

Mythical 131

Chapter 131: The Depths of Aristocratic Families

"What!" Madam Zhang slammed her hand on the table when she heard that her family's assets were valued at 770 million. She angrily scanned the gathered family heads and glared at Ju Shou, her chest heaving in fury as she recalled the recent events.

"Fine! Well done, Hebei aristocrats and Yuan family of Yuzhou. The Zhen family concedes defeat. Mi Zizhong, grant us a ten-day grace period. Our Zhen family can still come up with a mere two billion coins!" Madam Zhang shouted, her eyes burning with anger, and ordered her servants, "We're leaving!"

As Madam Zhang turned to leave, no one dared to stop her. The heads of Hebei's aristocratic families exchanged glances before turning their attention back to Mi Zhu, who now stood as the new top merchant.

"Congratulations, Zizhong!" The head of the Geng family rose and bowed to Mi Zhu. "You must visit the Geng family estate someday."

Then, a chorus of congratulatory voices filled the hall. Every aristocratic family present wanted to forge ties with the new top merchant, recognizing Mi Zhu's immense wealth and connections as an asset in these turbulent times, especially since he posed no threat to their power.

Mi Zhu reciprocated with polite bows, showing no arrogance despite his newfound status.

"Thank you, Ju Gong." After everyone left, Mi Zhu bowed to Ju Shou.

"No need to be so formal. We are merely upholding the law. When you return, inform Chen Zicuan that Jizhou is willing to form an alliance with Qingzhou. And as for you, Zizhong, Jizhou's doors are always open to you." Ju Shou smiled, viewing Mi Zhu as a lucrative and non-threatening ally.

Mi Zhu's eyes gleamed with joy, and he replied, "Thank you, Ju Gong. I will surely return to Jizhou. I assure you, the Mi family's wealth is not inferior to the Zhen family's!"

"Good to hear!" Ju Shou laughed heartily, thinking of the benefits of having such a wealthy ally in Jizhou. Though Jizhou was rich in resources, having a wealthy partner like Mi Zhu meant that the treasury would always have a backup.

When Madam Zhang returned to the Zhen residence, she immediately locked down the inner courtyard, allowing only the direct family members inside.

"The situation is as follows: the entire Hebei aristocracy has excluded our Zhen family," Madam Zhang calmly explained the current predicament.

"Mother, should we relocate?" Zhen Mi asked calmly, showing no trace of panic.

"Yes, we will relocate. Until our departure, no one except Ju Gong or Mi Zizhong will be allowed an audience," Madam Zhang commanded with the authority of the family matriarch, quelling any opposition from the household and branch families. "We still don't know what we're up against. Not a single piece of information has returned from our covert operatives, and our family has been reduced to this state?"

"Madam, our covert operatives were cut off by various families immediately. We have no information channels left. The power of Hebei's aristocracy has far surpassed our Zhen family," one of the Zhen family stewards reported.

"Abandon all current operations and reorganize! If we have failed, then we must minimize our losses," Madam Zhang instructed calmly. "Order the family members to evacuate Hebei in batches. Sever all business connections. Even without Jizhou, we are still one of the most prominent families in the land!"

"Mi'er, stay," she added as Zhen Mi prepared to leave.

"Your father left a dowry for you before he passed. I will use it to resolve this crisis, and once the family stabilizes, I will prepare another dowry for you," Madam Zhang explained to her nine-year-old daughter.

"Mother, you may handle it as you see fit," Zhen Mi replied calmly.

Before he died, Zhen Yi had prepared a dowry for Zhen Mi worth two billion coins, as prophesied by Liu Liang, a fortune-teller, who claimed she was destined for great things. The top merchants of this era, like Mi Zhu, who prepared a two-billion coin dowry for his sister Mi Zhen, were known for their immense wealth and protective nature toward their sisters.

Meanwhile, Chen Zicuan received a letter from the north and felt reassured. He was currently patrolling the Jizhou border, able to receive Mi Zhu's messages in half a day thanks to the swift horses. Accompanying him was the White Horse General, Zhao Yun, while Guan Yu and Zhang Fei remained in Licheng with their troops.

"Let's go. We'll visit the Zhen family ourselves. Now, what identity should I assume?" Chen Zicuan wondered aloud as he boarded the carriage. "Hurry, the Zhen family isn't an ordinary aristocratic family. If we're late, they might relocate."

"Understood, Zicuan. Leave it to me," Zhao Yun responded with a hearty laugh.

Raising twelve billion coins wasn't easy. Although Ju Shou had prepared in advance, gathering such a large sum discreetly was challenging. He had only managed to accumulate half of it so far.

"It seems I need to visit the Zhen family earlier than planned. Raising this much money isn't easy. Madam Zhang spoke confidently, so the Zhen family must have other avenues. With the six billion I have now, it should be enough!" Ju Shou calculated the current situation and sighed, realizing the financial burden of the war against Gongsun Zan. If Qingzhou launched another attack, Jizhou would struggle to handle a two-front war.

Mi Zhu escorted Chen Zicuan to the Zhen residence. Despite their recent defeat, the Zhen family's estate showed no signs of decline. The stone bricks at the entrance were meticulously cleaned, and the guards remained as vigilant and imposing as ever.

"Mr. Zizhong!" The two guards at the gate glared at Mi Zhu but refrained from any rude actions. "Madam has instructed us not to obstruct you. Someone inside will guide you to her."

"Thank you," Mi Zhu said, bowing.

After Mi Zhu entered, the guards immediately drew their swords to block Chen Zicuan and Zhao Yun. They knew these two were with Mi Zhu, but their orders were clear—they could not harm Mi Zhu but could act against his companions.

Before Chen Zicuan could speak, Zhao Yun effortlessly tossed the two guards aside, their strength incomparable to his.

"Let's go. Even in defeat, a century-old aristocratic family's dignity won't waver," Chen Zicuan commented as he admired the surroundings. The depth of an aristocratic family's heritage was evident in every meticulous detail.

Chapter 132: Using Power to Suppress

Chen Xi and Zhao Yun entered the mansion, and soon the servants of the Zhen family surrounded them. However, the skill difference was vast, and within moments, Zhao Yun had subdued them all.

"Madam, this is no way to treat guests!" Mi Zhu called out loudly, knowing full well that the Zhen family couldn't be unaware of the commotion in the front hall.

"Why shouldn't we treat uninvited guests like this?" Zhang Shi's voice came from the central hall.

"Zhang Shi, if you don't want to provoke a war between the Chen family of Yingchuan and the Zhen family of Jizhou, stop now. Otherwise, I don't mind showing you some harsh lessons. The connections your Zhen family boasts about are nothing to me; I won't hesitate to ensure you can't leave Jizhou!" Chen Xi's icy voice reached Zhang Shi's ears.

"Yingchuan Chen family, well, well, well!" Zhang Shi's voice, filled with anger, echoed back.

Chen Xi remained unfazed by Zhang Shi's anger. As for using the name of the Yingchuan Chen family, he had done it many times, and the Chen family had never objected. After quelling the Yellow Turbans, he felt even more justified in wielding this intimidating title.

Zhang Shi did not doubt Chen Xi's words. Among the prominent families in the Central Plains, only three had the capability to suppress the Zhen family across provinces. With the Liu family preoccupied, the

Yuan family too busy, and the Yang family in chaos, only the Chen and Xun families could manage such a feat.

"Zilong, make sure none of them can fight anymore!" Chen Xi commanded Zhao Yun, seeing that the Zhen family's servants were still resisting.

Sounds of spears striking filled the air.

"Well, now we can talk." Chen Xi's expression turned gentle as he walked towards the central hall.

"You must be Madam Zhen," Chen Xi greeted the woman sitting at the head, bowing slightly. "Chen Zicuan greets you, Madam."

"This general is quite impressive!" Zhang Shi ignored Chen Xi and instead focused on Zhao Yun.

"Hahaha, the second-best warrior in the world, Zhao Zilong, is merely 'impressive' to the Zhen family? Should I say it's arrogance or just small-mindedness?" Chen Xi's warm expression turned mocking, infuriating Zhang Shi. He was clearly implying the Zhen family had no discernment.

With a clap, Chen Xi had Mi Zhu's men bring a heavy wooden chair and place it opposite Zhang Shi in the central hall. Chen Xi sat down, his seat higher than Zhang Shi's, casting a shadow over her.

"Let's talk," Chen Xi propped his head on his hand, staring at Zhang Shi.

"What is there to discuss with your Chen family!" Zhang Shi fumed, barely containing her rage. Chen Xi's indifferent demeanor was intolerable, but the imposing presence of Zhao Yun kept her in check. Two people alone had subdued the entire Zhen family.

"I have many things to discuss, such as this incident or anything Madam wishes. I am here to talk, and I doubt Madam wants me to leave empty-handed," Chen Xi spoke leisurely, his gaze sweeping over Zhang Shi as if she were a commodity, making her shudder.

"Hmph, a mere two billion coins is something our Zhen family can afford!" Zhang Shi retorted defiantly.

Chen Xi paused, his expression hidden as he surveyed the hall, preventing Zhang Shi from noticing his reaction.

"Honestly, how many times can your Zhen family endure this?" Chen Xi adjusted his posture, now sitting upright and staring coldly at Zhang Shi.

"In this world, when status is equal, it's a battle of wits. I believe my wit is not inferior. The plight of the Zhen family was orchestrated by me alone, without any support from my family. Even if your Zhen family moves to Bingzhou next to the Wang family, trust me, the outcome won't differ," Chen Xi's confidence was palpable, intimidating Zhang Shi.

"Is the Chen family also entering this grand scheme, choosing to fight rather than just bet?" Zhang Shi finally spoke after a long silence, seemingly mesmerized by Chen Xi's presence.

"Not really. I'm just preparing a gift for someone I favor, and among all the choices, only the Zhen family fits. What does Madam think? Does the Zhen family wish to advance further?" Chen Xi asked pointedly.

"..." Zhang Shi remained silent. The situation was indeed dire; the Zhen family's influence and connections had been severed, making them incapable of resisting this man.

"Your silence implies consent. I need your Zhen family. Give me the two billion coins, and we can make a deal," Chen Xi said coolly. "Perhaps your Zhen family has other options, but I believe Jizhou's land is the most suitable for your survival. This time, I'm merely showcasing my capabilities. The properties and lands your Zhen family acquired will be considered a gift. Future transactions will not exceed the prices you initially paid."

Chen Xi's casual attitude shocked Zhang Shi. There was no arrogance, just a calm and undeniable confidence that left her unable to maintain her composure.

"Can you mobilize the merchants of the world?" Zhang Shi asked with difficulty. If that were the case, the Chen family might have already accumulated enough wealth to buy an entire province. The thought of the Chen family's history was alarming; they had once used wealth to buy one of the Five Hegemons,

Qi, leading to the end of the Spring and Autumn period and the rise of the Warring States. Though they bore the surname Tian then, their experience in such matters was evident.

"Just leveraging benefits," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly. "What does Madam think? The Yuan family is not easy to deal with."

Zhang Shi pondered for a long time. This man's proposal might not be a bad plan. With the previously mentioned resources, the Zhen family could firmly establish itself in Jizhou. Even if unexpected events occurred, they wouldn't be as powerless as they are now. Given this man's demeanor, his chosen ally might be just as capable as Yuan Shao, if not more.

"Please wait a moment, Sir Chen. Such a significant matter requires further deliberation," Zhang Shi said, rising and bowing gracefully. "We will give you an answer shortly."

"I'll wait here, but my time is limited," Chen Xi smiled.

As Chen Xi waited in the hall, a feast was laid out, and the maids attended to him calmly, showing no fear despite Zhao Yun's earlier actions.

Chen Xi remained relaxed, eating and observing. He knew that his actions were being reported to Zhang Shi, and soon she would understand the scale of the Yellow Turban campaign and why all of Jizhou had made their choice.

As Chen Xi continued his casual inspection, a young girl with a determined yet fearful expression approached, carrying a tea tray. Chen Xi paused, extending his hand toward her, captivated by her resolve despite her fear.

Chapter 133: Disturbed Heart

As Chen Xi came to his senses, his right hand was already touching the little girl's cheek, which made him feel a bit embarrassed. However, he quickly regained his composure. When had he ever been so infatuated with a woman?

Since he had already touched her, Chen Xi didn't want to show whether it was intentional or accidental. Trying to remain calm, he said, "Zhen Mi? You indeed have a good face."

Zhen Mi blushed. Though young, she understood that her appearance shouldn't be touched by others. She was a noble daughter of the Zhen family, and the most favored one of her generation. Being so lightly taken advantage of by Chen Xi naturally angered the other members of the Zhen family, who immediately rushed forward, no longer as composed as before.

"Zilong, go easy on them," Chen Xi said without turning his head, hearing the footsteps behind him. With such a gap in strength, capturing Zhao Yun was simply a joke.

"Do that expression again," Chen Xi said, staring at Zhen Mi.

"Huh?" Zhen Mi looked at Chen Xi, puzzled.

"Do that expression again," Chen Xi repeated, ignoring Zhen Mi's confused look.

Zhen Mi had no idea what Chen Xi was talking about.

"Do I need to say it again?" Chen Xi asked, somewhat impatiently. "Hurry up, do it again!"

Zhen Mi was frightened by Chen Xi's agitated demeanor. Her eyes welled up with tears, but she held them back, not letting them fall.

Chen Xi slowly closed his eyes. He didn't want anyone to see this other side of him. When he opened his eyes again, he had regained his calm. He took out a white silk handkerchief and tossed it to Zhen Mi. "Luck and misfortune are intertwined... Zi Zhong, get a chair and let her sit."

Soon, Mi Zhu had someone bring a chair and place it beside Chen Xi, then invited Zhen Mi to sit.

"My mother said that sitting should have proper posture. Chen Gongzi, your current posture doesn't resemble that of a noble young master," Zhen Mi said calmly, looking at the chair Mi Zhu had brought without moving towards it. She spoke with a natural grace, completely lacking the previous fear. She could clearly sense that the man before her harbored no malice towards her.

"Get a sitting mat and take away the chair," Chen Xi said calmly, then stood up to let the servants remove the chair. Soon, a sitting mat was brought in, and Chen Xi ceremoniously knelt on it in the center of the Zhen family's hall.

"Separating guest and host isn't proper etiquette," Zhen Mi remarked as she looked at Chen Xi. Although he now appeared elegant and polite with the wooden folding fan placed on his right side, kneeling in the center of the hall was improper.

"Such a similar temperament and actions!" Chen Xi's eyes showed a trace of nostalgia as he looked at Zhen Mi. It was as if he didn't hear her, and soon the nostalgic look faded, leaving only clarity. Sighing, he said, "Tell your mother, in consideration of you, the Zhen family will avoid this calamity. This matter is over. Zi Zhong, leave that box of deeds and IOUs. We're leaving."

With that, Chen Xi stood up and prepared to leave with Zhao Yun and Mi Zhu. As he reached the door, he couldn't help but look back at Zhen Mi, but he didn't see the expression he hoped for—only a look of confusion. He sighed and strode out of the Zhen family mansion.

"Zi Chuan, what are you doing!" Mi Zhu asked frantically once they were outside. He had held back his questions while inside the Zhen family home but now felt completely bewildered. "We finally had this opportunity in our grasp. Just as we were about to close the net, why did you suddenly let go? This won't make the Zhen family grateful; they'll just think you're foolish!"

Zhao Yun also looked at Chen Xi with confusion but remained silent. He had witnessed Chen Xi's miraculous decisions too many times.

"It's nothing. We've done what we needed to do, and the rest doesn't matter," Chen Xi said indifferently. "Regarding the situation, everything necessary has been done. The final step is inconsequential."

"I mean you! You've let yourself be blinded by infatuation!" Mi Zhu said angrily. Although Chen Xi had orchestrated this, Mi Zhu had put in a lot of effort. Now, with Chen Xi saying they should give up, all of Mi Zhu's hard work seemed wasted.

"Blinded by an eight or nine-year-old girl?" Chen Xi retorted disdainfully. "I've seen your sister, Mi Zhen. Did you see me show any interest? The important thing is not Zhen Mi herself but her demeanor and expression. In terms of beauty, Zhen Mi is only on par with your sister."

"Speaking of which..." Mi Zhu frowned, recalling that Chen Xi had shown no interest in beauties before. During the New Year banquet at the Mi family home, even when Mi Zhu's sister served tea, Chen Xi had remained indifferent, not even offering a comment.

"It's not what you think. This matter is settled," Chen Xi said, shaking his head. He had no desire to return to Jizhou or see Zhen Mi again. The memory of that expression was too hard to forget.

"Madam," a servant approached Zhang Shi as she was about to return Zhen Mi's dowry. "Lord Ju requests an audience."

"Ju Gong..." A cold glint flashed in Zhang Shi's eyes. Compared to Chen Xi, the actions of the Yuan family and the Hebei nobility filled her with disgust. But now that the crisis had passed, Zhang Shi didn't mind settling accounts with all the families in Jizhou. This time, the Zhen family was not at fault.

Chapter 134: The Situation as It Is, What Can You Do?

Seeing someone he shouldn't have seen, Chen Xi's mood was extremely bad. If it weren't for needing to stay in Jizhou for a few more days to wait for news from Madam Zhang, he would have already returned to Taishan.

Since meeting Zhen Mi, both Zhao Yun and Mi Zhu noticed the gloomy expression on Chen Xi's face. Though neither asked, they were both curious. Despite Chen Xi's previous explanations, they found them hard to believe. They couldn't understand why Chen Xi, who normally showed no interest in beauties, reacted so strongly to Zhen Mi. No matter how they looked at it, this was a big piece of gossip!

"Military Advisor, Madam Zhen and Zhen Mi have come to visit," a soldier came running to inform Chen Xi as he sat in his room, lost in thought.

"Let them in," Chen Xi said, dressed in white, lounging lazily on his chair. Hearing that Madam Zhang and Zhen Mi were visiting, a complex expression flashed across his eyes.

"Advisor, this isn't appropriate," the soldier hesitated. Most of the soldiers following Chen Xi to Jizhou were Zhao Yun's personal guards and were well-educated. They knew that meeting guests in a bedroom, especially female guests, was highly inappropriate.

"They will come," Chen Xi said, his gaze fixed on a potted plant nearby. Deep down, he vaguely hoped that his poor hospitality would cause Madam Zhang to take Zhen Mi and leave, never to appear before him again.

"Understood!" The soldier saluted, accepting Chen Xi's decision.

"Governor of Taishan County, Military Advisor to Liu Xuande, Chen Zichuan, you truly have a grand demeanor!" Zhang's voice came before she even arrived, now having secured the situation in Jizhou, she was vastly different from a few days ago.

"Have a seat," Chen Xi didn't even lift his head.

Chen Xi's attitude nearly made Zhang leave in a huff. As the actual ruler of the Zhen family, she had never been treated this way before.

Suppressing her anger, Zhang smiled lightly and said, "I've heard that Chen Zichuan is full of resourcefulness and never misses a target, always planning ahead. So why did you let go this time?"

"Aren't you here?" Chen Xi straightened up, his gaze sweeping over Zhang before finally resting on Zhen Mi.

"Just because I am here doesn't mean things will go as you planned," Zhang retorted coldly.

"Perhaps Yuan Shao said he would give you a hand. If I hadn't let go, in such a situation, you wouldn't have chosen that path. Your Zhen family isn't at the end of its rope. As a local family in Jizhou, choosing Yuan Shao is merely choosing your fate in the world." Chen Xi's eyes were cold as he spoke, "It's just a case of 'lending a way to extinguish a kingdom.' Until absolutely necessary, would your Zhen family rely on Yuan Shao? Who in your Zhen family can serve as a pillar? You'd merely be a target for annexation!"

"Aren't you trying to annex the Zhen family too?" Zhang sneered.

"There's no essential difference. You can choose Yuan Shao," Chen Xi's gaze didn't waver. He had already seen some familiar expressions on Zhen Mi's face.

"You!" Zhang was furious. "Aren't you afraid I'll turn to Yuan Shao?"

"..." Chen Xi didn't respond, simply glancing at Zhang before turning his attention back to Zhen Mi. However, the disdain in his eyes deeply stung Zhang.

"What does Liu Xuande want?" Zhang composed herself, using her authority as the head of the Zhen family to face Chen Xi.

Chen Xi withdrew his gaze from Zhen Mi and focused on Zhang. "We want to do business with you. We don't want Yuan Shao to quickly gain full control of Jizhou, so we need a spokesperson, and the Zhen family is suitable."

Zhang stared at Chen Xi without speaking. She didn't believe this reason.

"Don't underestimate Yuan Benchu. The combined strength of the Hebei families is no match for Yuan Shao alone. Where are Xu You, Shen Pei, and Feng Ji now? The defense along the northern front relies mainly on Tian Feng, and the southern defense on Ju Shou. Where are those confidants who took Jizhou?" Chen Xi might not have been fully focused on this matter now, but he had done a lot of preparation beforehand.

"Jizhou belongs to Yuan Benchu. It's just a matter of time. No matter how the Jizhou families struggle, they can't escape this fate." Chen Xi spoke slowly. "I only hope you families can hold out a little longer. As for the rest, I have no expectations. My actions this time are merely a wake-up call. There are too many ways to bring you down in this world."

"Is the Yuan family's power really at that level?" Zhang didn't entirely believe Chen Xi, but she couldn't help but have doubts. Thinking for her family's sake was an instinct for every member of a noble family.

"It's not the Yuan family; it's Yuan Benchu. In times of chaos, the strength of a noble family sometimes can't compare to an individual. The Yang family, with its five generations of high-ranking officials, was played by Dong Zhuo. The world no longer adheres to the rules of the noble families. For example, when I pressed my troops on Jizhou, if I had written to Yuan Shao to take the lives of over a hundred people in the Zhen family, Yuan Shao would have had to consider it." Chen Xi's calm words sent chills down Zhang's spine.

After a long period of contemplation, Zhang finally made her decision. Indeed, this was no longer a time for adhering to old rules. "Fine, I agree, for the sake of my Zhen family and all the noble families in Jizhou!" Zhang's eyes showed clear resentment as she spoke about the noble families in Jizhou. The Zhen family still needed the strength of the entire Jizhou aristocracy.

"Madam, you are indeed a heroine among women," Chen Xi said absentmindedly.

"Hmph, don't be so perfunctory!" Zhang said discontentedly. "Now let's talk about the alliance between my Zhen family and Taishan."

At this, Zhang's eyes glimmered. Over the past ten days, with extensive investigations, she had obtained the information she wanted. Whether it was white paper, white porcelain, or white wine, Zhang was very interested.

"Alliance?" Chen Xi glanced at Zhang, then turned his head back to admire Zhen Mi. After watching her for a while, he noticed that Zhen Mi had started to exhibit a slight resemblance to a familiar demeanor.

"My Zhen family is the top merchant family in the world," Zhang said with a trace of pride. Merchants were often looked down upon, but when wealth reached a certain level, perspectives had to change.

"Zi Zhong would disagree," Chen Xi said without lifting his head from watching Zhen Mi, who was becoming increasingly shy under his gaze.

Zhang was left speechless. The wealth of the Mi family had to be reassessed, as all the noble families believed. This upstart merchant family had gained everyone's attention after the battle with the Zhen family, and its wealth was no joke.

"You surely don't want my Zhen family to become a vassal of Taishan like the Mi family," Zhang said angrily.

"It's just not necessary. The Zhen family can establish a branch in Taishan," Chen Xi said firmly, unaffected by Zhen Mi's presence.

"..." Zhang looked at Chen Xi, then at her daughter. "Fine, it's settled!"

Chapter 135: Failing to Gain and Losing Even More

When Madam Zhang left with Zhen Mi, Chen Xi covered his forehead and took a long breath before perking up. "This matter is settled, and all things are in place. I should return to Taishan. I never want to come to Jizhou again."

"Zi Zhong, we are returning to Taishan!" Chen Xi called out loudly as he stepped out of his room.

"Understood!" Mi Zhu's voice came from afar. When Madam Zhang personally came to visit earlier, Mi Zhu had already understood that the matter in Jizhou was settled. Although sometimes he found Chen Xi unreliable, he had great confidence in Chen Xi's abilities.

Sitting in the carriage, Chen Xi silently pondered the events in Jizhou, finally confirming there were no significant loopholes. What remained was the contest between the strengths of the Yuan family and Liu Bei. Ultimately, it would come down to a real battle, where only Liu Bei's victory would grant the right to use the Zhen family as a strategic piece.

"Zi Zhong, did I seem somewhat ill earlier?" Chen Xi, dressed in a white brocade robe, leaned against the carriage wall with no semblance of dignity, resting with his eyes closed.

"Zi Chuan, if you fancy Zhen Mi, you don't have to act this way. With your status, proposing marriage to the Zhen family is unlikely to be refused," Mi Zhu did not directly call Chen Xi ill, but suggested that he should propose to Zhen Mi.

"It wouldn't be appropriate. Even if I married her, she would be nothing more than a vase." Chen Xi smiled bitterly. "Her demeanor is too similar to someone in my memory, incredibly alike."

"A vase?" Mi Zhu repeated, confused.

"Even if I married her, she would only serve as a substitute for someone else, which is unnecessary. In the future, unless necessary, do not let me come to Jizhou again." Chen Xi slowly opened his eyes.

"Using a woman as a stand-in for someone else is not what I want."

Chen Xi's cold eyes made Mi Zhu feel a piercing pain, making him understand why Chen Xi had lost composure upon seeing Zhen Mi.

"Military Advisor, the south gate of Nanpi is closed!" Zhao Yun rode back to the carriage and reported quietly.

"Oh, it seems Ju Gongyu has discovered me. Forget it, I'll go meet him. If the situation turns unfavorable, remember to follow the plan I laid out when we came." Hearing Zhao Yun's words, Chen Xi's previously bitter expression straightened, revealing a mocking smile. "Ju Shou, you're quite cooperative."

"Where is Ju Gong? Come out and meet me." Chen Xi stepped out of the carriage, standing on the shaft, looking towards the city gate.

"Since Hu Lao Pass, it has been a year since we last met. I did not expect the young man of that time to now be renowned throughout the land, having defeated a million Yellow Turbans. Would you care to stay in Bohai for a while?" As soon as Chen Xi spoke, the previously closed city gates parted, and Ju Gongyu appeared, smiling at Chen Xi.

"It has indeed been a year." Chen Xi casually jumped off the carriage, walking towards Ju Shou without any escort. "What teachings does Ju Gong have for me?"

Seeing Chen Xi walking towards him, Ju Shou also smiled in welcome. Nanpi City was already sealed. With just these few men, it was impossible for Chen Zichuan to break out. Even if Zhao Zilong was here, he would only meet his end under the onslaught of a properly organized force.

"Since Zi Chuan has come, it would be unbecoming of a guest not to see the host," Ju Shou laughed. He believed in Chen Zichuan's intelligence. Anyone who could defeat a million Yellow Turbans in a month

must be smart. Within a year, he had transformed the desolate Taishan into a prosperous place comparable to Jizhou's Wei Commandery. Such a talent could be called extraordinary anywhere. But after all, he was still young and could not change his youthful arrogance.

"Heh, now that I've met the host, Ju Gong, may I leave?" Chen Xi chuckled, standing just a step away from Ju Shou.

"Wouldn't Zi Chuan like to stay a few more days so I can show you proper hospitality?" Ju Shou replied, not giving any ground.

"Heh, it seems Ju Gong intends to detain me. You must have already investigated Taishan. My reputation for planning ahead is no joke," Chen Xi mocked, his left hand already holding a dagger to Ju Shou's throat.

"An assassin's means will ensure you can't leave Bohai City alive. If I die here, you, Chen Zichuan, will also not leave Bohai. Besides, Liu Xuande's foundation is weak. Losing you would be far more devastating than my master losing me. It might even provoke an all-out war, jeopardizing Liu Bei's entire base. I hear Liu Xuande is a benevolent lord and likely wouldn't bear the loss of his right-hand man," Ju Shou, ignoring the dagger at his neck, maintained a calm demeanor.

"If I didn't know this, I wouldn't be called Chen Zichuan. Those two should be Zhang Yun and Gao Lan, correct?" Chen Xi mockingly glanced at the calm Zhang Yun and Gao Lan, knowing Ju Shou had likely briefed them on all possible scenarios.

"Zilong!" Chen Xi called out, glancing back at Zhao Yun.

Zhao Yun took out a treasured bow from his saddle, causing Zhang Yun, Gao Lan, and their lieutenants to immediately become alert.

Ignoring them, Zhao Yun drew his bow and shot an arrow into the sky. The silver-blue arrow shot into the heavens and exploded in mid-air.

"This isn't good!" Ju Shou reacted immediately, urgently shouting to Zhang Yun and Gao Lan, "Zhang Yun, Gao Lan, order your men to guard the four gates and defend Nanpi. You two, return to the camp

and bring in reinforcements. Chen Zichuan, do you really want to provoke a war between Qingzhou and Jizhou?"

"Heh, the one provoking war between Qingzhou and Jizhou is not me, but you, Ju Gong. A gentleman does not stand under a dangerous wall. I won't risk myself for a piece of land. Remember, I'm still a guest here," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly, unfazed by Ju Shou's threat.

Chen Xi neither dared nor would provoke a war between Qingzhou and Jizhou, and Ju Shou likewise would not. Both were cautious, which was why Chen Zichuan dared to come to Bohai alone. Otherwise, he wouldn't risk himself for any plan.

"What do you want, Chen Zichuan?" Ju Shou asked coldly.

"Jizhou is prosperous, Bohai is rich. Since you scared me half to death, I'll take half of Nanpi as compensation. By the way, when Zhang Yun and Gao Lan gather their troops, Nanpi's city gates will be broken. The gates can't withstand the vanguard of my army without a proper defense," Chen Xi said carelessly. "Ju Gong should have let me leave earlier. Now, look at the trouble."

Just then, an explosion sounded from Bohai County's east gate. "Yan Ren Zhang Yide is here!"

"See, I knew it," Chen Xi said, grinning. "Zhang Yun and Gao Lan are great generals, but you brought them as escorts, leaving their lieutenants to follow. This disrupted the command structure of your army. An army without a commander is just a rabble!"

Ju Shou fully understood Chen Xi's plan now. If he hadn't tried to detain Chen Xi, the latter would have just left. But to ensure safety, he brought Zhang Yun and Gao Lan, leading to their lieutenants following, thus disrupting the army's command structure.

Chapter 136: A Miscalculation Leading to Unexpected Consequences

"So, how about it? With just a thousand men, I can take down a city, capture its highest commander, and send its defense into disarray. I believe Ju Gong knows well what it means for the city's gates to be breached," Chen Xi taunted, his face full of mockery. At this moment, Zhang Fei had only five hundred men, but five hundred soldiers who didn't aim to kill but to disrupt. With the command structure in chaos and the gates breached, their destructive power was immense.

"Hmph, Chen Zichuan, I admit your courage and strategy, but you've underestimated the Hebei generals! Just because you temporarily have the upper hand doesn't mean Zhang Yun and Gao Lan won't turn the tide once they regroup and return!" Ju Shou coldly replied, feeling heartache as he noticed several fires already starting.

"Relax, relax, Yi De won't cause too much damage. After all, Nanpi City is also a symbol of Jizhou's dignity," Chen Xi chuckled, causing Ju Shou to relax a bit. If Zhang Fei continued, the losses in Nanpi would be significant.

"However, Ju Gong's hope that Zhang Yun and Gao Lan can accomplish what you wish for is quite naive," Chen Xi opened his wooden folding fan, hiding his playful expression. "Nanpi's military camp is so prominently built. Perfect!"

As he spoke, a massive green light streaked across the sky from the western part of the city, followed by a slight tremor. Chen Xi covered his mouth with his fan, his eyes mocking Ju Shou.

"So, what do you think? But Ju Gong, please abandon the idea of taking me hostage. Unlike you, I don't have much confidence in survival here. Zhao Zilong has been watching, and the moment you pull out your knife, he'll split it in two," Chen Xi finished, retracting his dagger. Zhao Yun would handle guarding Ju Shou.

Soon, Guan Yu arrived with his five hundred swordsmen, escorting Zhang Yun and Gao Lan. He bowed to Chen Xi, "Mission accomplished!"

"Yun Chang, go stop Yi De. Don't let him continue the destruction. We need to hold Nanpi. It doesn't have to be for long, just one day. Even if Jizhou's other forces respond, they won't make it in time. The top commanders responsible for local defense are all here, and the command structure has collapsed. I hope Zi Yi can hurry," Chen Xi calmly instructed Guan Yu, his tone indifferent.

"Chen Zichuan!" Ju Shou shouted angrily.

"Ju Gong, please calm down. Once you've made a choice, you must bear the consequences. It's always been this way. I believe Ju Gong is not someone who shirks responsibility," Chen Xi replied calmly. As for

Zhang Yun and Gao Lan, who were sealed by Guan Yu and thrown aside for Zhao Yun to guard, Chen Xi showed great interest. After all, they were significant catches.

"Ah, communication methods are really terrible. Zi Yi probably hasn't received our message yet. Though I had him prepare, he's likely still at the Qing-Ji border. Truly a waste of time," Chen Xi stretched lazily.

"What exactly do you want, Chen Zichuan?" Ju Shou demanded angrily, sensing the situation spiraling out of his control. If Tai Shi Ci really marched from Qingzhou, Jizhou's army, without its top commanders, would be crushed, leading to Bohai County's fall and potentially altering the entire Yu-Ji war.

"I could ask you the same thing, Ju Gongyu," Chen Xi sneered.

"What benefit do you gain if Gongsun Zan takes Jizhou?" Ju Shou questioned furiously.

"It's better than Yuan Benchu. Gongsun Zan and Xuande share mutual respect and can be trusted as neighbors," Chen Xi mocked.

Hearing this, Ju Shou finally exhaled a breath of relief. Chen Xi was also wary of Gongsun Zan, which meant there was room for negotiation.

"What do you want?" Ju Shou asked, regaining his composure.

"I'll take Nanpi City with me," Chen Xi stated bluntly.

Ju Shou shuddered. This city had taken so much effort to build since Han Fu's time, and now it was fully established...

"That's settled then," Chen Xi smiled, turning around. The current situation favored him, and negotiations were unnecessary. He dictated terms, knowing taking too much could trigger Ju Shou's defense and collapse Yuan Shao's already strained defense.

"Yun Chang and Zi Long, guard the four gates. Nanpi City is quite large, and it's tough to defend with just a thousand men. Hold out for a day. Zi Yi must be rushing here under strict orders. As for other places in Bohai County, they can only stick to their defenses without orders," Chen Xi sighed. To Zhao Yun, though, his words were full of ridicule towards Jizhou.

"Understood!" Guan Yu and Zhao Yun responded in unison.

All the Jizhou families silently observed, making no moves. As long as Chen Xi didn't threaten their interests, they wouldn't intervene. Especially now, it was clear Chen Xi held the advantage. They had no deep ties with the Yuan family, and any disaster Yuan Shao faced didn't concern them. They could even mock the Yuan family later.

Madam Zhang, seeing the situation, was thrilled. Ju Gongyu was a well-known figure in Jizhou, and his ability was evident from Nanpi City's construction. Yet, here he was, outmaneuvered by Chen Xi.

Hearing about Chen Xi defeating a million Yellow Turbans had been shocking. But seeing this situation firsthand made Madam Zhang fully understand Chen Xi's capabilities.

"Mi'er, let's go home. Chen Zichuan might be a good choice after all. Rather than betting on others, I trust him more," Madam Zhang smiled, stroking Zhen Mi's head. "Mi'er, would you like to visit Taishan? How about we establish a branch there?"

"Taishan?" Zhen Mi nodded, having heard it was a place where emperors offered sacrifices.

"Mi'er, grow up quickly," Madam Zhang said, smiling. "You're so young, yet already have someone interested in you."

Zhen Mi shyly lowered her head, then hugged her mother, nestling close. "Mother, since Chen Zichuan left, it feels like home is as it was when Father was alive."

Madam Zhang remained silent. Through this ordeal, she realized her late husband's decisions were the wisest. The Zhen family had surpassed the stage of rapid accumulation and now needed stability. Their wealth was beyond ordinary imagination, and there was no need for the previous frantic pace.

Chen Xi was unaware that the Zhen family, after witnessing this scene, had decided to fully support Liu Xuande. His efforts in Jizhou no longer required years of cultivation. At this moment, the seed he planted had sprouted, growing stronger fueled by the Zhen family's resentment towards the Yuan family and Jizhou nobility.

Chapter 137: Exploiting Your Weaknesses

After seeing the silver-blue light, Guan Yu immediately ordered a messenger to rush to the Qingzhou border and urge Taishi Ci to come quickly. This was an arrangement Chen Xi had made as a precaution.

In all honesty, it wasn't that Chen Xi didn't want to secretly transport twenty thousand troops to Jizhou, but it was simply not feasible. Even the thousand personal guards of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were brought in separately, disguised as merchants. Transporting twenty thousand troops unnoticed was a joke; the commotion would be too significant, even in fog or rain.

The commotion from the breach of Nanpi City was loud enough for the entire Nanpi camp to hear, but no soldiers dared leave their posts. The reason was simple: without a military order, mid-to-low-ranking officers had no authority to mobilize the troops. The practice from the Han Dynasty still prevailed; they recognized seals, not people.

Moreover, if Nanpi City was lost, it was the responsibility of the city's commander. However, if the Nanpi camp fell, it would be a significant issue for the entire southern Jizhou.

Because of this, a strange calm settled over Nanpi City and the Nanpi camp. Despite the camp having thirty thousand elite veteran soldiers, and Nanpi City only having a thousand of Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun's personal guards, both sides maintained a strict defense, not daring to engage.

"Hahaha, Zichuan, look at the Nanpi camp, with its thirty thousand elite veterans, now strictly defending and not daring to fight," Zhang Fei joked.

"Ju Gong, your Jizhou soldiers are quite disciplined. In an uncertain situation, they still adhere to previous orders. Although rigid, they are difficult to break," Chen Xi commented, ignoring Zhang Fei and addressing Ju Shou.

“Hmph, we are your captives. In an uncertain situation, the army can only adhere to military regulations to avoid war. Even without our command, our Jizhou soldiers would still cause significant losses to you,” Ju Shou coldly replied.

Zhang Fei’s comment was good news for Ju Shou. As long as the thirty thousand elite veterans in the camp adhered to the formation and strict defense under mid-to-low-ranking officers, it posed a considerable threat to Qingzhou, ensuring heavy losses if attacked.

“Ju Gong can rest assured. If it were an easy prey, Qingzhou would have taken it. But for a tough bone, it's not worth the effort,” Chen Xi said, fanning himself. “Ju Gong, please stay for a day. Once Ziyi arrives, I will naturally let you go.”

Meanwhile, Guan Yu's messenger rushed to the Qingzhou border, where Taishi Ci eagerly awaited. Seeing the messenger, he was overjoyed.

“What’s the situation?” Taishi Ci asked loudly, galloping forward before the messenger could dismount.

“March to Qingzhou and seize Nanpi!” the messenger shouted.

“Mobilize the troops! March at full speed, no rest tonight, forced march!” Taishi Ci ordered. The previously prepared soldiers grabbed their rations and followed their leaders towards Jizhou.

As for the defensive troops under Ju Shou's orders, they strictly guarded their posts, not leaving to intercept. Their task was to defend their respective cities unless ordered otherwise. The defense of Bohai’s heartland was the responsibility of the Nanpi camp.

Ju Shou's approach was correct. Every county had limited defensive forces, and instead of risking them in intercepting, it was better to rely on the city walls for defense, buying more time. Moreover, if Qingzhou really aimed to conquer Jizhou, it would have to take each city one by one, securing a stable retreat path. Otherwise, any setback could lead to a complete collapse of the army.

However, Taishi Ci knew they weren't there to conquer but to loot Nanpi. With the messenger's signal indicating Nanpi was already attacked, he just needed to march in. Whether they could retreat was secondary.

Chen Xi had planned for a worst-case scenario, leaving Fa Zheng in Licheng to notify Liu Bei if necessary. Liu Bei could then use the pretext of an alliance to pressure Jizhou, though that was the last resort.

Fortunately, everything went as Chen Xi predicted. Ju Shou, consistent with his historical caution and emphasis on the bigger picture, was outmaneuvered. Chen Zichuan's youthful appearance made it easy to be underestimated.

Chen Xi exploited Ju Shou's cautious nature to outmaneuver him, showing his youth and audacity, forcing Ju Shou into a defensive stance. Ju Shou, seeing Chen Xi's evident pride, felt reassured. As long as Chen Xi remained youthful and proud, his ego would be his downfall. Ju Shou planned to inflate Chen Xi's reputation, ensuring Liu Bei would eventually see him as a threat.

Ju Shou didn't believe Chen Xi could maintain his composure under immense praise and popularity. With widespread acclaim, Chen Zichuan's youthful arrogance would surely lead to his downfall. Ju Shou intended to make Chen Xi a stepping stone, inflating his reputation until it became a burden.

Unaware of Ju Shou's calculations, Chen Xi continued to strategize. In these chaotic times, scheming was the norm, and every outcome was shaped by such plots. As obstacles arose, they would be met head-on.

"Ju Gong, why not join us? I think you're a decent person," Chen Xi suggested, eating a bowl of fried rice.

Ju Shou, savoring the delicious fried rice, felt his previous meals had been lacking. Hearing Chen Xi's words, he replied, "You don't genuinely want to recruit me, do you?"

"Just making small talk while eating. I wouldn't seriously ask," Chen Xi said nonchalantly.

"Then why bother?" Ju Shou frowned, puzzled.

"Just casual chat. We're not familiar, so it's a way to pass the time," Chen Xi replied, his words almost infuriating Ju Shou.

Chapter 138: Affairs in Jizhou Resolved

Afterwards, Chen Xi and Ju Shou casually chatted about non-military matters. Ju Shou couldn't quite understand Chen Xi's confidence, but he eventually chalked it up to youthful arrogance.

As the sun was setting, Chen Xi looked at the clouds on the horizon and smiled. The Taishan soldiers had the protection of the city, whereas the camp outside, no matter how well-fortified, would inevitably have its vulnerabilities—like right now.

"Boom~" A huge thunderclap echoed, lightning coiling around the dark clouds. Chen Xi used one dark cloud to push a raincloud towards them. However, as he pushed, it started discharging electricity, and it looked like it would start pouring before reaching its destination.

Fortunately, Chen Xi's actions were fast enough. Just before the torrential rain fell, he dragged the cloud over, resulting in the classic scene of half the sky sunny and half rainy. The massive camp to the west of Nanpi City was drenched in a downpour, while only a few stray raindrops made it into the city, carried by the wind.

"Well, this should make it difficult for you to launch a sneak attack. If you can still storm the city in this rain, I'll be impressed!" Chen Xi clapped his hands with a smug look, mockingly eyeing the panicking Jizhou soldiers in the rain.

As expected, the camp had no strategist capable of dispelling the rain clouds. Chen Xi kept the cloud there, and it rained heavily all night. By morning, the western part of Nanpi had turned into a swamp. Chen Xi figured that even he couldn't mount an attack in such muddy conditions.

Taishi Ci arrived just as dawn broke, having marched through the night. Though they lost a few dozen men along the way, considering the two thousand troops, Chen Xi was quite satisfied. Given this was the Three Kingdoms period, these soldiers could be considered tough veterans by Republic standards.

"Seems like I had good luck. Nothing went wrong on the way here. Hahaha, Ju Gong is indeed cautious," Chen Xi said, standing at Nanpi's south gate with Ju Shou, a smile on his face.

Hearing Chen Xi's words, Ju Shou's face turned as black as the bottom of a pot. If he didn't know by now that he had fallen into Chen Xi's trap, he would be a fool!

"Well, well, well, as expected of Chen Zichuan, a strategist unparalleled, planning everything against my mindset!" Ju Shou suppressed his anger and looked at Chen Xi with resentment. He had not anticipated that Chen Xi, whom he knew little about, would have such a deep understanding of his own character.

"Slipped my tongue," Chen Xi said, covering his mouth with his folding fan, a look of helplessness on his face. After thinking for a moment, he turned to the guard behind him and said, "Keep an eye on Ju Gong, make sure nothing happens to him."

After that, Chen Xi walked down the city wall, as he didn't have the combat ability of Lu Bu to jump down directly.

"Ziyi's arrival is timely. Let the soldiers rest and have a good meal before we proceed with the relocation. Jizhou is good at following rules. By now, the request for instructions from Yuan Benchu has probably reached his hands, but by the time he issues new orders and they reach the Taishou of Hejian, we'll almost be out of the border. Not having the power to make decisions on the spot is really tragic!" Chen Xi disparaged Yuan Shao as he spread his thoughts. This incident would surely shock Liu Bei, emphasizing the necessity of having the authority to make on-the-spot decisions.

The quality of Taishan soldiers was average; several of them, despite having access to the treasury, went to loot from civilians' homes, which was frustrating.

"Ziyi, Zilong, keep an eye on these men. If any of them dare to sneak into people's homes again, don't be polite—ten lashes to teach them a lesson. However, if a soldier wishes to marry a widow, that's fine," Chen Xi instructed Zhao Yun and Taishi Ci, signaling them to be lenient as long as the men didn't go too far. After all, they were there to seize grain and money; the victors couldn't avoid doing some bad deeds.

Chen Xi set up a tea table on the south gate tower of Nanpi City and, enjoying the cool northern breeze and cold tea, tried to soothe his mood. A true nobleman maintains composure amidst the chaos of war.

"Chen Zichuan, isn't this enough? You've emptied the treasury and looted the homes of commoners and nobility alike. What more do you want?" Ju Shou demanded angrily, though he couldn't part with the white porcelain cup in his hand.

"Well, if I had more time, I'd surely gather the people, distribute land, and exempt taxes for three years. Wouldn't that be great?" Chen Xi said nonchalantly, sending cold sweat down Ju Shou's spine.

Such a method was a sure way to destroy any opposition. In ancient China, land was everything to the people. Once they had land, they wouldn't let go. For a peasant, land was life itself. If Chen Xi did this, Nanpi would never be peaceful again.

"Alright, Ju Gong, let's go for a walk. We'll release you once we reach our destination. Nanpi is yours, and on behalf of Lord Xuande, I sincerely apologize. We have no intention of interfering in Jizhou. Please give us a way out," Chen Xi said with a gentle smile that lacked any sincerity.

A coachman drove the carriage with Chen Xi and Ju Shou. Zhang He, who had been knocked out by Zhang Fei when he tried to escape, was carried along, to be released along with Ju Shou. Gao Lan, also knocked out, was left in the dungeon, likely unconscious for half a day.

In truth, Chen Xi had considered persuading the three to switch sides, but during Yuan Shao's ascendancy, they would never surrender. Nor could he kill or imprison them, as that would mean formally intervening in the conflict between Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan, contrary to his goal of stable development and stockpiling grain and troops. With locust plagues and droughts looming, it was unwise to ignite a major conflict now.

Intervening in the Yuan-Gongsun war could lead to Yuan Shao mobilizing allies, turning it into a major war in the Central Plains. This would not benefit the fledgling forces of Liu Bei. Even if victorious, they'd be weakened, with the benefits likely snatched by the major players. It was better to control the scale of the war for everyone's benefit, for the sake of the people.

Watching the slow-moving Taishan army, Chen Xi felt pleased. War was not his forte; he preferred a leisurely life at home. With so much grain, and Lu's family exchanging books for grain everywhere, they could sustain a million Yellow Turbans for three months, enough to reach the summer planting season.

Thinking of the promising future, a smile spread across Chen Xi's face. Returning home, it was time to get married. He had a concubine, Lan Chen, after all.

Chapter 139: The Hidden Dangers Among the Lords

As expected, no one obstructed their journey, and Ju Shou's already dark face turned even graver.

Upon reaching the Jizhou border, Chen Xi invited Ju Shou off the carriage, "Please forgive me, Ju Gong, for the necessity of ensuring my safety. I believe Gao Yuanbo will arrive shortly, so please wait here. Yide, release General Zhang."

Ever since Zhang He was carried out under Zhang Fei's arm that day, despite knowing he couldn't defeat Zhang Fei, his gaze towards him was filled with resentment.

"Zhang Yide, remember this, one day I will repay you!" Zhang He said angrily.

"You've said that many times. Don't you feel embarrassed repeating the same line over and over?" Zhang Fei mocked while digging his ears, showing no respect for his ancestor from centuries past.

Zhang He said nothing, merely glaring at Zhang Fei. For the first time, he felt that besides commanding troops, personal martial strength was equally important. He desired to reach the level of internal energy projection, to never again feel as powerless as he did now.

Guan Yu coldly glanced at Zhang He, making him shiver. The divine blade light from that day still haunted his mind. In Zhang He's eyes, the silent Guan Yu was far more intimidating than Zhang Fei.

"Ziyi, Zilong, cover the rear!" Ignoring the looks from Ju Shou and Zhang He, Chen Xi gave orders to Zhao Yun and Taishi Ci. He didn't want to be ambushed; the soldiers of this era could collapse with just ten percent casualties, providing Chen Xi with little sense of security.

"Yes!" Zhao Yun and Taishi Ci shouted loudly, disregarding Ju Shou and Zhang He. To Ju Shou, it seemed as though the command was meant for him. It was clear that both Chen Xi and Ju Shou wanted to avoid war at this time, though the key difference was that Chen Xi, being younger, was bolder.

"Zichuan, you won this time. I won't forget this. But next time we face each other, I won't show mercy just because you spared me today." Ju Shou saluted with a stern expression.

"Heh, you won't encounter me then. I won't return to Jizhou." Chen Xi smiled and turned to leave.

Watching Taishan's forces retreat from Jizhou, Zhang He fumed, "Governor, shouldn't we pursue them?"

"No, those supplies are worth the lesson learned. This incident revealed significant hidden dangers in Jizhou. Chen Zichuan leveraged these weaknesses to achieve an incredible feat with just a thousand men. Shouldn't this make us reflect?" Ju Shou addressed Zhang He, having recognized the issues within Jizhou's military during this event. These issues were far more crucial than the lost supplies.

"The military and government of Jizhou must be reformed! We can't continue like this. We need the ability to make decisive decisions when necessary, or we'll end up as helpless as we were this time!" Ju Shou declared forcefully. Without this authority, such situations could recur. He believed Yuan Shao would agree for the sake of Jizhou's future, not personal gain.

Chen Xi, on his way back to Taishan, also pondered the problems in Jizhou, knowing Taishan likely faced similar issues. Even if these were suppressed due to their smaller territory and strong generals, they would eventually surface like in Jizhou.

Military and governmental reforms were necessary to avoid being toyed with. The thought of Taishan experiencing what happened in Jizhou was humiliating to Chen Xi. He contemplated solutions to present to Liu Bei, knowing Taishan's situation was slightly better than Jizhou's.

"Achieving balance throughout the ages is difficult!" Chen Xi sighed. Even temporary autocracy could foster significant issues, as it always nurtured ambition. Chen Xi couldn't guarantee he wouldn't be corrupted by holding absolute power indefinitely.

In this regard, Chen Xi admired Zhuge Liang. For thousands of years, only he maintained autocracy and control over military and government while remaining respectful to the emperor. Chen Xi doubted his own ability to do the same. The allure of power was undeniable, a trap that ensnared even the most resolute. Understanding this early on, Chen Xi avoided assuming control in Fenggao, passing on power to prevent giving himself any reason to fall into this trap.

Current circumstances, however, necessitated granting certain individuals the power to act decisively under specific conditions. This was the best way to foster ambition, yet avoiding this led to situations like Jizhou's monkey business.

"Forget it, let's not dwell on it now. After this incident, Liu Ziyang and Lu Zijing will surely notice the issue. I'll leave it to them to handle." Chen Xi looked up at the carriage roof, knowing he'd done his part by identifying the danger. Now, it was up to others to resolve it.

"Zizhong!" Chen Xi opened the carriage window, calling out to Mi Zhu riding beside.

"What is it?" Mi Zhu replied.

"Have your intelligence network closely monitor Ju Gong's actions and Yuan Shao's response." Chen Xi whispered.

"Zichuan, you could use Taishan's intelligence network. Why rely on the Mi family?" Mi Zhu asked, puzzled.

"Taishan's network is currently focused on investigating Yanzhou and Yuzhou. I don't want to overburden them. I only need the results for Jizhou." Chen Xi shook his head.

Reflecting on the hidden dangers and Ju Shou's intelligence, along with Yuan Shao's disposition, Chen Xi believed he understood why Yuan Shao had entrusted each of his three sons and his favorite nephew Gao Gan with a province during his prime. It wasn't that Yuan Shao was foolish, but he realized the threat posed by assigning territories to his sons and Gao Gan was far less than that posed by other commanders holding both military and governmental power.

Thinking further, by the time of Cao Wei, border territories were primarily controlled by members of the Cao and Xiahou families, with other commanders, regardless of their capabilities, sidelined. This indicated that by then, all lords understood the necessity of temporary autocracy in specific situations, but were also acutely aware of its dangers.

Chapter 140: Chen Xi's Governance Perspective

Thinking about this, Chen Xi couldn't help but think of Guan Yu, who governed Jingzhou during the Three Kingdoms period. This also fell under the category of military and governmental power in one hand. Liu Bei didn't have many sons or relatives, just two sworn brothers, so Guan and Zhang were the obvious choices.

From this perspective, everyone seemed harmonious, except for the tragic case of Yuan Shao. But Chen Xi also remembered Li Yan from the Shu-Han period. As a regent minister, he held both military and governmental power and proposed creating five counties as Bazhou instead of attacking Wei in Hanzhong. What was he trying to achieve?

For this reason, such matters required careful consideration. Chen Xi felt he had done enough by bringing up this issue in advance. From now on, he wouldn't need to speak further and would watch how Lu Su and the others would address it. Such dangerous matters were better left unspoken, as Chen Xi felt he wasn't adept at politics.

Three days later, Chen Xi's carriage finally reached Licheng. The rest of the matters didn't require his arrangement. Stepping onto this land, Chen Xi felt a great sense of security. Jizhou, almost an enemy territory, had always made him feel uneasy, no matter how cautious he was.

"Finally back!" Chen Xi's carriage passed through the gates of Licheng, and after the troops returned to the barracks, the war was truly over.

"Congratulations, Zichuan, on your victory!" Fa Zheng said sourly. Seeing the numerous supply wagons, Fa Zheng knew Chen Xi had won a great victory this time. The Napi treasury was likely emptied.

"It was a necessary move. I gambled on Ju Gongyu's mindset and fortunately won. Otherwise, it would have been troublesome. I suppose you also noticed the biggest issue in our military system?" Chen Xi said with a bitter smile.

"Stop pretending! If you hadn't guessed Ju Gongyu's thoughts, you wouldn't have taken such risks. Although the Zhen family is crucial for future plans, it's not worth risking your life. By the way, is Zhen Mi really that beautiful?" Fa Zheng first mocked, then asked curiously.

"Very beautiful, but there are countless beauties in the world. Zhen Mi may not be the most outstanding. When we return to Taishan, I'll take you to meet Mi Zhen, and you'll understand." Chen Xi paused and then spoke, remembering Zhen Mi's face. To Chen Xi, her demeanor was more important than her beauty.

"Mi Zhen?" Fa Zheng was taken aback. "Don't mess around. I'm a married man. I can't afford to marry Mi Zhu's sister, the sister of the world's wealthiest merchant!" Fa Zheng said, drawing out his words, clearly still influenced by his family's teachings. To him, merchants were still a lowly occupation.

"Put away that look. Your vision still has problems. It seems you need considerable education." Chen Xi glanced at Fa Zheng, then turned away, saying indifferently, "Until you understand where you're wrong, I won't appoint you to an official position."

Chen Zichuan never intended to overturn centuries-old thinking. How commoners thought was their business, but as an official, you shouldn't think in terms of who's lowly or what occupation is inferior. You should focus on how to make the people prosperous.

Whether through educating or keeping people ignorant, the goal was to ensure the people lived harmoniously, with enough to eat and wear, ideally becoming simple and kind-hearted.

In an era where giving a meal was a kindness, Chen Xi believed that officials' personal conduct was less important than their governance. Whether vengeful, greedy, or lecherous, these were secondary. What mattered was their ability to govern effectively.

Chen Xi never saw himself as a paragon of virtue. Imagine that taking concubines wasn't harming people but saving them. Imagine a landlord marrying ten concubines just to save ten lives. Such seemingly unreasonable actions happened during the Three Kingdoms period!

In 193, Qingzhou was devastated by disasters and war to the point where no one was left, and no grass grew. The survivors were those who ate corpses and plundered others. When Cao Cao later imposed harsh laws in Qingzhou, not a single commoner opposed him because, despite the harshness, there was at least a way to survive. To the starving people of Qingzhou, a sixty percent tax rate was not exploitation but a blessing!

For this reason, when drafting the talent recruitment order, Chen Xi nearly had Liu Bei write "appoint solely based on talent," but given the situation, he had Liu Bei write "appoint based on merit, regardless of background."

For Chen Zichuan, as long as officials could ensure the people were fed and clothed, minor transgressions like bullying or taking concubines would be overlooked. However, if an official allowed

famine while committing such acts, Chen Xi wouldn't hesitate to have Man Chong deal with them harshly.

In the current state of Taishan and Qingzhou, as long as local officials governed well, they wouldn't need to forcibly take concubines. For example, if Zhao Yun wandered around Taishan, any household he visited for water would offer their daughters to serve tea. If Zhao Yun showed interest, the families would readily consent, making force unnecessary.

Now, if Zhao Yun wanted to marry, any family would consider it an honor. Being an official to such an extent would be worth it, though Zhao Yun's appeal also came from being a handsome, single noble.

"Huh?" Fa Zheng was stunned. How had he gone from being favored by Chen Xi to this? Was it just because he expressed no interest in Mi Zhen?

"Keep trying. Once you understand, I'll recommend you for the position of Chancellor of Qi." Chen Xi patted Fa Zheng's shoulder and walked away.

If Fa Zheng couldn't change his perspective, he'd always be just a strategist. While this role was valuable in chaotic times, without military power, it meant nothing in peaceful times.

Sudden shifts in power would leave someone like Fa Zheng, who was vindictive, unable to cope. Retirement would make him resentful, but letting him handle other matters without understanding fundamental principles would lead to trouble.

"Huh?" Fa Zheng was initially pleased, then puzzled, scratching his head. He had no idea what he'd said wrong. "Oh well, I'll consult others. Heh, I'll definitely get the position of Chancellor of Qi!"