

Mythical 151

Chapter 151: The Importance of Educating Aristocratic Heirs

Liu Bei, unaware of Chen Zichuan's intentions, continued to greet Qu Qi with a smile. Hua Xiong's letter had already reached Liu Bei's hands, and naturally, Liu Xuande, who came from a humble background, understood the importance of grain to the people of the world.

Reaching out to help Qu Qi down from the carriage, Liu Bei treated him with almost the same respect he showed to Jia Xu and Li Ru. What was surprising was that Qu Qi's demeanor was almost identical to theirs—he bowed respectfully, maintaining a calm and composed demeanor without showing any trace of excitement. "Qu Hanmou greets Lord Xuande."

Although Qu Qi lacked the kind of calm that came from holding a high position, as Jia Xu and Li Ru did, his composure as an aristocrat was fully evident in this moment. It was clear that Qu Qi was a direct descendant of a well-established family.

Chen Xi frowned slightly, not because of Qu Qi, but because of Liu Bei's behavior. While being warm and kind-hearted could be a good thing, it was clear that this should depend on the person being addressed.

Qu Qi was evidently a member of a noble family, and a prestigious one at that. The thorough aristocratic education Qu Qi had received was displayed fully in his exchange with Liu Bei, making it clear that Qu Qi was undoubtedly from the direct line of his family.

"Is he from the Qu family of Yizhou?" Chen Xi mused silently. With his enhanced mental acuity, he could recall many details, and soon, combining historical records from his previous life and current circumstances, he speculated that this Qu family might very well be the predecessor of the Qu family that would establish a regime a few centuries later—a low-profile family that had inherited the lineage of the Hundred Schools of thought from the Qin Dynasty.

【This guy might actually be the head of the Qu family and possibly the one who is often referred to as the contemporary Shen Nong—a figure who experimented with new crop varieties in Chang'an without leaving a name.】 Chen Xi thought with a frown. It seemed they had caught a big fish this time. Even if some aristocrats were testing the waters with Liu Bei, it was unlikely that any family would send out their family head directly—such a move would be ridiculous! Of course, someone like Gan Ning was an exception; he was just there for amusement.

Liu Bei asked Qu Qi a few questions, and to his surprise, Qu Qi, who had been quite brash earlier, responded in a composed and measured manner. This shocked Hua Xiong, who had been tormented by Qu Qi's antics during the journey. He had been worried that Qu Qi might act foolishly, but the calm and steady responses now made him wonder if Qu Qi had been toying with him all along.

However, when Liu Bei subtly hinted at wanting him to join their cause, Qu Qi simply responded, "My ambition lies with the common people of the world. I only hope for a day when every household has full granaries. Instead of hoping for a saint to descend from the heavens to teach the people, I would rather rely on myself to instill in them the knowledge of etiquette and the sense of honor and shame. Therefore, I wish to travel across the land to spread my knowledge and ideals."

Liu Bei was left speechless. Was this man feverish? How could it be possible to teach every commoner in the world to know proper etiquette? Throughout history, countless sages had pursued this goal, yet who among them had succeeded?

【So that's what it is...】 Chen Xi finally understood why such a figure was remembered only in a small region. Most likely, he died before he could spread his wisdom. But thinking about it, this made sense—there were very few people in ancient times who could travel extensively and not end up dead. In this era, there were probably more wolves than humans...

Such grand ambitions could not go unsupported. Liu Bei immediately expressed his willingness to support Qu Qi's research, providing funds, land, and whatever else was needed. He suggested that Qu Qi could start with a pilot project and then gradually expand. As for further attempts to recruit him, Liu Bei refrained from pressing the issue—he had shown enough sincerity, and now it was up to Qu Qi to make his choice.

Having impulsively made such bold statements not long ago, Liu Bei was well aware that anyone who could calmly state such world-shaking ambitions would not be easily swayed by words alone. Only reality could teach him otherwise, and in all likelihood, even hitting a wall would not make him turn back.

When it was Cai Yan's turn to meet Liu Bei, he was much calmer. Compared to those whose influence could sway the entire world, a woman like Cai Yan, who was more suited to the realm of poetry and romance, held less attraction for Liu Bei. However, since they had taken the Cai family's collection of books from Luoyang, Liu Bei still invited Cai Wenji down with respect.

“Lady Cai, please.” Liu Bei said as calmly as possible. Cai Yan’s beauty was indeed stunning, and coupled with her scholarly aura, Liu Bei, who had seen few such beauties, found himself momentarily tempted.

“Greetings, Marquis of Fanyang.” Cai Yan curtsied gracefully, her refined demeanor further endearing her to Liu Bei.

“Lord Xuande,” Chen Xi quickly intervened when he saw Liu Bei becoming infatuated. “Please host a banquet to entertain our guests.”

【Damn, I forgot that Liu Bei has never experienced luxury before!】 Chen Xi cursed inwardly. Fortunately, Liu Bei was a man of strong will, and after being snapped out of his daze by Chen Xi, he quickly regained his composure and no longer fixated on Cai Yan.

“Everyone, please follow me. The banquet has already been prepared,” Liu Bei said, smiling warmly.

Naturally, Cai Yan was left in the care of Chen Xi’s wife, Fan Jian. After all, in the entire Fenggao, only Fan Jian had the status to host her; the others were either concubines or of humble origin, and thus not qualified.

As for the banquet, Chen Xi was now somewhat distracted. He had only considered Liu Bei’s ambitions but had overlooked an important point—Liu Bei was different from him. Liu Bei had risen from humble beginnings and had never experienced wealth or luxury, nor had he ever encountered truly stunning beauties. Thus, someone like Cai Yan, renowned for her talent and beauty, had a particularly strong allure for someone like Liu Bei.

【Sigh, he might even let beauty lead him astray. I was too careless. I’ll need to discuss this with Liu Ye and the others later. I’ll have to resort to some unconventional methods.】 Chen Xi thought as he sipped his wine, uninterested in the dishes before him. The best course of action was to eliminate potential problems early.

Chen Xi himself had no concept of being led astray by beauty or indulging in luxury. The reason was simple—such temptations held no sway over him, or rather, they did not exist for any properly educated scion of an aristocratic family.

Think about it—when have top-tier aristocrats like Yuan Shao, Yuan Shu, Xun Yu, Xun You, or Chen Qun ever been bewitched by women to the point of losing their minds? Ever since the story of King You of Zhou lighting warning beacons for a smile from Bao Si, all the great families had intensified the education of their heirs in this regard. Though this comprehensive education was costly, it was well worth it. After such training, most of the world's temptations were nothing.

Chen Xi himself had received this education in his previous life. Though he had to interrupt it due to certain circumstances, he had completed a significant portion of it. This life's Chen Xi had also received parts of this education when his family became wealthy, and together, the two lifetimes had provided him with almost a complete aristocratic education.

As for the next level of training intended for grooming certain individuals, Chen Xi had undergone it before being sidelined in his previous life. Later, he had to settle for the standard aristocratic education before forcibly ending that as well—because it was no longer necessary.

What he had once considered unnecessary, Chen Xi now realized was actually quite useful. In his opinion, Liu Bei was in dire need of some of this education. Splendid mansions, luxurious carriages, stunning beauties, gold and silver treasures—Liu Bei needed to have these until he could remain indifferent to them!

Chapter 152: Your Positions Have Long Been Reserved

After the banquet, Chen Xi personally escorted his two friends to the residences he had prepared for them. Meanwhile, Fan Jian took Cai Yan to the temporary residence prepared for her. As for Hua Xiong, he was kept behind by Liu Bei, who wanted to inquire about the events that had occurred during his extended stay in Chang'an, as Hua Xiong had spent an unusually long time in Yongzhou.

"Wenhe, Wenru, please." Chen Xi smiled and made a welcoming gesture. Without any hesitation, Jia Xu and Li You casually walked in, as if the three were old friends who hadn't seen each other in years.

After sitting in the living room, the three men casually chatted about the affairs in Yongzhou, and after some time, Chen Xi excused himself and left.

The next morning at dawn, Li You and Jia Xu appeared together at Chen Xi's doorstep. At Chen Xi's invitation, they entered his home.

“How is it?” Chen Xi asked with a smile.

“It’s indeed not bad. There are no spies placed in our residences. Liu Xuande is truly a man of virtue.” Li You stiffly smiled as he spoke.

“If that weren’t the case, I would rather remain hidden than expose myself to the light.” Chen Xi looked at Li You with a slight sense of pride.

“Let’s be honest—why did you think of having me and him join? You should know that if his identity is exposed, it could cause significant trouble. I don’t like putting my life in someone else’s hands,” Jia Xu said, frowning slightly. “This is far too dangerous. If I had any other choice, I wouldn’t have asked that question before.”

“Because both I and Lord Xuande need you. As for your identities, you are now Li Wenru and Jia Wenhe, and you’ve already washed away your past. With your abilities, maintaining this won’t take long before you become indispensable to us. Lord Xuande’s ambitions are vast. I believe that once we reach a certain level, even if your identities are exposed, it won’t matter to him,” Chen Xi shook his head, rejecting Jia Xu’s concerns.

“Lord Xuande’s ambitions are vast!” Li You suddenly exclaimed, eyes wide.

“Indeed. From the tone of his responses earlier, I could almost feel that ambition to unify the world—a spirit that truly befits the title of a heroic leader. However, it’s a pity his background is too humble, and his scope is too narrow,” Jia Xu first praised, then sighed as he recalled Liu Bei’s behavior in front of Cai Yan.

“You two are the only ones I dare speak so frankly with,” Chen Xi sighed. “Lord Xuande’s goal is to surpass the glory of his ancestors in every way. If he cannot achieve that, he will never covet the throne. This is his vow.”

Both Jia Xu and Li You were taken aback by Liu Bei’s ambition. They exchanged glances and then shook their heads slightly before Jia Xu spoke, “Ambition and resolve are not the problem, but did you not notice his earlier behavior?”

“A humble background, never having enjoyed wealth, and never having seen a truly beautiful woman—these are things I will address. It’s simply a matter of using poison to cure poison. I can handle it. As for why I had to bring you both to Taishan, one reason is that you are too dangerous elsewhere, and the other is that Lord Xuande needs you,” Chen Xi waved his hand, indicating that these concerns were not problems.

“No need to explain the danger. If you weren’t involved in the events in Yongzhou, I’d be surprised. As for Lord Xuande needing us, that’s true. To achieve Lord Xuande’s goals, one or two advisors alone wouldn’t be enough. You two, who have already proven your abilities to the world, are the best candidates,” Chen Xi continued.

“If those issues are settled, let’s discuss other matters. What’s your view on the current situation?” Jia Xu, satisfied with Chen Xi’s answers, asked this next question. Li You, having learned what he needed, closed his eyes and rested.

“I don’t have much of an opinion. I’ll continue developing my own territory while they handle their affairs,” Chen Xi replied with a shake of his head. He had no plans to interfere with other warlords for the time being, except for perhaps causing some trouble for Cao Mengde when he had the chance. But it was clear that he hadn’t found the time yet.

“If I didn’t know that you crushed the Yellow Turbans and pressed down on Ji Province at just the right time, managing to govern a poor region like Taishan into such prosperity, I’d suspect you, Chen Zichuan, of being a charlatan,” Jia Xu remarked calmly.

“I have limited resources, so I must prioritize. I believe if I governed Qing Province, the results would be even better. Steadily widening the gap between us and others, safely and effectively—why would I choose any other approach?” Chen Xi responded, unfazed.

“Indeed. Given the speed of Taishan’s development, your choice of strategy is likely the best. However, it’s a bit of a pity to abandon external affairs entirely,” Jia Xu said, clicking his tongue in amazement, as Chen Xi’s administrative abilities were truly impressive.

Chen Xi silently noted that he had left this very task to Jia Xu. Although Guo Jia was also suitable, his current primary role was to educate Fa Zheng, which meant that other tasks had to be delayed. If Guo Jia were simultaneously mentoring Fa Zheng and harassing the surrounding warlords, it was likely that Cao Cao would find an opening.

By assigning this task to Jia Xu and allowing Guo Jia to assist occasionally, the two could work together to ensure that even if they couldn't suppress Cao Cao, they could at least make it difficult for him to exploit any weaknesses.

"Wenhe, rest assured. Since I've invited you here, I've already made arrangements. When you visit the administrative office today, you'll learn about your duties. But please, Wenhe, do your best. Don't let Cao Mengde find an opening," Chen Xi said, fixing his gaze on Jia Xu. His greatest fear was that Jia Xu wouldn't put in the effort. Given Jia Xu's abilities, as long as he worked diligently, it would be very difficult for Cao Mengde to find any weaknesses to exploit.

"Hahaha..." Jia Xu laughed heartily but didn't respond. It was unlikely he would give his all, but Chen Zichuan's recognition of Cao Mengde's threat reassured him somewhat.

"As for Wenru, please continue as we discussed earlier, helping Lord Xuande address any oversights. Your health is clearly an issue, so I won't trouble you with other matters. Your experience is something we urgently need. Right now, everyone in Taishan is exceptionally talented, but they are still too young. If they act too rashly, please point it out," Chen Xi bowed to Li You.

He had brought Li You out of Chang'an precisely for his experience. As for Li You's abilities, to be honest, they might be top-tier, but compared to his experience, they were lacking. At this time, Li You was one of the few who had encountered various situations, from large-scale military campaigns to elite small-unit operations, cross-province campaigns, and even nationwide strategic planning. In this era, there were few who could match his experience.

As for others, they had never held positions as powerful as Li You's at his peak. Thus, during this period, even if Li You were to face anyone in the world, he wouldn't lose. While others might be brilliant, how much more brilliant could they be? This was the difference between experience and inexperience!

Chapter 153: Walking the Night Road Often Leads to Encountering Ghosts

The administrative affairs in Taishan were relatively leisurely. For instance, Chen Xi was currently napping in the administrative hall. With the warmer weather, he spent less time lounging at home. Of course, this also served as an example for the newly arrived Jia Xu and Li You—if he didn't show up every day, those two might not bother coming either, and one day, if he needed extra hands, there would be no one to recruit.

Naturally, this situation was somewhat pathetic. While some had leisure time, others were quite busy, like Liu Ye, who was furiously writing at his desk, and Lu Su, who was meticulously reviewing and correcting government documents. These two unfortunate souls had been at it for over ten days, and what seemed like simple tasks had driven them mad—it was far from easy!

“How are things going, Xianhe?” Chen Xi didn’t dare ask Liu Ye or Lu Su directly, so he softly inquired of Jian Yong, who was leisurely reviewing documents related to the division of Qing Province’s land. If he had asked the other two, they would have glared at him.

“It’ll probably take a few more days,” Jian Yong shook his head slightly, clearly impressed by how what seemed like straightforward administrative work had become so overwhelming.

“Oh, that’s good. If this continues, I might need to lend a hand. Ziyang’s planning is too meticulous,” Chen Xi shook his head slightly. Since it was only a matter of days, he wasn’t too worried.

The main issues in Qing Province were handed over to Chen Xi for printing after Liu Ye came up with a solution, so there was no rush. As for selecting the minor officials in Qing Province, Chen Xi distributed the printed books to over a hundred officials, leaving the selection entirely to them. Given the principle of shared honor and disgrace, these officials naturally made careful choices.

Li You coughed lightly as he walked in with a document bag, expressionless as he handed it to Chen Xi. “Jia Wenhe passed this to Lord Xuande, who asked me to bring it to you for handling.”

Chen Xi opened the document bag and pulled out the intelligence report, frowning slightly. “Hmm, there’s tea for you. Help yourself; I’m not moving.” He casually handed the teapot to Li You.

“Did Wenhe mention how to handle this? I recall he has the authority to deal with it.” Chen Xi thought for a moment and felt it best to leave it to experts like Jia Xu and Guo Jia. As for the still-training Fa Zheng, it was time for him to gain some experience.

“Wenhe didn’t say,” Li You replied flatly, simply stating the facts with no further commentary.

“Alright, then send someone to notify Yuan Gonglu. Since Cao Cao has set his sights on Yuzhou, it would be a shame not to cause some trouble for him.” Chen Xi squinted slightly. “Xianhe, do you mind traveling to Jingzhou as an envoy? As kin, it’s appropriate to congratulate Liu Jingxian.”

“I’ve long wanted to meet Liu Jingxian, one of the Eight Stallions,” Jian Yong said with a hint of excitement.

Jian Yong was known for his straightforward and easy-going nature. If he were an envoy of a minor warlord, someone like Liu Biao might consider him beneath notice. But draped in the prestige of Lord Xuande, even as an envoy, he would be a respectable figure.

“There’s no need to do much on this trip. Participate in the banquets and dances if you can. Oh, and take Wei Shuo with you—he’ll help you appear more like a man of letters. Remember, you’re visiting a friend, not discussing state affairs. Your presence in Jingzhou is Lord Xuande’s grandest gesture. After all, the world still belongs to the Han Dynasty!” Chen Xi thought for a moment and decided it would be beneficial to send Liu Yan as well. Let the world recognize that the so-called mighty lords of the Central Plains were nothing in comparison—enhancing one’s reputation across the land was always a good thing.

“This is quite an enjoyable task,” Jian Yong chuckled, abandoning his earlier worries about how to meet Liu Biao and persuade the officials of Jingzhou. “Hmm, this is probably what you often refer to as a business trip on public funds.”

“That’s about right. Anyway, once you arrive, Liu Jingxian will have to think things over. Whether or not he sends troops, it will significantly impact Cao Cao. After all, just by being there—even as private citizens—he’ll have to receive you properly. After all, you’re men of letters!” Chen Xi’s smile deepened as if he had just thought of something amusing. “Oh, I heard Liu Biao has three cups named Boya, Zhongya, and Xiaoya. Don’t hold back—drink him under the table, and if possible, knock out Liu Jingxian too.”

“...” Jian Yong was speechless for a moment, then burst into laughter. “Zichuan, make sure to give me some of your strong liquor. With fine wine and a refined demeanor, a man of letters has all he needs. I may lack the demeanor, but the wine will suffice!”

“I won’t forget. But don’t actually make Liu Jingxian drink three full cups—it could be deadly,” Chen Xi nodded but cautioned. He didn’t want Liu Yan and Jian Yong to get too carried away and fill all three of

Liu Biao's cups. Given Liu Biao's habit of not considering himself a true man of letters until he had drunk three full cups, he might actually drink himself to death.

"Wenru, please convey my arrangements to Jia Wenhe. I'll leave the rest to them. Meanwhile, I'm still pondering how to build a grand residence for Lord Xuande and select beautiful concubines. Do you have any suggestions?" Chen Xi turned to Li You. Recently, this had been his primary focus.

"Cai Zhaoji is a good choice!" Li You replied expressionlessly.

"Don't tell me you don't know Cai Zhaoji is already betrothed. Although the marriage hasn't been finalized, the wedding contract is set, and she's still in mourning. She might even observe a three-year mourning period," Chen Xi glanced at Li You.

"Cai Zhaoji won't get married. Wei Zhongdao is doomed. Her fate includes losing her mother in childhood, her father in her youth, and her husband—her life will be full of hardship. If I promise her a lifetime of wealth and honor, it will require someone's life to offset those misfortunes," Li You candidly shared his thoughts with Chen Xi. The three of them were like grasshoppers tied to the same rope.

"You're not seriously considering Lord Xuande, are you? If not for Cai Yong's incident in Chang'an, she would indeed be the best choice, but as things stand..." Chen Xi didn't elaborate, confident that Li You would understand.

"So I'm just mentioning it," Li You replied calmly.

Chen Xi nearly choked on Li You's nonchalant tone. After regaining his composure, he looked at Li You and asked, "How do we proceed? Give me a plan—you're good at this."

"Just let the various warlords know. They have no shortage of beauties, so it's only appropriate to foster alliances. As for the internal matters, leave them to the merchants," Li You said, his expression unchanged. He had handled such matters countless times before.

"Alright, then this task is yours. I'll focus on building the house. I'll show the world what it means to be truly magnificent!" Chen Xi habitually tried to pass the burden to Li You.

"I'm leaving. You continue with your work," Li You turned and left without paying Chen Xi any attention.

"Huh?" Chen Xi was dumbfounded, encountering someone who didn't fall for his tricks for the first time. Upon further reflection, he realized... it seemed... perhaps Jia Xu had used Liu Bei's hand to push the task he should have handled onto him. After walking the night road too often, he had finally encountered a ghost. [Those two bastards are old foxes! How did I fall for their trick? Could Jia Xu really not handle this? I'm doomed...]

Sure enough, not long after, Liu Bei's order came down, instructing Chen Xi to consider the situation in Yanzhou during his administrative duties and to pay close attention to the circumstances in Qingzhou and Jizhou. After all, Zhao Yun and Taishi Ci in Licheng were already in a standoff with Zhang He and Gao Lan. Chen Xi's previous actions had already caused the border between Jizhou and Qingzhou to go on high alert!

Chapter 154: Betting on the War in the Northern Lands

Chen Xi was far too idle. Many who saw Chen Xi leisurely going about his daily routine couldn't help but feel this way. Thus, Liu Bei, in an effort to maintain harmony among his ministers, had to suppress Chen Xi a bit, not wanting him to be too laid-back. After all, hadn't Lu Su and Liu Ye been working frantically, day and night, for over ten days now? Meanwhile, Chen Xi sat across from them, sipping tea every day—wasn't this just sowing discord?

"Wenru, why do you think Zichuan is so lazy?" Liu Bei asked Li You with a hint of frustration.

"It's human nature," Li You responded in his usual calm tone.

"Then why are Zijing and Ziyang so diligent?" Liu Bei continued, peeking into the administrative hall from outside.

"Because they haven't finished their work," Li You replied, his flat tone only increasing Liu Bei's frustration.

"Then why does Zichuan always finish his work?" Liu Bei grew even more curious.

Standing behind Liu Bei, Li You calmly said, “Because for most matters, Chen Zichuan has already thought them through, even before they arise. So when the issues come to him, he can deal with them immediately.”

Li You’s gaze remained straight ahead, paying no mind to Liu Bei’s cautious peeking into the hall. The phrase “appearing unfit to be a ruler” seemed apt for Liu Bei’s current behavior.

However, such words had little effect on someone like Li You, who had seen through the ways of the world and could almost achieve enlightenment. What does it matter what a ruler should look like? Who could define it? The notion of a ruler’s appearance was often based on exaggerated tales. Take Liu Xuande, who was currently peeking over the wall—he was the famed heroic lord of the Central Plains. Would anyone believe that?

“Hmm, that makes sense. Zichuan does like to plan ahead,” Liu Bei muttered without lifting his head. “Wenru, let’s take a walk around Fenggao and see if there are any problems.”

Li You nodded to Xu Chu, who followed closely behind them. Xu Chu was a straightforward and loyal warrior, beloved by all the ministers, especially after it became clear that his intelligence was somewhat lacking. Li You, in particular, enjoyed having him around.

Xu Chu scratched his head and followed them, sensing a slight hint of danger from Li You from time to time.

Back in the administrative hall, Chen Xi was growing increasingly frustrated as he tried to figure out how to obtain the most accurate information on the situations in Jizhou, Yanzhou, and Yuzhou with the least amount of time. He wasn’t fond of current affairs, as they required constant attention to the ever-changing political landscape—a task he found exceedingly time-consuming.

“Argh!” Chen Xi slumped onto his desk with a loud thud, drawing the attention of Lu Su and Liu Ye, who rarely concerned themselves with anything outside their work.

“Zichuan, what’s wrong?” Lu Su hesitated for a moment before asking. Despite being teased by Chen Xi many times, Lu Su was, at heart, a gentleman. He couldn’t help but offer assistance when necessary, even though he had fallen into Chen Xi’s traps more times than he could count.

“Zijing, how about we switch jobs? I’ll help you with Qing Province’s administrative work, and you help me monitor the situations in Jizhou, Yanzhou, and Yuzhou,” Chen Xi suggested, looking at Lu Su with hopeful eyes.

“... Ziyang, let’s continue,” Lu Su said, lowering his head back to his work. No matter how much noise Chen Xi made afterward, Lu Su and Liu Ye pretended not to hear him. Left with no choice, Chen Xi began kicking the desk, disrupting their work like a mischievous child.

“Zichuan, what exactly do you want?” Lu Su and Liu Ye gritted their teeth, clearly irritated by the interruption.

Chen Xi dropped his playful demeanor, his expression turning serious. “Let’s make a bet. If I lose, you two will help me monitor the situations in Jizhou, Yanzhou, and Yuzhou, and I’ll take care of your administrative tasks. The way you’re handling things now, you’ll never finish. To be precise, you won’t achieve the level you’re aiming for in your entire lifetime. So, how about it? Will you bet?”

“Are you saying we’ll never finish in our entire lives?” Lu Su asked, taken aback as he stared at Chen Xi.

“The combined population of Qing Province and Taishan under Lord Xuande’s rule has surpassed two million. The potential disputes and situations that could arise are far beyond what two people can manage. Although your intelligence is indeed extraordinary, the length of your lives won’t be enough to complete such a monumental task. Moreover, disputes will change over time—this is the nature of things,” Chen Xi explained with a smile. He had looked over the administrative work that Lu Su and Liu Ye were managing, and it was clear to him that the issue wasn’t that they hadn’t completed their tasks, but rather that their ambitions were simply too grand.

“We’re just gathering and organizing common disputes, not cataloging every possible conflict,” Liu Ye shook his head, somewhat unconvinced.

“Fine, I won’t argue with you. I’ll just ask if you’re willing to bet. Regardless of the outcome, I’ll help you finish this task, and it will be even more thorough than what you have now. How about that?” Chen Xi was tired of explaining and pressed them to answer.

“Since Zichuan is so interested, it would be ungracious not to oblige. What are we betting on?” Lu Su asked after a brief consideration. Liu Ye, though still pondering, quickly followed suit after Lu Su spoke.

“When do you think Yuan Shao will go on the offensive? Let’s bet on that,” Chen Xi suggested with a grin.

“And how do we bet on that?” Lu Su asked, frowning. At this point, the war between Gongsun Zan and Yuan Shao had only just begun, with Gongsun Zan holding a significant advantage. The fearsome reputation of his White Horse Volunteers was still unmatched, making any guess seem impossible.

“What about you, Ziyang?” Chen Xi turned to Liu Ye, who also shook his head repeatedly.

“In that case, I’ll make my prediction, and you can judge whether it’s right or wrong,” Chen Xi said confidently. Though he had only recently started reviewing the intelligence on Jizhou and Youzhou, he had just read about the Battle of Jieqiao. The fact that it had been delayed until now surprised him, but after analyzing other pieces of intelligence, he understood the situation. Originally, the battle should have taken place earlier, but the disparity in forces between Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan had prevented it. The armies couldn’t even properly deploy at Jieqiao.

It wasn’t until recently, when Yuan Shao, feeling the pressure from Liu Bei, took the risky step of dividing his forces to attack Bingzhou. With fewer troops, Yuan Shao naturally had to pull back his front lines, leading to a standoff at Jieqiao. The terrain there wasn’t very open, favoring Yuan Shao’s defensive strategy. However, considering Gongsun Zan’s arrogance at this time, he likely wouldn’t care about such strategic details...

Chapter 155: Stirring the Pot from All Directions

Gongsun Zan would never have imagined that while he was fighting tooth and nail at the frontlines, his supposed subordinate’s subordinate was already betting his future on some trivial matter. One can only wonder what Gongsun Zan would think if he knew.

But even if Gongsun Zan did know, he might have just laughed it off. After all, during the Spring and Autumn period, people bet on the fate of the world over a cup of wine. What was this in comparison? Besides, he never considered the possibility of his own defeat, just as Yuan Shao never truly believed he would win!

“Very well,” Lu Su said after a moment of thought. He couldn’t pinpoint when Gongsun Zan would switch from offense to defense, so he decided to rope Chen Xi into helping with their administrative

tasks. As for everything else, he could leave it to Chen Xi. After all, knowing Chen Xi's usual tendencies, tasks that were time-consuming but not particularly difficult would eventually fall on his shoulders anyway.

It's clear that none of these ministers were easy to deal with. Lu Su had his own cunning plans in mind.

Lu Su had done his homework on Gongsun Zan while gathering intelligence and had come to a rather grim conclusion. Gongsun Zan was a classic example of Zhao Wuling Wang—a fierce, aggressive warrior who, despite his early successes, was destined to face countless unforeseen challenges, especially against someone like Yuan Shao. Gongsun Zan's military background made him ill-suited for political maneuvers, and his stubborn nature only added to his eventual downfall. Lu Su could already foresee Gongsun Zan's failure.

"In that case, I bet that General Gongsun will be defeated at Jieqiao, and the White Horse Volunteers will be completely annihilated," Chen Xi stated coldly.

"That's impossible!" Liu Ye and Lu Su exchanged glances, both showing disbelief.

"There's nothing impossible about it," Chen Xi shook his head.

After spending so much time in this world, Chen Xi had noticed a pattern. The world's events unfolded like a strategy game, with him as the player able to control the pace and direction of the story. He could prevent certain things from happening and could influence the overall course of events, but once a key historical event was triggered, unless he intervened decisively, history would tend to follow its known course. By "known," he meant the outcome, even if the process differed slightly.

It was similar to playing a game like Romance of the Three Kingdoms. For example, in the infamous Battle of Wancheng, where Dian Wei was destined to die, if the player avoided triggering the event, Dian Wei could survive. However, if you merely delayed his fate by moving him elsewhere, the script would eventually catch up to him. The overarching trend was for Dian Wei to die, but as long as you kept him in the right place, you could avoid that outcome.

Chen Xi had roughly figured out some ways to strongly intervene in such events, but unfortunately, his influence on Youzhou and Jizhou was minimal. Although he had delayed things by a few months, events still culminated at Jieqiao. The moment he saw this name, Chen Xi knew Gongsun Zan was in trouble.

“Even if General Gongsun is defeated, he won’t be beaten so badly that he can’t retaliate,” Liu Ye quickly assessed the situation and voiced his doubts.

“Haha, General Gongsun’s biggest problem isn’t Yuan Benchu—it’s Liu Youzhou!” Chen Xi said ominously.

The two were silent. With their insight, they couldn’t overlook this point. Between Gongsun Bogui and Liu Yu, one had to fall. Given Gongsun Zan’s rigid nature, if Liu Yu lost, his only outcome was death. After that, it was inevitable that Gongsun Zan would be defeated by Yuan Benchu, who would capitalize on Liu Yu’s reputation.

“So, if General Gongsun loses the White Horse Volunteers, it would be a huge setback. But if he loses them and then has to deal with Liu Yu’s provocations, he’s doomed. My suggestion is to send Liu Yu to Chang’an. Do you have any better ideas? By the way, I’m also planning to send Taishi Ci to assist Gongsun Zan from a distance—at least to prevent the complete loss of the White Horse Volunteers,” Chen Xi said, tapping his fingers on the table.

“Even the emperor’s edict is useless in this case. The governor of Youzhou wouldn’t want to create trouble for himself. Even if an envoy is sent to Youzhou, Liu Yu would likely feign illness and not appear. Chang’an is just a quagmire,” Lu Su shook his head.

“We’re saving his life, after all,” Liu Ye said with a wicked grin, completely unconcerned that Liu Yu was of the same imperial lineage. “No one else can restrain Gongsun Bogui, but I’m sure our lord’s reputation will compel him. So, we’ll just forcibly send Liu Yu to Chang’an. As for the slander he might spread—hah, I doubt it would be worse than killing him outright.”

“Alright, it’s settled then. Ziyang, you’ll go to Youzhou and help settle this matter,” Chen Xi said, glancing at Liu Ye.

“Fine, now get started on our administrative tasks. The bet is on,” Liu Ye said, throwing his papers and pens towards Chen Xi with a laugh.

“Good, looks like I won’t have anything to do from now on. You there, Chief Clerk, come over here!” Chen Xi called out, finally noticing his chief clerk.

“Yes, my lord. What would you have me do?” The chief clerk responded respectfully.

“Send orders to all the county magistrates to gather and submit records of all past dispute resolutions to the Assistant Prefect Lu Zijing!” Chen Xi laughed heartily. “Farewell, my task is done. The rest is up to you.”

Lu Su and Liu Ye exchanged glances, instantly realizing they had been working in vain all this time. While Chen Xi’s method might start off slow, over time, they would have records of most disputes. The saying that circumstances change with time was true, but it didn’t negate the fact that every situation followed an underlying pattern.

Meanwhile, Fa Zheng’s young heart had been thoroughly shaken, and even Guo Jia had nearly been bested. To be fair, Guo Jia was half-drunk and not in the best condition to deal with Fa Zheng, who already had some psychological issues. But when it came to facing Jia Xu, who was clear-headed and sharp, Guo Jia was far outmatched.

“Wenhe, you’re truly a genius!” Guo Jia wiped the sweat from his brow, vowing never to drink before meeting newcomers again. He hadn’t faced such a dangerous situation in years—he had barely managed to hold his ground.

“Let’s focus on dealing with Cao Mengde. I’ve heard that Lu Fengxian has taken his troops to join Yuan Shu. Who do you think we should weaken?” Jia Xu asked calmly, though a cold sweat was also forming on the back of his neck. He had nearly been outmaneuvered by the drunken Guo Jia.

Jia Xu’s cold gaze swept over Fa Zheng, thinking this young man had potential and was worth cultivating.

Fa Zheng felt as if two cold beams had pierced through his chest, making him shiver involuntarily. He instinctively moved behind Guo Jia, sensing malice in Jia Xu’s eyes.

“We should weaken Liu Jingxian and elevate Yuan Gonglu!” Guo Jia straightened up, exuding an aura that rivaled Jia Xu’s. He resolved never to drink before facing this man again; the one in front of him was definitely no good.

Jia Xu glanced sideways at Guo Jia, who turned to look back at him. The two nodded at each other and grabbed Fa Zheng. “Xiaozhi, here’s your chance to put what we’ve discussed into practice. Do you understand what we were talking about earlier?”

Fa Zheng gulped and nodded. Guo Jia laughed heartily, “Good, my dear disciple, this task is yours.”

“Huh?” Fa Zheng looked at Guo Jia in confusion. Jia Xu glared at the smug Guo Jia, while Fa Zheng scratched his head and asked, “When did I become your disciple?”

This time, it was Guo Jia’s turn to look annoyed at Fa Zheng.

Chapter 156: Occasionally Taking a Risk

After skipping work, Chen Xi unusually didn’t go home. Instead, he wandered aimlessly around Fenggao City. The library at the Recruitment Pavilion had already begun construction—a library built to fortress standards. Alongside it, Taishan Academy was also under construction. Although classes had already begun with makeshift classrooms and the students were diligent, Chen Xi believed that if something was worth doing, it was worth doing well.

In Chen Xi’s view, when it came to building an academy, it should either be done properly or not at all. Unlike the makeshift thatched huts in Jingzhou, which he found unsightly, the academy should reflect the city’s dignity.

Dignity? Chen Xi glanced at the bustling commercial streets on either side, free from the filthy garbage and stagnant water that marred other cities. Aside from a few street vendors setting up stalls, the entire Fenggao City exuded an unusual harmony. Chen Xi thought for a moment and decided that the legendary elite troops could continue to lay low for now—after all, it wasn’t time yet. In this era, as long as the city streets weren’t garbage dumps, that was considered pretty good!

“Bang!” As Chen Xi was surveying his surroundings, he suddenly felt a heavy thud against his chest. Looking down, he saw a raggedly dressed child of about eight or nine years old who had fallen to the ground.

“Hey, are you okay?” Chen Xi bent down slightly, resting his hands on his knees as he asked, “Where are your parents?”

“None of your business!” The child scrambled to his feet and ran off without looking back.

“Whose kid is this? So rude,” Chen Xi muttered, feeling slightly annoyed. Even though his silk robe was dirtied from the collision, he wasn’t angry. Instead, he was more baffled by the child’s abrupt departure, feeling a bit sorry for him.

Chen Xi dusted off his chest, slightly irked. White clothes had the downside of showing dirt too clearly, but as a lazy person, there was no way he was going back home to change.

“Well, well, isn’t it Tan Zhi?” Chen Xi reached out and patted a boy about his height on the shoulder.

“Greetings, Uncle Chen,” Guan Ping responded respectfully, bowing slightly.

“Good, good,” Chen Xi replied with a strained smile. He wanted to tell Guan Ping to drop the formalities, but in this era, where seniority and filial piety were paramount, Guan Ping would never agree. Instead, he’d probably think there was something wrong with Chen Xi’s head. “What are you up to, Tan Zhi?”

Guan Ping hesitated for a moment, which made Chen Xi sigh inwardly. He peered into the alley and immediately understood the situation. “Ah, it’s just a brothel. Come on, Uncle will treat you today.”

Chen Xi didn’t care anymore. With Fenggao’s environment improving, even the quality of the brothels in these alleys had risen. The courtesans were becoming increasingly beautiful, and some were clearly the daughters of fallen officials. However, this was the reality of chaotic times. So, Chen Xi resigned himself to listening to the music and watching the dances, ignoring the tales of fallen princesses and princes—it had nothing to do with him. Unless he took a liking to someone, he wouldn’t meddle in such affairs.

“Uncle...” Guan Ping stammered, feeling embarrassed.

“Come on, what’s there to be shy about? You’re a grown man—there’s nothing wrong with spending time with women. Just tell me which one you like, and Uncle will take care of it,” Chen Xi said nonchalantly. His sense of propriety had flown out the window. Every time he entered a place like this, his sense of shame seemed to drop by the pound.

"Uncle, Uncle..." Guan Ping was stunned as Chen Xi nonchalantly walked inside. Left with no other choice, Guan Ping reluctantly followed.

Holding his intricately carved sandalwood fan, Chen Xi exuded the aura of a typical playboy. Since he rarely left his house, few people in Taishan had actually seen him, though everyone had heard of Chen Zichuan.

"Would the young master prefer to listen to music or watch a dance?" As soon as Chen Xi stepped inside, a madam approached him with a fawning smile. Despite the stain on his chest, everything about Chen Xi's attire and accessories screamed wealth and nobility. Even in a place like Taishan, someone of Chen Xi's standing wouldn't be dressed like a beggar. And as they say, even a marquis's face must be respected.

"Tan Zhi, just pick the one you like. Uncle's got this," Chen Xi called back to Guan Ping, who was hesitating at the entrance, with a mischievous grin.

Seeing that Guan Ping didn't dare enter, Chen Xi burst out laughing and dragged him inside. Guan Ping didn't resist—partly because Chen Xi was his elder and partly because he had a reason for being there.

"The decor is pretty nice, but what's upstairs?" Chen Xi asked the madam, having noticed Guan Ping's wandering gaze.

"Young master, your praise is undeserved," the madam giggled, covering her face with her sleeve. "Is there something in particular the young master is looking for? We have everything you could desire~"

Chen Xi frowned slightly. "Tan Zhi, do you want to go upstairs?"

"Ah, yes!" Guan Ping snapped out of his daze and quickly answered, though his embarrassment was evident as he lowered his head.

"I want to take a look upstairs," Chen Xi declared. Given his experience as a military commander, his commanding presence left the madam with no room to refuse.

As Chen Xi began ascending the stairs, the madam finally regained her composure and rushed to stop him. “Young master, please forgive me, but the upstairs is reserved today. I must ask for your understanding.”

“You’re looking for a girl, aren’t you? Is she upstairs?” Chen Xi asked, turning to Guan Ping.

“Ah!” Guan Ping was momentarily stunned.

“If you don’t speak up, I’m not helping you,” Chen Xi said, turning away.

“Uncle!” Guan Ping exclaimed, now visibly agitated.

“There’s something off about this situation. Courtesans are easy for someone like me to secure, but if someone upstairs has taken an interest in her, things could get complicated,” Chen Xi said calmly.

To Chen Xi, Guan Ping’s predicament was perplexing. It was just a courtesan—if you liked her, just take her. You’re the son of Guan Yu! Forget paying for her; just hint at your interest, and she’ll be in your bed the next morning. It was ridiculous how much people would go to just to curry favor in these times!

Hearing this, Guan Ping immediately understood. Sometimes, a man just has to stand up for himself!

“Please, Uncle, help me!” Guan Ping bowed respectfully.

“Watch and learn,” Chen Xi laughed, then turned to the madam blocking his way. A cold gleam flashed in his eyes, and the madam promptly fainted, knowing she couldn’t afford to offend either party.

Reaching the second floor, Chen Xi stopped at a door and turned to Guan Ping. “Watch carefully and remember what to do in situations like this!”

With a swift kick, Chen Xi broke down the door. Having trained in martial arts for over ten years, Chen Xi was no stranger to combat. Kicking down a door was child’s play for him.

“Ping’er, see if your girl is here and take her with you,” Chen Xi said casually as he scanned the room. Three young men sat inside, clearly from wealthy families, but to Chen Xi, they were insignificant.

Guan Ping felt a pang of embarrassment—he had never expected Chen Xi to be so brazen—but he quickly located the woman playing the qin inside and escorted her out.

“Not bad,” Chen Xi remarked, taking note of her refined appearance. It was obvious she was the daughter of a fallen official. Such well-mannered women were incredibly attractive to someone like Guan Ping, who had grown up in poverty.

“Let’s go, Tan Zhi. See? It’s that easy. But really, doing it yourself is a bit beneath you. What are you three looking at?” Chen Xi’s tone dripped with arrogance, clearly intent on causing trouble.

Chapter 157: Risking It with Principles

Chen Xi was typically not one to be reckless, but when he decided to let loose, he did it with abandon. According to his own philosophy, if you’re going to play the role of a playboy, you have to do it convincingly—if people catch onto your act, it’s all for nothing. Besides, Chen Xi was playing his part so well, and he wasn’t bullying commoners, so no one would ever suspect him of being involved. Moreover, by targeting certain people, he avoided stirring up public resentment. As for feuds between wealthy families, Chen Xi couldn’t care less—he wasn’t afraid of any trouble that might arise.

The three young noblemen across from Chen Xi were still in shock from his door-kicking entrance, but they quickly realized what had happened when Guan Ping walked in and took away the girl they had been eyeing. How could they possibly tolerate this?

“Stop right there!” A youth in a light yellow silk robe slammed his hand on the table and stood up. “How dare you take my girl!”

“Back off, don’t annoy me. Taking her from you is doing you a favor. For your own safety, I suggest you stop whining,” Chen Xi glanced at the young man dismissively, then casually opened his folding fan and fanned himself a couple of times.

As Chen Xi's gaze swept over him, a sudden sense of authority washed over the young man, a feeling akin to when he faced his father. It wasn't something to be taken lightly.

"Let's go," Chen Xi said, turning to leave. He could tell these three were from noble families, but in a place like Taishan, taking a courtesan and even roughing up a few customers wouldn't cause him any trouble.

"Get him!" As the young man stood there, stunned, Zhang Xuan had already stood up in a rage, yelling to the servants in the adjacent rooms.

"Clatter!" More than twenty burly men quickly emerged on the second floor, clearly the guards of these young nobles.

"Leave the girl, and I'll spare your lives!" Zhang Xuan swept his sleeve dramatically as he stepped out of the room, glaring at Chen Xi.

"My lord, please leave quickly. They are sons of great families—Yue'er isn't worth the trouble!" The courtesan, seeing the situation escalate, tearfully urged Guan Ping to go. Even when her family was wealthy, they couldn't afford to provoke these three, let alone now. To her, Guan Ping was just a naïve young man who visited her daily, and as for Chen Xi, he was nothing but an arrogant fool.

"Tan Zhi, take care of them. You can handle these guys, right?" Chen Xi said, snapping his fan shut and covering his lower face with it, his tone light and unconcerned, showing no sign of panic that Zhang Xuan had hoped for.

"Uncle..." Guan Ping smiled wryly but wasn't afraid. "Yue'er, step back. It's just a bunch of servants!"

"Hmph, just a bunch of servants? Get them! Teach this kid who not to mess with!" Zhang Xuan barked.

Chen Xi shrugged. Having spent time in the military, he could tell these servants were veteran soldiers. However, in a setting like this, where they couldn't form a battle formation, they would struggle even to defeat Guan Ping, let alone someone like Chen Xi, who was only average in combat skills. Sure enough, within seconds, Guan Ping had easily tossed all the servants down to the first floor. Despite his youth, Guan Ping was already at the level of a second-rate warrior.

“Guan Ping, rough up these three too. How can they try to steal your girl and not get a proper beating?” Chen Xi said, glancing at Guan Ping, his tone instructive.

“Huh?” Guan Ping was taken aback, but now wasn’t the time to hesitate. They had already beaten up a group of servants—what were three more? In no time, the three young nobles were lying on the ground, thoroughly beaten.

“You’ll pay for this! Our Zhang family won’t let you off!” Zhang Xuan shouted furiously from the floor, unused to being treated like this.

“Our Gu (Zhu) family won’t either!” The other two chimed in angrily.

“Oh? The three of you are from the Four Great Families of Jiangdong, and you think you can threaten me?” Chen Xi sneered, his gaze sweeping over them, sending chills down their spines. “Your family heads don’t even dare speak to me like that, and you think you can?”

Chen Xi squatted down slowly, his eyes locking onto Zhang Xuan’s. “Go ahead and try. Let’s see if I can’t crush your families until they can’t fight back. By the way, taking your girl is a favor to you—don’t push me, or I might just erase you all.”

Chen Xi’s calm, measured tone sent a cold sweat down the young men’s spines. Someone who spoke so boldly was either a madman or someone untouchable. This man before them was clearly not mad...

“Let’s go, Tan Zhi. Later, we’ll give these families a taste of their own medicine. They’ve been hiding in Jiangdong for so long that they’ve lost touch with the situation in the Central Plains. These fools don’t even know who they’re dealing with,” Chen Xi said as he stood up, shaking his head in disbelief.

Chen Xi wasn’t just looking down on these three Jiangdong families—he was disdaining the entire Jiangdong aristocracy. Their collective lack of vision and small-mindedness were appalling. While the Central Plains families aimed to unify the empire and expand their territories, the Jiangdong, Jingzhou, and Yizhou families were content with their little fiefdoms. Ambition and vision, when matched with intelligence, determined the ultimate height one could reach. It was no surprise that Shu-Han and Sun Wu were eventually crushed by the North.

Even during Cao Cao's most difficult times, advisors like Xun Yu, Xun You, and Guo Jia still called for the unification of the empire. Their unwavering ambition was evident when Cao Wei's forces reached the Yangtze River. In contrast, the behavior of the Jiangdong families was laughable to Chen Xi. Such weak-minded families—he could crush them without even giving it a second thought!

The three young men watched Chen Xi leave, their faces filled with resentment. They weren't yet the heads of their families, but even Cao Mengde had lashed out in anger before—what more could be expected of these three, who were far less capable and mature?

"Hmm?" Chen Xi touched his chest and realized that the money pouch Chen Lan had embroidered for him was missing. It had contained several gold pearls that were too valuable for common circulation.

"Today's really not my day. Looks like I'll need to tighten up on the petty crime in Fenggao City," Chen Xi muttered, annoyed. "Oh well, I'll write you a note. You can take it to the administrative office and get compensated for the courtesan's fee," he said, pulling out a piece of paper and his personal seal.

"Let's go, Tan Zhi," Chen Xi said with a yawn. It wasn't the first time he'd walked out without paying, though he hadn't done it at this particular establishment before. Guo Fengxiao often dragged him out without money, then insisted on drinking with the courtesans. Once Chen Xi realized Guo Jia had no money, he would usually slip away, leaving Guo Jia to figure out the rest. What happened next, Chen Xi had no idea—sometimes it was fun to mess with your friends.

"Uncle, we just beat them up—why are we paying?" Guan Ping asked, puzzled by Chen Xi's actions.

"We beat up those three, but the madam here is an innocent bystander, and we've hurt her business. Bullying these people is pointless. If you're going to bully someone, it should be those who think they're untouchable," Chen Xi said as he heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Turning back, he saw the three beaten young men had gotten up and were now standing on the second floor, looking down at him with smug expressions.

"Ugh, I didn't hit them hard enough—now they've made a scene," Chen Xi muttered, exasperated. "Madam, it looks like your place is going to get wrecked, but don't worry—I'll compensate you for the damages." With that, Chen Xi quickly scribbled a note and stamped it with his personal seal.

Chapter 158: Crossbows? Are You Courting Death?

Ever since Chen Xi kicked open the door, the scholars downstairs had started to quietly slip away. By the time the chaotic footsteps echoed from outside, there were barely any customers left in the brothel—they weren't fools.

"Young master, you should leave quickly. Don't risk your life for someone like me," the courtesan known as Yue'er pleaded as she heard the approaching footsteps. She knew things were bad. Typically, noble sons traveled with guards, and although some might shake them off, it was clear that this time the three young men had a whole contingent of bodyguards with them.

"Just stay there and don't move. Don't cry or scream. Have some faith in your man!" Chen Xi glanced at the woman. Even in such a tense situation, she was still trying to protect Guan Ping—a sign of a decent heart.

"You brat, let's see how many you can take on!" Zhang Xuan leaned over the railing, shouting. Ever since Zhao Zilong had single-handedly intimidated the mighty Zhen family, the noble families of the land had become wary. Their old household guards had been replaced by hardened veterans, not to defend against top-tier warriors like Zhao Yun, but at least to prevent being overpowered by ordinary ones.

"Seize those two down there!" Zhu Li's eyes flashed with a cold, mad gleam as he snarled, "I'd like to see what you can do to us. Don't harm that courtesan—if you want her, let me have her first!"

"Annoying!" Chen Xi snapped his fan shut and waved his hand. The air seemed to ripple, and the second-floor railing was instantly reduced to dust. The three noblemen on the balcony spat out blood and fell to the ground below.

This secret technique really is only good for self-defense. If I really want to fight, I'll have to rely on my own mental power, Chen Xi thought with some resignation as he glanced at the three men struggling on the ground. This technique might be effective against small fry, but against anyone stronger, it was just wishful thinking.

"Get them!" The steward, who had been hesitating about whether to kill the two men, flew into a rage upon seeing Chen Xi's display and shouted for the men to attack.

“They’re yours, Tan Zhi. If you can’t handle them, don’t blame me for telling your father,” Chen Xi said with a smile, though his expression was icy. The fact that the Zhang, Gu, and Zhu families had managed to smuggle nearly a hundred veteran soldiers into Fenggao City was a blatant provocation.

Guan Ping kicked one veteran into the air, turned, and punched another square in the face. With a swift grab, he lifted a soldier and hurled him into the not-yet-formed formation of troops, then followed up with a flying kick that scattered their ranks. While his attacks lacked the overwhelming force of his father Guan Yu’s, they were still impressive. However, it seemed he wasn’t going all out.

“Tan Zhi!” Chen Xi called out loudly, snapping his fan shut. “Use your real skills and stop playing around! The formation is almost complete!”

“Understood!” Guan Ping shouted, a faint blue aura enveloping him as he launched himself forward. The air seemed to tremble as his fist connected with the chest of the burly man blocking his path, instantly caving it in.

“Now that’s the power of a true martial lineage!” Chen Xi’s eyes gleamed coldly. In the narrow confines of the alley, large military formations were useless, so he had no worries about Guan Ping’s safety.

A dull hum filled the air, causing Chen Xi to freeze momentarily before instinctively expanding his mental energy. In the next instant, he detected the strong bolts of a crossbow and reflexively forced the bolt down.

With a faint thud, the bolt embedded itself in the ground at Guan Ping’s feet.

Chen Xi’s anger flared. Although civil officials like him had mental energy that could almost negate physical projectiles—since mental energy could influence the physical world, making it possible to deflect bolts as long as they were detected—he was furious that they had dared to use crossbows in Fenggao City.

“Heh, smuggling private soldiers into the city is one thing, but hiding crossbows? You really must have a death wish,” Chen Xi said, his mental energy flaring and causing everyone present to freeze in fear. “Tan Zhi, kill them. Anyone who doesn’t surrender—kill them all. If anything happens, I’ll take the blame.”

“Understood!” Guan Ping shouted back, his own fury ignited by the crossbow attack. Who dared to shoot at him in Fenggao City?

The icy aura emanating from Chen Xi made all the veteran soldiers feel a deep sense of dread. But it was too late to turn back now—they could only grit their teeth and fight. Guan Ping’s attacks, once tempered, now unleashed their full lethality, each move filled with deadly intent.

“What’s happening up ahead?” Liu Bei asked as he, Li Ru, and Xu Chu were inspecting the city. A commotion was brewing just ahead.

“Murder!” Just as Liu Bei began to inquire, a loud shout rang out from the front.

“Murder!” Liu Bei was stunned, then his anger surged. Someone was killing on his turf—did they have no respect for him?

“Zhongkang, clear the way and arrest everyone involved!” Liu Bei commanded furiously. His earlier good mood, bolstered by the prosperity of Fenggao’s new city, was shattered by this cry of murder.

“Lord Xuande, please remain calm. There’s always a reason for killing. The authorities have their duties, and the righteous have their code,” Li Ru said calmly. He was certain there must be some justification for such a brazen act, and he felt Liu Bei was overreacting.

“...” Liu Bei hesitated, then recalled Guan Yu’s situation and nodded. “Law should never override compassion. Let’s see what’s happening first. Zhongkang, go arrest those involved!”

“Make way! Xu Zhongkang is here!” Xu Chu bellowed, then leaped over the crowd and charged into the alley. He found a group of veterans in combat and quickly powered through them, toppling the remaining soldiers in seconds.

“Huh...” Xu Chu stared in shock at the blood-soaked Guan Ping. As Liu Bei’s only nephew, how could Xu Chu not recognize him?

"Zhongkang, drag those three out, arrest all these servants, and bring this with us!" Chen Xi yanked the crossbow bolt out of the stone floor and held it up. "Let's go, Tan Zhi. Bring your woman—we're meeting Lord Xuande."

"Uncle, should I really go like this?" Guan Ping asked, a bit fearful.

"What are you afraid of? You've only killed a few people. I've crushed tens of thousands in Qingzhou," Chen Xi sneered. Today's events, from the pickpocketing to the clash with the Jiangdong families, had reminded Chen Xi that there was still something he hadn't done!

"Zhongkang, tell that madam to register with the assistant prefect. I'll compensate her for the damages to her shop. And keep an eye on these bastards—Jiangdong's three families, huh. Hmph!" A cold light flashed in Chen Xi's eyes. Using crossbows inside the city—what were they thinking?

"Tan Zhi?" Liu Bei was startled to see Guan Ping, covered in blood, appear before him. "Are you hurt? How did you get into a fight and end up like this? What happened?"

Liu Bei quickly checked Guan Ping over, only relaxing once he confirmed his nephew was uninjured. With so few relatives, any harm to Guan Ping would have been a serious blow.

Chapter 159: Trying Out a New Household Registration System

Seeing that Guan Ping was unharmed, Liu Bei immediately put on a stern face. "Explain what happened. How did you get into a fight?"

"Lord Xuande, don't blame Tan Zhi. We have him to thank today; otherwise, several hundred Jiangdong soldiers would have entered Fenggao without anyone noticing. And they even dared to bring this in!" As Liu Bei was questioning Guan Ping, Chen Xi emerged from the alley, his eyes cold as he spoke. He then tossed the crossbow bolt to Liu Bei.

"A crossbow!" Liu Bei recognized it immediately upon touching it, and his anger flared up. "Wenru, send orders to Yun Chang and Yi De to seal the city gates. We must investigate these assassins thoroughly and let no one involved escape!"

The situation was thus defined. Even if the three Jiangdong families caused a ruckus afterward, they would not be able to overturn the verdict. At most, they could pay a ransom to get their men back. But once labeled as assassins, that label would stick, no matter how much noise they made. Possession of a crossbow in this era was no trivial matter—just like when Zhou Yafu's family was exterminated for secretly keeping armor, though there were other reasons, the crossbow was a serious offense.

Soon after, Xu Chu descended from the sky, carrying a man in his grip. Seeing the disassembled crossbow nearby, Chen Xi couldn't help but give a thumbs-up. It didn't take long for the professionals to apprehend the criminal.

"Throw them all in prison, and we'll interrogate them later!" Liu Bei ordered with a cold expression. Bringing crossbows into the city—what were they trying to do? Were the Jiangdong families seeking death? It's one thing to keep weapons in their own territories secretly, but bringing them here was a blatant challenge to authority.

"Oh, and who is this?" Liu Bei asked curiously, noticing the young woman who, despite her appearance resembling that of a noble lady, was clearly dressed inappropriately.

"Tan Zhi's concubine," Chen Xi said nonchalantly, stifling a yawn.

"N-no, not at all..." Guan Ping stammered, flustered.

"What are you afraid of? It's just a concubine. Do you think your uncle would harm you?" Liu Bei clapped Guan Ping on the shoulder. "Don't worry. With what you did today, your father won't say a word against you. You're still young, and like Chen Xi said, 'A crown of anger for a beauty.' What's there to fear? Stand tall. As my nephew, you shouldn't be afraid of anything! No matter how big the issue, your elders will back you up!"

Guan Ping blushed, nodding repeatedly like a pecking chick. Meanwhile, the courtesan known as Yue'er felt a storm of emotions surging within her.

Su Yue had never imagined that the honest-looking youth who had been visiting her was actually Liu Xuande's nephew. Who was Liu Xuande? Before being sold off, Su Yue had no idea. But after settling in Taishan, the title of the "Central Plains Hero" Liu Xuande had filled her ears. With all the rumors and stories, Su Yue was well aware of this benevolent elder's power. He was like one of the hegemonic lords

in the historical tales she used to read. Even when she was still a noble lady, she would have been far below his family's standing.

"Your servant Su Yue greets the Marquis of Fanyang," Su Yue said, bowing deeply.

"Rise," Liu Bei said gently. "Tan Zhi, you have good taste. Take her home; I'll talk to your father for you."

Guan Ping was overjoyed. He had been lingering around because he feared his father wouldn't approve. Otherwise, he would have taken her home long ago. Although Guan Ping was somewhat dull, he wasn't stupid. As Chen Xi had mentioned earlier, just hinting at his interest would have been enough for the girl to be in his bed the next day. But doing so would have earned him a severe beating from his father.

Given how things had played out today, Guan Ping was grateful he had charged in. Everything had worked out, and he realized that while his Uncle Chen could be unreliable at times, he was quite capable.

"Go on now. You won't enjoy yourself with me around. Don't be so stiff—go on," Liu Bei said, waving him off, signaling that Guan Ping didn't need to keep up the act in his presence.

"And you, Zichuan, what are you doing here? This is a brothel, isn't it?" Liu Bei asked, then seemed to remember something, looking at Chen Xi with some frustration. "What's going on with you and Fengxiao? I arranged for plenty of singers and dancers for you, so why are you still hanging around places like this? I've heard from Baining many times that you two once left without paying and got caught. And aren't you supposed to be working on your official duties?"

Chen Xi felt a bit embarrassed, caught skipping work by his boss at the entrance of a brothel, discussing how he had once skipped out on paying—this was a new low.

"I was investigating the people's sentiments when I saw Tan Zhi lurking here, so I brought him in. But then this whole mess happened," Chen Xi explained, making up a reason on the spot.

"Enough. Lord Xuande, let's talk as we walk. The administrative duties you assigned me aren't difficult, but today's events made me realize some issues. We need to establish a few positions under your

command to handle the affairs of Qingzhou and Taishan," Chen Xi said as he led the way, quickly moving Liu Bei away from the scene.

As Chen Xi spoke, Liu Bei was left amazed, and even Li Ru, who was walking alongside them, found himself impressed by the governance system and household registration system Chen Xi proposed. With all his years of experience, Li Ru couldn't spot any flaws. Chen Zichuan truly was a genius.

Seeing how beneficial this new system would be for governing his territory, Liu Bei quickly shifted his focus from Chen Xi and Guo Jia's antics to carefully listening to the details. He memorized the points he didn't understand, planning to ask more questions later.

"That about sums it up. This should resolve the issues with spies, hidden agents, corvée labor, population control, and other related problems," Chen Xi concluded, his throat dry from speaking so much. He was confident that while Liu Bei could sense the system's benefits, he probably didn't fully grasp the complexities. Even Chen Xi couldn't perfectly explain the intricacies of the Ming Dynasty's household registration system—he could only ensure the key elements were in place. If Liu Bei could fully understand it, there wouldn't be a need for advisors like them.

Chen Xi glanced sideways at Li Ru, who was clearly deep in thought. It was obvious that Li Ru was intrigued by the household registration system, though unlike Liu Bei, he wasn't excited—he was more focused on finding potential flaws.

Chen Xi wasn't worried in the slightest. The Ming Dynasty's household registration system had its issues, such as difficulties in relocating and changing one's registration, but other than that, it was superior even to modern systems. Let alone the late Eastern Han period, two thousand years ago!

The efforts of countless wise men over nearly two millennia had gone into developing this system. Even if Li Ru had the foresight to see the future, it would be nearly impossible for him to find any major flaws!

Chapter 160: Preparing the Administrative Structure for the Office

Li Ru could guarantee that he had never encountered a household registration system similar to the one Chen Xi proposed. As he thought it through, he couldn't find a single flaw. Back in Luoyang, he had been someone who had a firm grasp on all the intrigues of the world, having seen and understood everything. Even he had to admit that the system Chen Xi introduced was far superior to the current one.

"Zichuan certainly came prepared!" Liu Bei remarked with a smile. "Wenru, did you note down the system that Zichuan described?"

"I've noted everything down. The overall system surpasses the current household registration system by far, especially in terms of controlling the populace and managing the flow of refugees. It also facilitates the control of foreign populations," Li Ru replied with a stoic expression.

"Good. Zichuan, draft a formal proposal of your household registration system and hand it over to Wenru. Then, let Zijing and others review it to catch any potential issues," Liu Bei said, now assured that Li Ru had captured all the details. He no longer felt the need to keep pressing Chen Xi.

In Liu Bei's view, although Li Ru wasn't one for many words, whenever he did speak, his points were always spot on. His broad perspective and calm demeanor, regardless of the situation, always carried insightful opinions. Most importantly, Li Ru was the kind of person who blended into the background unless directly addressed by Liu Bei, making him an incredibly convenient presence. Liu Bei had already grown accustomed to having him around.

"Alright," Chen Xi replied, feeling a bit worn out. After talking so much, his throat was dry, and he had lost any desire to continue walking in circles with Liu Bei.

After bowing to Liu Bei, Chen Xi took his leave. Sometimes, a young man just needs to rest, and right now, Chen Xi felt incredibly drowsy. The thought of organizing the entire household registration system from the Ming Dynasty and the three departments and six ministries system from the Tang Dynasty seemed exhausting to him. Although these systems were well-established and just needed to be written down, once fatigue sets in, it can be hard to find the energy for anything.

"Wenru, why does Zichuan seem so dazed every afternoon? Sometimes he even falls asleep in the administrative office. When I asked him before, he said he had insomnia at night, but I later found out that he sleeps soundly. Why does he always seem so tired during the day?" Liu Bei asked, frustrated with Chen Xi's lazy nature.

"Some people think too much and have to make decisions, which drains their mental energy, making them seem constantly tired," Li Ru replied expressionlessly. As he spoke, he continued to ponder the household registration system, comparing it to the flaws in the current system and considering the situations in Taishan and Qingzhou. Being able to focus on multiple things at once was a skill he had honed over many years under Dong Zhuo.

"That makes sense, I suppose. Zichuan is always thinking about the future, and most current affairs were prepared for long in advance. But it seems like Zichuan isn't very good at handling sudden crises," Liu Bei mused, looking up at the sky and sighing. Reflecting on the arrangements for Qingzhou and Taishan, it became clear that Chen Xi had started preparing for these on the road to Taishan—his focus was always on the future.

"No, Lord Xuande, it's quite the opposite. Zichuan is very adept at handling sudden crises, but because of certain reasons, he rarely needs to," Li Ru countered, shaking his head.

Li Ru had taken the time to understand Chen Xi and found himself even more intrigued by what he discovered. Chen Xi excelled at leveraging situations, taking advantage of trends. It seemed as though every major event worked in his favor. He seldom resorted to scheming, instead relying on the momentum of larger trends to push situations in his favor. By doing so, he ensured that the outcome was almost always preordained, making it impossible for any sudden event to alter the course of events. In Chen Xi's world, no matter what unexpected crisis arose or how it was handled, it was of little consequence.

Take, for instance, the time Chen Xi subdued the Zhen family in Jizhou. At that moment, no matter what Chen Xi did, the outcome wouldn't have changed. Even if Ju Shou had offered silver as a bribe, it wouldn't have altered the situation because the Zhen family had no other options left. Aligning with Yuan's family would have left them with nothing. Their only glimmer of hope lay with Chen Xi—Liu Xuande's influence hadn't yet reached Jizhou, so the Zhen family still had a chance to turn things around by siding with Chen Xi.

In Li Ru's view, it wasn't that Chen Zichuan lacked the ability to handle sudden crises; rather, he accounted for them in his plans, ensuring that no loose ends remained. Li Ru believed that either Chen Xi had previously suffered from having his schemes exposed, or he was simply too lazy to deal with things twice. Based on his understanding, Li Ru leaned toward the latter—Chen Xi preferred to handle things in one go to save time for more sleep...

Liu Bei fell silent for a long time after hearing Li Ru's explanation. Finally, he sighed deeply. "Wenru, you're right. Zichuan probably does try to handle everything in one go to save time for sleep. What a character..."

Although Liu Bei sighed, he felt reassured. He was confident in both Chen Xi's abilities and his temperament. With Chen Zichuan's personality, rebellion was out of the question. He was much better suited to being a marquis in a peaceful era, spending his days comfortably at home.

Chen Xi wandered back to his house, hesitated for a moment, then decided to do what Xia Yu had done—he didn't go inside and headed straight to the administrative office. Liu Bei might not have fully understood, but there were two people here who would. Although they had taken a heavy blow earlier, they had also been liberated from the tedious administrative work and were now happily enjoying tea and bean cakes.

"Time to get to work, fellas. There's more to be done," Chen Xi shouted as he entered the office, where the two men were treating the administrative hall like a teahouse.

"What is it this time, Zichuan? You're not going to dump more work on us, are you?" Lu Su choked on a bean cake when Chen Xi patted him on the shoulder, nearly choking. After gulping down a large cup of tea, he glared at Chen Xi and asked.

"Not exactly. Lord Xuande wants you two to refine the new household registration system and the administrative structure needed to establish the office. I've already sketched out the basics; you just need to check for any flaws," Chen Xi replied calmly.

Both men were aware that Liu Bei intended to establish his own office and knew that, as a marquis, General of the Eastern Command, and Governor of Qingzhou, coupled with his imperial lineage, Liu Xie had approved Liu Bei's request to set up his own administrative structure. Therefore, preparing a new governance system wasn't out of place.

"In that case, Zichuan, please proceed," Lu Su and Liu Ye sighed in unison. They knew Chen Xi had come to delegate part of his workload to them, but given Chen Xi's habits, they wouldn't be able to avoid it. Since they couldn't change the reality, they might as well grin and bear it.