents. This ability must be uncontrollable, yet it's a remarkable strategic talent."

Meanwhile, heading north, Chen Xi continued pondering the effects of his mental talent. Over time, he realized his talent didn't enhance physical objects but rather influenced the environment subtly. He could broadly alter weather patterns, although he wasn't sure if he merely improved conditions or suppressed adverse weather, leading to a potential future outbreak.

Regardless of which it was, Chen Xi knew his talent's significant importance. His mental talent operated continuously, passively affecting the environment around him. This made it a passive skill, unlike Lu Su's active skill.

Whether his talent improved conditions or suppressed bad weather, it was crucial for Chen Xi to stockpile enough grain during these favorable years. Even if catastrophic weather events followed, they would be prepared with enough food reserves to withstand them. Historically, the period was marked by poor harvests, so having stored grain would mitigate the impact of any disasters.

With this in mind, Chen Xi wasn't overly afraid of his mental talent potentially causing future disasters. After all, the region had already experienced severe droughts leading to failed crops. Additional disasters wouldn't worsen the situation further; they would still need disaster relief efforts. As long as they had grain reserves, they could handle any crises that arose.

"Phew!" Chen Xi sighed, looking at the letter from Li Ru. It seemed Li Ru had overstepped by openly using tribute items, but Chen Xi knew he had to cover for Li Ru since he was considered a friend.

"Strategist, is there any bad news?" Zhao Yun asked, noticing Chen Xi's displeased expression.

"Zijian is too slow in presenting tributes to the emperor, although it's partly due to dealing with Dong Zhuo's remnants," Chen Xi replied, giving a convenient explanation.

"Oh, I haven't seen Zijian since last November. I hope he's doing well. But since the strategist has arranged it, I'm sure there won't be any mistakes," Zhao Yun said, reassuring Chen Xi, who seemed agitated since realizing he might miss his wedding date.

"Forget it. Although I didn't give him clear instructions, with Jia Xu and Li Ru around, they should understand my intentions," Chen Xi said with a smile. He hadn't given Hua Xiong explicit directions, but Jia Xu and Li Ru were sharp enough to grasp his plans.

Meanwhile, Hua Xiong had already presented the documents in Chang'an. As the first warlord to offer tribute after the chaos caused by Dong Zhuo and a member of the Han imperial clan, this pleased the young Emperor Xian greatly. He saw it as a sign that the Han dynasty was stabilizing again, believing that the empire was returning to normalcy after Dong Zhuo's rebellion.

Naturally, such an act that displayed the Han dynasty's authority couldn't be overlooked by the emperor. Delighted by the tribute, he decreed that Hua Xiong and his entourage stay at the Chang'an inn, while the rest were to stay thirty li away. After nine days of purification rituals, Hua Xiong would be allowed to see the emperor.

"Strategist, Mr. Jia, please refrain from leaving the inn these days. If you need anything, just let me know," Hua Xiong said, uneasy as he escorted Li Ru and Jia Xu to the Chang'an inn.

"We know better than you what to do. But as for you, do you even understand why Chen Zichuan sent you to Chang'an?" Jia Xu scoffed at Hua Xiong.

Li Ru, mostly disinterested in conversations, spent most of his time resting with his eyes closed or awaiting death. Fortunately, before Hua Xiong left, Chen Xi, worried about Jia Xu and Li Ru's health, sent ten doctors with them, ensuring Li Ru's survival.

"You!" Hua Xiong was incensed but took a deep breath to avoid embarrassing himself in front of Li Ru.
"Please, strategist, enlighten me."

"After presenting the tributes and grain, request that the emperor grace Taishan with his presence. Although it's unlikely to be approved, just making the request will suffice. Chen Zichuan simply wants to prevent others from criticizing him," Li Ru said, not even bothering to open his eyes.

"If you don't understand, just follow orders. Neither Chen Zichuan nor Wenyou would harm you. This move will earn you a favorable position. But once it's done, leave quickly. Although Lu Bu is strong, he can't withstand Li Que and Guo Si for long. Our time is limited," Jia Xu said, noticing Hua Xiong's confusion. He provided a brief explanation, ensuring Hua Xiong understood the benefits and urgency.

Chapter 125: Promising Her a Lifetime of Glory

Hua Xiong didn't ask more questions, as he understood the wisdom of these two far surpassed his own. With Li Ru also advising him, he knew he wouldn't be led astray.

"I will go and pray then. Since we are here, it's best not to challenge the Emperor's authority. Strategist, please rest well. If you need anything, please send someone to inform me. I will not neglect my duties." Seeing Li Ru remain silent, Hua Xiong bowed and slowly exited.

"I still don't know how you managed to do it. These people respect you immensely!" Jia Xu remarked, watching Hua Xiong leave. Even though Dong Zhuo was gone, these former generals still followed Li Ru's orders.

Li Ru didn't respond, but a slight smile appeared on his lips. Although he had misjudged Dong Zhuo, the fierce generals he had nurtured from Xiliang were all loyal and righteous men. However, without his guidance, their righteous and generous nature might not last long due to their lowly origins and limited vision.

"Wen He, have someone investigate who offered incense or mourned for Zhongying. Record everyone who did, whether true or not. Although Zhongying promoted many people, anyone who did so should be noted." Li Ru turned to Jia Xu. Although he had little hope, since Dong Zhuo's actions in Chang'an had deeply alienated the people, it was worth a try.

"I already sent someone to investigate when we arrived in Chang'an. I still have some spies here. The report says no one offered incense, and those who mourned have been imprisoned, awaiting execution." Jia Xu said calmly.

"In prison? Cai Bojie, I presume?" Li Ru reacted immediately. "It must be him. Zhongying treated him well. As a great scholar, only his integrity would make him do such a thing. Does he have any children needing care? With his status, Wang Zishi likely won't execute his entire family. Have Hua Xiong see to it and move the Cai family if necessary."

"He has only one daughter, promised to Wei Zhongdao of the Wei family in Hedong. However, whether mourning for three years or sending her to the Wei family now, both are inappropriate." Jia Xu detailed the situation to Li Ru. Typically, daughters of noble families married at eighteen or nineteen, and Cai Yan was currently unsuitable for either option.

"Have Hua Xiong move the Cai family. Promise her a lifetime of glory! Jia Wen He, can you do this?" Li Ru's eyes shone with determination. "I know you're good at self-preservation, but let me ask you this: Zhongying treated you well. Even if you offered no counsel, Zhongying's downfall was his own doing. However, someone mourned him. Since we have time, we must take care of his family. You, Jia Wen He, can't shirk this responsibility!"

"Fine, fine. What's a lifetime of glory? It's nothing but a simple task for us. But remember, Wenyou, I will only provide covert protection. Her choices will be her own; I will not interfere." Jia Xu reluctantly agreed, making clear he would only provide hidden protection without meddling in her decisions.

"Understood." Li Ru closed his eyes, uttering one word. With that, Cai Yan's fate was sealed, guaranteed a lifetime of prosperity with these two formidable figures ensuring her well-being.

Ten days later, at Weiyang Palace, Emperor Xian sat high on his throne, gazing down at his bowing ministers and Hua Xiong, who had brought much-needed grain tributes. He was very pleased, ignoring the past incidents at Hulao Pass. Those in the know chose to forget the past, seeing no need to offend a powerful warlord, especially one who was a Han clan member and had just defeated the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans.

Hua Xiong's time presenting the tribute was brief. Aside from the shock of the white porcelain cups Chen Xi sent, most of the session was Yang Biao and the newly appointed Wang Yun arguing. Hua Xiong's suggestion for the Emperor to move to Taishan was ignored. Without the valuable tributes and Liu Bei's loyalty, they might have scolded him outright.

"Are you disappointed?" Jia Xu asked with a smile.

"Very. Is this the Han court?" Hua Xiong, having never attended court before his capture at Hulao Pass, found the experience new but ultimately disappointing.

"Haha, just take the imperial envoy with you. These titles and ranks are what Chen Zichuan really wanted. It's surprising that he, not yet twenty, secured a high rank. But sweeping through a million Yellow Turbans is indeed a great achievement for the Han. To the Emperor, without the Yellow Turbans, he wouldn't have suffered so much." Jia Xu laughed.

Securing a Han title was difficult. If not for Chen Xi's overwhelming success, he wouldn't have earned the rank of a guanneihou. Of course, this was disheartening for Chen Xi, who expected a marquis title. Liu Bei was awarded the title of tinghou, confirming that defeating Yellow Turbans was something the Han court deeply appreciated.

"Let's leave tomorrow. The Xiliang army will soon return, casting the Han court into darkness again. The splendor and prosperity of the past are gone, leaving only pain. I wonder who will clean up this mess and who will rule the land." Jia Xu sighed.

Early the next morning, Hua Xiong paid his respects to the Ministry of Rites and then exited the city.

"Is this Cai Zhonglang's home?" Hua Xiong looked at the dilapidated mansion that everyone avoided, its walls and ground in disarray.

"Knock on the door!" Li Ru frowned. He couldn't be seen in Chang'an, but seeing the state of the Cai residence made him glare at Jia Xu, who nonchalantly looked out the window before closing the door again.

"Bang, bang, bang!" Hua Xiong dismounted and knocked firmly on the door, ignoring the surrounding mess.

After a long time, a young girl in mourning clothes opened the door slightly and softly said, "The Cai family is in mourning. Only women are left inside, and we cannot invite guests in. Please forgive us."

"Zijian, help me out of the carriage." Li Ru leaned out and said.

"Form a perimeter, maintain vigilance, and seal the entire street." Hua Xiong commanded without hesitation, perplexed by Li Ru's risky move of stepping out of the carriage.

Hua Xiong helped Li Ru out of the carriage and then let go. Li Ru walked to the Cai residence door, his aura of authority and years of holding power emanating from him. "Tell Zhaoji to take Bojie's compiled music classics, his beloved jiaoweiqin, and his unfinished manuscripts. She cannot stay in Chang'an."

Frightened by Li Ru's imposing manner, the maid hurried back. After a while, Cai Yan, her eyes swollen from crying, came out in mourning clothes and bowed gracefully to Li Ru. "Zhaoji greets Uncle."

Chapter 126: Deep Regrets

"Do you know who I am?" Li Ru asked in surprise, looking at Cai Yan.

"I do not know. However, those who dare to come to the Cai family at this time are either my father's close friends or righteous men who once received his kindness. Either way, for me now, they are important aids," Cai Yan, her eyes slightly red, shook her head and replied.

"Your father, Cai Bojie, once said he had a daughter of both talent and beauty. It seems he was right. Would you be willing to come with me to Taishan? Chang'an is no longer safe; war is imminent. As for the Wei family in Hedong, after you complete the three-year mourning period, I will prepare a dowry for you as your elder. Would you follow me to Taishan?" Li Ru spoke gently. Though he wasn't very familiar with Cai Bojie, since Cai had mourned for Dong Zhuo, Li felt obligated to look after Cai's family. This was his way of conducting himself.

"I am willing to follow Uncle to Taishan." Cai Yan sighed, realizing that regardless of what she said, the person before her would insist on taking her away from Chang'an. The aura surrounding him already spoke volumes. Given her experiences with the vicissitudes of life and human warmth and coldness, Cai Yan was no longer the naive girl who knew nothing but books.

"Very well, very well. I am Li You from Yongzhou, styled Wenru. You may call me Uncle Li. This person is Hua Xiong, styled Zijian. Once we reach Taishan, if you need anything, you can come to us. Wen He,

come out as well." Li Ru called out, and Jia Xu, with no choice, stepped out of the carriage, his attire flowing, presenting a scholarly and elegant appearance.

"I am Jia Wen He." Jia Xu bowed and said no more.

"If Miss Cai does not mind our rough military men, we can help move anything you need." Seeing that Li Ru had finished speaking, Hua Xiong stepped forward and offered his assistance.

"No need. As Uncle Li said, I only need to take those three items." Cai Yan shook her head and then slowly withdrew.

"Miss..." Upon returning inside, Cai Yan's maid looked at her anxiously, not needing to say more.

Cai Yan gently shook her head to signal her maid not to worry. Cai Bojie had mourned Dong Zhuo not only out of gratitude but also to give the Han dynasty a chance to save face. Unfortunately, the common people did not understand, and the court officials like Wang Yun and Yang Biao knew everything but couldn't be bothered with a seventeen-year-old girl who had no value to them. People leaving and cooling the tea was just the way of the world.

Because the common people were ignorant, Cai Yan found herself trapped in Chang'an. If she could leave, her father's reputation would allow her to thrive in any noble family. But the current situation left her confined in Chang'an.

"Let's go and pack our things. We are heading to Taishan. I heard that place belongs to Liu Xuande, and many of our lost books from Luoyang have been collected by him. People say Liu Xuande is benevolent. With this connection, I believe he won't make things difficult for us. On the contrary, we might find some solace." Cai Yan, her eyes still red, spoke to her maid.

Soon, Cai Yan emerged carrying the Jiaoweiqin and the music classics, while her maid brought out Cai Bojie's unfinished history of the Han dynasty. They then boarded the carriage Hua Xiong had prepared and slowly left Chang'an.

After traveling thirty miles, Hua Xiong reached the camp where his soldiers were stationed. After a brief rest, they resumed their march. With four thousand soldiers at his command, Hua Xiong felt a surge of confidence. Their presence was his courage.

Sitting in the carriage, Cai Yan's eyes sparkled with curiosity. Seeing four thousand well-disciplined soldiers, and knowing the commander was that old gentleman's subordinate, she thought, "A warlord, perhaps?" As for Liu Bei, she didn't consider him much, as the information she had from outside indicated that Liu Bei was still a struggling Han clan member with only Taishan to his name.

Meanwhile, on the frontline between Jizhou and Youzhou, Yuan Shao was shocked upon receiving news from the rear. The one hundred thousand Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou had been swept away by Chen Xi. This Chen Zichuan from Yingchuan was too formidable.

"Yuanhao, look at this report." Yuan Shao handed the latest intelligence to his most trusted advisor, Tian Feng.

"A genius of the age. The Yellow Turbans were bound to be defeated by him. However, what worries me more is that Liu Xuande poses a greater threat to us than the Yellow Turbans." Tian Feng, after reading the report, initially stunned, then sighed repeatedly before furrowing his brows.

"I worry about the same. If I had known he was a disciple of the Chen family from Yingchuan, I should have recruited him during the alliance of the warlords, especially since he was always following me around then. It's a pity he was taken in by Liu Xuande. Such talent, what a loss." Yuan Shao reflected, vaguely recalling the name Chen Xi. Then he realized, this was the young man who had been following him during the early days of the alliance, looking for meals.

"What?" Tian Feng was surprised. "Lord, you've met Chen Zichuan from Yingchuan?"

"I was careless. I should have inquired more back then. During the alliance, I noticed he was quite talented, so I let him join me in the main tent for meals. We chatted a bit, but didn't delve deeper. I only knew his name was Chen Zichuan. It's a pity. Later, Liu Xuande took him in. Now thinking back, he must have already joined Liu Xuande then." Yuan Shao was frustrated. If he had known Chen Xi was such a great catch, he wouldn't have let him go, acting as if he was just some small fry.

"This is fate. It's always been like this. In the south, we have Gong Yu, Jun Yi, and Yuan Bo defending. Even if Liu Xuande has any ill intentions, it shouldn't be a major problem. After all, that area is our home ground, where we have significant advantages." Tian Feng sighed. "Fortunately, Chen Zichuan is a capable minister and unlikely to start a war easily. He probably intends to show military might and perhaps seize some resources while we are preoccupied."

"In that case, our main strategy remains unchanged. If Chen Zichuan only seeks some benefits without causing too much trouble, we should accommodate him. Our primary target remains Gongsun Bogui. Only by defeating him can we hope to conquer the realm. Until then, we must tolerate the existence of other warlords." Yuan Shao calmly concluded after a brief contemplation.

"Lord, you are wise." Tian Feng bowed, deeply appreciating Yuan Shao's ability to assess situations and make the most beneficial choices under any circumstances.

"Therefore, I will write to Gong Yu, advising him to avoid conflicts with Chen Zichuan as much as possible. If Chen Zichuan's demands are not excessive, we should comply temporarily. If he deliberately causes trouble, then..." Tian Feng's eyes gleamed with determination. A capable strategist must be decisive when necessary.

"Good! We have two of Hebei's four pillars stationed on the Qingzhou border, with able ministers like Gong Yu. Jizhou is our home turf. Let's see if Chen Zichuan can defy the odds!" Yuan Shao nodded, a hint of pride in his voice when mentioning Hebei's four pillars.

Chapter 127: Desperation Breeds Change

But before Yuan Shao could send out the letter to Ju Shou, a second piece of intelligence arrived. If the first report left Yuan Shao merely shocked, the second one made it clear that Liu Bei was now qualified to stand alongside him. Even if there were differences in strength, Liu Xuande had now become the lord of a state!

"Yuan Hao, take a look at this report," Yuan Shao said bitterly. He regretted not recognizing that young man's talents earlier.

Tian Feng read through the report and then looked up at Yuan Shao, saying each word with emphasis, "My lord, Liu Xuande will surely become our formidable enemy in the future. Chen Zichuan is a prodigious talent, and the courage of Guan, Zhang, and Zhao is renowned throughout the land. We

cannot be unprepared. However, with Gongsun Bogui invading Jizhou from the south, we can only muster enough strength to defend, not to attack..."

At this point, Tian Feng hesitated and looked at Yuan Shao intently.

Yuan Shao, puzzled, asked, "Yuan Hao, speak your mind."

"Would my lord dare to take a risky move?" Tian Feng asked, steeling himself.

"Why not!" Yuan Shao, still in his bold and courageous phase, was not deterred by Tian Feng's suggestion.

"We currently have enough strength to defend against Gongsun Bogui, but it is nearly impossible to gain an advantage over him due to the speed of the White Horse Cavalry. I suggest that since we lack offensive power, we should abandon all attacks and instead focus our efforts here!" Tian Feng pointed to a location on the map.

"If we cannot defeat Gongsun Bogui with the strength of one state, then we should enhance our power to the point where we can face both adversaries without falling behind," Tian Feng said solemnly.

"Now, Bingzhou is overrun by the Wuhuan and Xianbei tribes. With our strength, defeating these ragtag forces would be no problem. I propose that we split our forces: one to conquer Bingzhou and the other to defend the border. Given Gongsun Bogui's arrogance, he will surely be enraged by our provocations and focus all his efforts on attacking our main forces. If we can hold out, once Bingzhou is taken, the entire situation will change dramatically," Tian Feng explained.

Yuan Shao pondered for a long time before making a difficult decision, "Very well, summon Yan Liang and Wen Chou to see me!"

Soon, Yan Liang and Wen Chou arrived at the main tent, respectfully saluting Yuan Shao and Tian Feng before standing at attention, waiting for orders. Unlike at Hulao Pass, they were now household retainers of Yuan Shao.

"Yan Liang, Wen Chou!" Yuan Shao sighed.

"Here, my lord!" they responded loudly.

"If only you two, Yuan Hao, and I are here, would you have the confidence to force Gongsun Zan to stay beyond the borders of Jizhou and Youzhou?" Yuan Shao asked.

"We will fight to the death!" Yan Liang and Wen Chou knelt on one knee without hesitation, speaking with determination.

Hearing this, Yuan Shao felt comforted but then rubbed his forehead in frustration. What a situation—he hadn't said much, and Yan Liang and Wen Chou were already pledging to fight to the death. Was he asking these two fools to die?

"Yuan Hao?" Yuan Shao looked at Tian Feng.

"Yan and Wen are brave and fierce generals, fearless in battle. Leaving them here with us is sufficient!" Tian Feng praised Yan Liang and Wen Chou but was inwardly frustrated. Compared to versatile generals like Zhang He and Gao Lan, Yuan Shao clearly trusted and valued Yan Liang and Wen Chou more.

"Alright, since that's the case, we'll take this gamble!" Yuan Shao glanced at Tian Feng, then looked back at Yan Liang and Wen Chou with relief.

Yuan Shao knew that Yan Liang and Wen Chou might not be suitable for commanding large armies, but did he need such generals? Hebei had no shortage of strategists; Yuan Shao's influence was not built on nothing. The civil servants Liu Xuande sought were abundant in Yuan Shao's ranks.

Yan Liang and Wen Chou might not be adept at command, but Yuan Shao valued their loyalty. He still had some doubts about others, but these two had proven their loyalty by fighting against Lu Bu to protect him. Such loyalty was what Yuan Shao needed. Talent could be found, but loyal subordinates were rare.

Because of this, Yuan Shao planned to train Yan Liang and Wen Chou. Even if they couldn't become great commanders, having them accompanied by strategists as military advisors should suffice. He believed their loyalty would ensure they followed orders.

"We will not falter!" Yan Liang and Wen Chou, though confused, maintained their composure and responded. They were prepared to sacrifice their lives for Yuan Shao.

Yuan Shao, still courageous and decisive, began preparing to split his forces to counter Gongsun Zan.

Meanwhile, Chen Xi, marching towards Jizhou, had no idea that his actions had forced Yuan Shao to take a risk. Originally cautious after years of stalemate with Gongsun Zan, Yuan Shao was now compelled to gamble.

"Set up camp in Licheng. We're here to pressure Jizhou, not to start a war. Yide, if you dare act on your own, don't blame me for being harsh!" Chen Xi warned Zhang Fei sternly in the Licheng government office.

Along the way, Zhang Fei had been itching for a fight, wanting to challenge the Hebei generals. Several times, he had wanted to march ahead to Jizhou, prompting Chen Xi to warn him. Starting a war now would severely damage Taishan's interests.

Chen Xi knew they didn't have the strength to take Jizhou. At best, they could win a battle but couldn't defeat Jizhou's local defenses led by Ju Shou. With no plans to conquer Jizhou, Chen Xi had no intention of fighting. The war between Gongsun Zan and Yuan Shao was Liu Bei's opportunity. They were here to showcase their military might, not to provoke a fight.

A war with Yuan Shao would only benefit Gongsun Zan. Full-scale attacks on Jizhou might defeat Yuan Shao, but it wouldn't benefit Liu Bei. After the war, how would they divide Jizhou? Gongsun Zan, though a hero, wouldn't listen to reason once power was at stake. Liu Bei, without solidifying Qingzhou, would become easy prey. Gongsun Zan wouldn't hesitate to eliminate him.

Thus, Chen Xi focused on strategic intimidation rather than direct confrontation, avoiding actions that might start a war they weren't prepared to finish.

Chapter 128: The Importance of the Zhen Family in Jizhou

Hua Xiong led his mounted infantry towards Yanzhou, equipped with the latest intelligence. Cao Mengde had already become the governor of Yanzhou, and Chen Xi, having defeated the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou, had ordered Hua Xiong to pass through Chenliu quickly without causing any trouble. He had also dispatched Zang Ba as a precaution.

If Zang Ba left Taishan to meet Hua Xiong, it would mean that relations with Cao Mengde were deteriorating. Therefore, unless absolutely necessary, Chen Xi hoped Hua Xiong wouldn't use Zang Ba's cavalry, as their entry into Chenliu would signify a complete break with Cao Cao. In this cautious situation, a high-profile approach was meant to prevent others from disrupting their plans, not to provoke a war.

With this letter in hand, Hua Xiong became much more careful. He didn't want to be the one to disrupt Chen Xi's grand strategy, even though he had no idea what that strategy was.

Meanwhile, the conflict between the Zhen family in Jizhou and the Mi family in Xuzhou had reached a fever pitch. In this battle among the five major merchants, the result was shocking: from the outset, the three-generation-old Mi family easily suppressed the century-old Zhen family, blocking all of its commercial channels.

Everyone in Jizhou had a rough idea of the Zhen family's wealth. But facing the Mi family, the Zhen family found themselves easily outmaneuvered. The Mi family's products were better in quality, lower in price, and available sooner. This difference made it difficult for the Zhen family to sell their goods, which piled up unsold.

Fortunately, the Zhen family was based in Jizhou, enjoying significant local support and exclusive channels. Initially, they weren't severely affected, with the Mi family's impact limited to mid and lower-tier sales. Such situations had happened before, so the Zhen family continued focusing on their upper-tier market.

The tragedy for merchants in this era was their low status, preventing them from accessing the highest echelons of society. Only noble families could engage with other noble families. Thus, the Zhen family largely dismissed the Mi family's impact.

Had the Mi family been alone, they might have been helpless. But they had many allies, and not all noble families in Jizhou favored the Zhen family. Some, like the powerful Cui family and the Geng family, descendants of Liu Xiu's supporters, saw this as an opportunity.

With this, the Zhen family's situation worsened. Their top-tier sales were hampered by the Cui and Geng families, while the Mi family began to clear out the mid and lower-tier markets. If not for the restraint of Jizhou's government, the Mi family might have already expelled the Zhen family from these markets. As it stood, the Zhen family's goods were piling up, costing them heavily every day.

"Damn that Mi family, what are they trying to do!" Zhen Mi's mother, Madam Zhang, fumed as she reviewed the daily accounts. She never imagined that their century-old noble family could be blocked by a three-generation-old upstart family.

"Madam, madam, something terrible has happened!" The Zhen family's steward, Zhen Lun, rushed to the inner courtyard.

"Zhen Lun, what do you think you're doing, shouting like that?" Madam Zhang frowned. As the family's steward, Zhen Lun's behavior was disgraceful. "You'll receive ten lashes for this!"

"Madam, the Mi family has brought officials and our contracts to collect debts," Zhen Lun said quickly, lowering his head.

Madam Zhang was stunned, but quickly pieced together the year's events. "Well, well, well. I don't know which family dares to scheme against the Zhen family. Let's see. If they want to see officials, then we'll see officials! If the Zhen family in Jizhou falls to a three-generation-old merchant family, then our end is near!"

"Mi Zizhong greets Madam Zhen," Mi Zhu said, bowing slightly when he saw Madam Zhang. He disliked playing the villain.

"You must be Mi Zizhong?" Madam Zhang nodded slightly at Mi Zhu. "You do have an air about you. How does it feel to be a pawn?"

“Zhu is unwilling, but a promise is a promise. Madam, please,” Mi Zhu responded, neither confirming nor denying her words, gesturing politely.

“Let’s go. I want to see who’s behind this, trying to defeat the Zhen family in Jizhou. Master Mi, if you find yourself homeless, you’re welcome at the Zhen family. I have faith in your talents,” Madam Zhang said with a smile, showing no panic, embodying the poise of a noblewoman.

“Sigh, Madam, please. The Zhen family’s influence is indeed strong in Jizhou, but it’s limited to Jizhou. Madam, you might not even know who you’ve offended. Sometimes a word or a look can cause great harm. Madam, be prepared,” Mi Zhu shook his head, responding calmly.

When Chen Xi shattered the Yellow Turbans, accepted a million surrendering troops, and incorporated Qingzhou into Taishan, Mi Zhu knew the outcome. Even if the Zhen family were in the right, Jizhou would abandon them. No one would risk bringing war to their doorstep for outsiders. The Zhen family was just one noble family in Jizhou, not the largest. This time, they had to face it alone.

The Zhen family’s strength lay in their connections. Without these connections, their power dropped by ninety percent. Chen Xi seized this opportunity to subdue the Zhen family, planting a foothold in Hebei. Though this foothold was unstable, it would strengthen as Liu Xuande’s power grew.

One day, when Liu Xuande’s power surpassed Yuan Shao’s, the Zhen family would see an opportunity. Comparing the family that abandoned them with Liu Bei’s growing influence, the Zhen family would naturally make a choice, becoming a crucial factor in destabilizing Hebei.

The Zhen family’s connections were what Chen Xi needed. This time, the Zhen family lost because Yuan Shao’s power was overwhelming. Other families had to abandon them. But as Liu Bei’s power rose, surpassing Yuan Shao’s, the Zhen family and other noble families in Hebei would have to reconsider their allegiance.

In this way, many problems would be resolved. The Zhen family was critical to Chen Xi’s plans—essential in many strategies where a noble family in Hebei was needed.

Chapter 129: Everyone is Calculating

When Madam Zhang saw Ju Shou and the heads of various influential families sitting inside the prefectural office, she had a bad feeling, but her confidence as a member of the Jizhou nobility prevented her from thinking too deeply about it.

After receiving Yuan Shao's letter, it didn't take long for a conflict to erupt between the Mi and Zhen families. This gave Ju Shou pause, prompting him to investigate. Or rather, Mi Zhu had intentionally sent signals to the Jizhou authorities. Upon receiving them, Ju Shou quickly realized that Liu Xuande (Liu Bei) had his sights set on the Zhen family.

What does the Zhen family have to offer? Ju Shou pondered and concluded that their value lay in their northern connections, trade, and wealth. However, compared to the entirety of Jizhou, these were not particularly significant. Especially after the Yuans from the Huan and Cheng branches had established themselves in Jizhou, both Yuan Benchu (Yuan Shao) and his advisors, including Ju Gongyu (Ju Shou) and Tian Yuanhao (Tian Feng), understood one thing: the local aristocracy of Jizhou needed to be weakened. There could be only one voice in Jizhou, and that was the Yuan family!

However, as the saying goes, "a strong dragon does not suppress a local snake." The Yuan family might be powerful, but local families like the Gengs, Cuis, Zhangs, and Zhens had centuries of history. They might not rival the Yuan family in influence across central China, but in Jizhou, these four families together could challenge the Yuan family.

This was why, despite his power, Yuan Shao needed to ally with local forces upon arriving in Jizhou—the local "snakes" were too strong.

The signals sent by the Mi family were actually good news for the Jizhou authorities. Even so, Ju Shou specifically wrote to Chen Xi, warning him not to push too far. Chen Xi's response reassured Ju Shou significantly. Chen Xi stated that Qingzhou was exhausted and burdened by the Yellow Turbans. He proposed a fair judgment and compensation with a million shi of grain.

After reading the letter, Ju Shou had it delivered to the front lines. He already knew how to handle the situation. A million shi of grain wasn't a big issue; Jizhou was prosperous and had harvested abundantly the previous year. The government granaries held over twenty million shi, but giving away a million for free was out of the question.

While negotiating with Chen Xi, Ju Shou advised Mi Zhu to hold off on suing the Zhen family, as he wasn't ready yet. He also secretly contacted the heads of various influential families in Jizhou, clarifying the situation and even presenting the latest battle reports.

Jizhou's families varied in size and lacked professional intelligence handlers. Their intelligence systems were often chaotic. While they knew of Taishan's response to the Yellow Turbans, they lacked detailed information. The best intelligence system, belonging to the Cui family, only knew that Chen Xi had defeated the Yellow Turbans. This news shocked the Cui family head but seemed irrelevant to them—or so they thought.

When Ju Shou presented the latest battle reports to the heads of Jizhou's families, their faces darkened. They realized that while Gongsun Zan posed an external threat, Chen Zicuan (Chen Xi) was a domestic one. With the power to defeat over a million Yellow Turbans in a month, this figure now threatened their doorstep.

Instantly, the family heads turned their focus to Ju Shou. The Cui family head noticed the absence of the Zhen family, suspecting they were being marginalized or that the upcoming discussion concerned them. Other astute family heads also sensed something was off and remained silent, waiting for Ju Shou to speak.

Soon, the room fell silent, all eyes on Ju Shou.

"This matter indeed concerns the Zhen family," Ju Shou said with a smile. He wanted them to understand his intentions when the time came to explain.

"This is a letter from Chen Zicuan. Please consider it carefully. I will step out for a moment. The fate of Jizhou is in your hands," Ju Shou said, handing over Chen Xi's letter and leaving the room without giving them time to react.

Less than half an hour later, Ju Shou was invited back. The outcome was as he expected—the Zhen family was out. Even the Zhang family, closely aligned with the Zhens, said nothing. Faced with their own interests versus the Zhen family's fate, all families chose self-preservation. As the Geng family head put it, dragging all of Jizhou's people into war for the Zhen family's sake was not wise, leading to the Zhen family's exclusion.

With the backing of all Jizhou families, Ju Shou calmly calculated the Zhen family's assets, finding that their total worth fell short of compensation. He felt reassured; the exclusion of one of the four major families significantly weakened their overall power, giving the Yuan family a chance to intervene.

After tallying the Zhen family's assets, Ju Shou sent a letter to Yuan Shao via fast courier. He had a better plan. If Chen Zicuan wanted to play, Ju Shou was willing to use Chen's move to subdue Hebei's four families in one go. Noble families were opportunistic. If Chen Zicuan could use them, why couldn't Ju Gongyu? There was no better way to win favor than by supporting someone in their time of need. A Yuan-Zhen alliance could potentially unify Jizhou!

With this in mind, Ju Shou began meticulous preparations, using the pretext of defending against Chen Xi to mobilize funds. This was an excellent opportunity to consolidate Yuan family control over Jizhou.

Seizing this chance, Jizhou, with its large population and grain production, could muster enough power through unified military and political orders to crush Gongsun Zan. Combining the forces of You, Bing, and Ji provinces, the entire realm could be within reach!

These thoughts excited Ju Shou, making him feel a thrilling tremor at the prospect of influencing the grand fate of the realm. "Misfortune turns to blessing," Ju Shou felt clearly.

Madam Zhang gave a graceful salute, the atmosphere tense. But seeing Ju Shou at the head, she felt more at ease. With Jizhou's official support, she was reassured. Without this backing, the Mi family alone couldn't defeat the Zhen family—it would be laughable!

"Seat Lady Zhen and Mi Zizhong," Ju Shou said calmly. Seats were quickly brought for both.

Mi Zhu frowned slightly, understanding Ju Shou's gesture of seating Lady Zhen but puzzled at being seated himself—he was just a merchant. Was Ju Shou aiming for mediation? Mi Zhu couldn't help but wonder.

Regardless of Ju Shou's intentions, the initiative remained with Mi Zhu. Everything was proceeding as Chen Xi had predicted. Having reached this point, there was no turning back. The Zhen family's downfall was imminent.

After the box of deeds and IOUs was brought forward, Mi Zhu spoke calmly, "These documents are all genuine. The Zhen family's reputation should ensure there is no denial."

The clerk quickly verified the documents and reported to Ju Shou, "Lord Governor, these are indeed the Zhen family's signed deeds and IOUs."

To avoid any mistakes, Ju Shou had ensured that every official present was his trusted aide, instructing them to handle the matter based solely on evidence, disregarding the other party's status.

Chapter 130: Two Giants in Court

"Madam Zhen, do you have any objections? I will not be one-sided. If there are any discrepancies, please inform me now," Ju Shou said calmly, showing no favoritism.

Madam Zhang smiled and responded, "These land deeds and IOUs were indeed issued by my Zhen family. Although I am curious how these debts and deeds came to be, this is not the place to discuss that. Please, Ju Gong, convert them to silver and cash value."

It was clear that Madam Zhang admitted the Zhen family's insufficiency in silver, allowing the government to repurchase at a discounted rate, and use the proceeds to pay off the debt.

After all, such overdue debts did not violate criminal laws. In the Han dynasty, they were considered miscellaneous laws. According to the law, as long as the debt was repaid within the time given by the court, the worst punishment was three lashes.

For this reason, in cases of overdue debts, the repayment methods and deadlines determined by the presiding judge were crucial. Depending on the repayment result, the final punishment could vary significantly. Those who couldn't repay might even be demoted to slavery.

As a lady of noble status, Madam Zhang wouldn't face whipping or be demoted to slavery due to inability to pay. So the final punishment would be canceled, as long as Ju Shou extended the repayment period, or even dragged it out indefinitely. The Zhen family could end up keeping all their properties without spending a penny.

However, Madam Zhang clearly didn't want to resort to such measures as they would tarnish the Zhen family's reputation. While they couldn't produce enough cash, they still had goods. By paying off the debt with goods at fair value, the Zhen family would only lose face but not suffer significant financial loss, assuming a fair valuation.

In the Han dynasty, government-imposed debt settlements were rarely fair; a three-tenths valuation was considered generous. However, for a prominent family like the Zhens in their home region, a fair valuation was not impossible. If even this couldn't be achieved, could they still claim to be a century-old noble family?

Ju Shou sighed and stood up, "Mi Zizhong, would you be willing to show mercy and let the Zhen family off?"

With these words, those aware of the situation began whispering among themselves. This diverged from their agreed plan to abandon the Zhen family. Now, if Ju Shou's intervention succeeded, it would complicate matters later.

"It's not that I'm unwilling. The Mi and Zhen families have no enmity and even had business dealings before. But now, the Mi family has no choice but to press forward. I hope Ju Gong understands," Mi Zhu said with a bitter smile and bowed. He knew that as long as he refused to relent, Ju Shou would have to adjudicate under the miscellaneous laws and could only apply the harshest one-tenth valuation. The Zhen family was cornered.

"I understand the Mi family's difficulties. Could we negotiate a way to give the Zhen family some leniency? Jizhou will not forget your favor," Ju Shou continued to mediate, hinting that regardless of Mi Zhu's decision, Jizhou would remember this. Showing leniency would earn Jizhou's gratitude, while refusing might someday lead to Jizhou seeking retribution.

Mi Zhu maintained his bitter smile but was unfazed. "Can you, Ju Gong, predict the outcomes for Yuan Benchu and Liu Xuande? If you could foresee everything, you wouldn't be here. I bet my family's fortune on Liu Xuande, you bet on Yuan Benchu. Now you're telling me Yuan Benchu is better?"

"Ju Gong, Jizhou surely knows who backs me. I'm just a pawn. Even if I don't want to fight the Zhen family, what can I do?" Mi Zhu lowered his posture, feigning helplessness.

Ju Shou sighed, "Does your backer truly refuse to reconcile with Jizhou? We have no direct conflict."

Ju Shou persistently demonstrated his support for the Zhen family before Madam Zhang, thinking ahead.

"I dare not make decisions," Mi Zhu continued his act, inwardly despising Ju Shou for trying to extricate himself.

"Sigh, Madam Zhen," Ju Shou turned and bowed to Madam Zhang.

"Thank you for your support, Ju Gong. Please calculate the assets. What we bought back then might be worth a lot now," Madam Zhang said firmly, implying that a fair valuation would essentially be selling to the government, which might even yield a profit for the Zhen family. "Mi Family Head must have incurred some losses too."

"Not really. My family has profited a bit from every sale in Jizhou, not much but it accumulates," Mi Zhu smiled, certain that the government wouldn't offer a fair valuation. One-tenth was the maximum he expected.

Soon, the Zhen family's assets were tallied. "Reporting to the Prefect, the Zhen family's calculable assets amount to approximately 770 million coins! The shortfall is 1.1 billion coins!" The scribe announced, visibly shocked. Even at a tenth valuation, the Zhen family's assets were worth 770 million coins. The Jizhou family heads were equally stunned. They knew the Zhen family was wealthy but had never had a chance to calculate it. This was eye-opening!

Without the severe discount, the Zhen family would be worth 7.7 billion coins, equivalent to 40 million shi of grain at Jizhou prices. This wasn't just immense wealth; it was enough to support a warlord's army. For the first time, Hebei's noble families felt the pressure; even noble blood couldn't withstand the allure of such wealth.

Ju Shou trembled slightly. He had known this figure beforehand, but announcing it publicly made him shake. Now he fully understood why Chen Zicuan insisted on the Zhen family. Liu Xuande's foundation was unstable, lacking money and grain. Absorbing the Zhen family would solidify his base!

One million Yellow Turbans was nothing. The Zhen family alone could support them without much strain. Plus, Mi Zhu stood there, another of the top five merchants, likely worth tens of billions of coins.

Mi Zhu was also shocked. Though his Mi family was among the top five merchants, the Zhen family's wealth was staggering. His assets totaled around 2 billion coins, a quarter of the Zhen family's. No wonder the Zhen family had never been dethroned as the top merchant!

The noble family heads eyed Mi Zhu with greed. If he absorbed the Zhen family, the Mi family would become the top merchant, and they would readily elevate him to their ranks.

Mi Zhu could only smile bitterly under their greedy gazes. He now doubted the wealth of the Chenliu and Hedong Wei families, who had fought the Zhen family for a century without faltering. They must have far more assets. Among the top five merchants, it seemed only the Mi family was just making up the numbers. Determined, Mi Zhu resolved to transform his family into a noble household.