

Mythical 161

Chapter 161: Household Registration and Agricultural Taxation

Chen Xi had considered various household registration systems, but after much deliberation, he finally settled on the system from the Ming Dynasty. It was arguably the most comprehensive system since ancient times, despite some of its less harmonious aspects. The Ming Dynasty's household registration system offered significant advantages in taxation, population management, and corvée labor.

Whether it was the "household certificate," which was akin to a 21st-century household registration booklet, or the way household registration was managed, the system was highly advanced.

Firstly, the household certificate not only recorded the names and origins of the family members but also listed their assets. Only the assets registered in the household certificate were recognized and protected by law. Anything not listed would be difficult to claim if stolen, making this document quite useful.

The system also divided households into different categories: civilian households, military households, and artisan households, each managed by a different government department—Household, Military, and Works Ministries respectively. This categorization didn't affect one's ability to become an official; as long as someone was capable, they could still rise to a governmental position. The primary purpose of the household registration was to categorize, and since most people inherited their family trade in ancient times, this binding registration generally didn't have much negative impact. In fact, many elders were pleased with it, as it reinforced the tradition of children following in their parents' footsteps.

Next, there was the "Li-Jia" system within the civilian households, where 110 households were grouped into a "Li." The ten households most skilled in farming were appointed as Li leaders, while the remaining 100 households were divided into ten Jia.

During times of corvée labor, a Li leader would lead a Jia leader and ten households from that Jia to fulfill the labor duties. Each Jia would take turns every year, a system known as "rotating years." This meant that for nine out of ten years, most of the population wouldn't be disturbed, allowing agricultural production and daily life to continue uninterrupted.

Moreover, because the labor duties were rotated, the common people would keep a close watch on each other to ensure no one tried to shirk their responsibilities. If someone tried to escape their duties, those who had already served their term would certainly not allow it.

After each rotation, the system could be reorganized, and a census could be conducted to check the population structure. If necessary, the gender ratio in various regions could be adjusted. In short, while this system tied civilian households to their place of residence, it was otherwise quite effective.

As for what to do when prosperity made this household registration system obsolete, Chen Xi could only say that they would cross that bridge when they came to it. If the goal of a tax-free agricultural society was ever achieved, then this binding household registration would no longer be necessary.

After spending a long time explaining this system to Lu Su and Liu Ye, Chen Xi was pleased to see their eyes light up with understanding rather than confusion. They were indeed capable ministers, fully grasping a system that far surpassed the standards of their time.

"That's basically it. If you find any flaws, try to address them. It shouldn't be too difficult for you," Chen Xi said, taking a sip of tea to soothe his parched throat.

"In the short term, I don't see any issues. This system is nearly complete, and I imagine it must have taken you a lot of effort to develop," Lu Su commented, his head still down as he wrote, showing little concern for Chen Xi's exhaustion. As long as Chen Xi could still move around, it meant he hadn't overexerted himself.

"Alright, then I'll leave the implementation to you. I'm really tired. By the way, how do you plan to handle the land distribution? And have you come up with a solution for the rest of Qingzhou? We can't just sit around and wait, no matter how much fame and virtue we've garnered among the Yellow Turbans. Take Xuan Gao, for instance. In a few months, when he goes to the Qingzhou military camp, apart from the generals who followed him to the end, most people won't even recognize him as the great leader," Chen Xi said, shifting the conversation away from the household registration system.

"Zi Yang has come up with a plan. There were some issues before, but now that your household registration system is in place, we have a solid foundation for implementation," Lu Su said as he continued writing.

"Zi Yang, tell me about your land plan. I'd like to hear it. And since you have a plan for land distribution, how do you intend to handle agricultural taxation?" Chen Xi asked, turning to Liu Ye. As the architect of the plan, Liu Ye would have the most insight, and it wouldn't be worth wasting Lu Su's time on it.

"I plan to directly allocate land. Qingzhou and Taishan don't have any true aristocratic families left—Yellow Turban raids have wiped them out. This makes these areas ideal for land distribution. The simplest method is to distribute the land, but I don't recommend dividing it among households or individuals," Liu Ye said without hesitation.

"This approach had significant flaws, but your Li-Jia system can cover those gaps. I plan to allocate land based on the Li-Jia system. The exact amount of land per Li is yet to be determined and will vary depending on the region. The Li leader will then distribute the land to the Jia leaders, who will further divide it among the households," Liu Ye explained calmly.

"This approach..." Chen Xi couldn't help but feel a strong sense of *déjà vu*, but he had to admit that it effectively dispersed the conflict, preventing land issues from directly targeting the central authority.

"As for fairness, that's not my concern. My responsibility is to ensure fairness at the highest level, with the prefectures and counties ensuring fairness at their respective levels. Problems might arise, but compared to the current system, I believe this one is a significant improvement," Liu Ye said proudly.

Chen Xi frowned, recognizing that Liu Ye's primary focus was not on ensuring that the common people had land but on maintaining stability throughout the realm. By dispersing the conflicts, any issues that did arise would be less likely to incite widespread rebellion. Even if there were uprisings, they wouldn't spread far, which would greatly benefit the stability of the Liu family's reign.

"It's acceptable, I suppose. I can also guess how you plan to handle taxation—by directly delegating it to the Lis, correct?" Chen Xi said, slightly dissatisfied with Liu Ye's central focus, but he didn't push the issue further. After all, maintaining peace was also in the best interest of the people, so it wasn't worth arguing about. Everyone had their own biases.

"Yes, I plan to collect taxes from each Li. Each year, we'll determine the average yield per prefecture and county, then calculate the average output. Taxes will be based on this average," Liu Ye nodded, looking quite pleased with himself. It wasn't a plan that just anyone could come up with, and Liu Ye was confident that his tax system would be far superior to the current agricultural tax system.

Chen Xi sighed inwardly. Liu Ye's focus was entirely on preserving the Han dynasty's rule, without considering that if someone wanted to curry favor with higher-ups, they could easily manipulate the figures, potentially causing disaster for an entire region.

Chapter 162: Liu Ye's New Accounting Method

"If someone tries to please those in power by altering a number or two, or if they simply choose the best locations, what then?" Chen Xi couldn't ignore this issue. Sometimes, a single error in data could lead to disaster for an entire region.

"We'll divide the years into normal years and disaster years. As for bumper harvest years, we'll calculate them as normal years. The average grain yield from the last normal year will be used as the basis for the next normal year's yield, and for the third normal year, we'll take the average of the previous two normal years, and so on," Liu Ye explained. He had indeed considered the potential flaws in this method. As someone who thought in various directions, he ensured that there were no major loopholes. Though this method of taking a nationwide average was cumbersome, it was stable.

"I knew you wouldn't overlook such a major flaw," Chen Xi sighed in relief. Using the nationwide average, unless everyone went mad, there wouldn't be significant issues with the data.

"Just keep separate accounts," Liu Ye said confidently, neither arrogant nor humble.

"That works," Chen Xi agreed. This method seemed feasible. Apart from requiring some manpower each year, there wasn't much of a problem.

"Oh, right, speaking of accounts, you reminded me of something." Chen Xi finally remembered the double-entry bookkeeping system he had meant to discuss. It had been years since he used it after college, but he remembered a few key concepts, like "debit and credit must be equal." Chen Xi was confident that with just this phrase, someone would be able to figure out the entire system.

Never underestimate the intelligence of the ancients. Apart from modern perspectives and experience, you wouldn't have any advantage over them. As for calligraphy, the kids from noble families would easily surpass you. Today's generation, raised with computers, is far behind in handwriting compared to those from twenty years ago, and the brushwork of people from twenty years ago was far behind those from seventy years ago.

As for classical studies, it's a bit harsh to say, but even today's "masters" of classical studies would struggle to even get a job as a doorman at the Imperial Academy in ancient times. In that era, everything

from their actions to their surroundings was steeped in classical learning. If today's "masters" were sent back, they'd be completely outclassed, like amateurs in a professional tournament.

Because of this, even though Chen Xi had a legitimate noble background and memories of the future, he always maintained a habit of speaking more and doing less. He figured that once the situation stabilized, he'd transition to speaking less and doing nothing. After all, with so many talented people around, his absence wouldn't make much difference.

"Zi Yang, haven't you noticed that our current bookkeeping system is full of problems? There are too many loopholes, and it's difficult to audit. I recently heard a vendor say, 'Money for goods, goods for money—must be equal.' I think this could be applied to accounting. Why don't you study it and see what you come up with?" Chen Xi said, yawning as he planted the seed of double-entry bookkeeping in Liu Ye's mind. He was confident Liu Ye would figure it out soon. After all, it was just a matter of a single phrase.

"Money for goods, goods for money—must be equal... must be equal..." Liu Ye repeated the phrase, seemingly entering a state of enlightenment. He began tapping the table and scribbling on paper.

"It's all up to you, Zi Yang. Good luck. I'm heading out," Chen Xi said, turning to leave. He went to the administrative office's back courtyard, nodding to the civil servants along the way. He then instructed them to prepare all the account books. The moment Liu Ye started clamoring to audit the accounts, they were to hand over all the unfinished account books to him without hesitation.

In Chen Xi's mind, this was to give Liu Ye a chance to thoroughly test his newly developed accounting method. He was more than willing to provide the accounts from the county, and even a large portion of Qingzhou, from the recent period. As the county magistrate, Chen Xi was more than happy to have someone else take over the mid-year audit. Life was good!

About ten days later, Liu Ye had developed a new accounting method. He called in Man Chong, and in front of Chen Xi, verified all the account books. He then loudly declared that he was going to promote this method across the Han dynasty. Little did he know, Lu Su, sitting beside him, was covering his face in embarrassment, feeling as though Liu Ye had been thoroughly tricked by Chen Xi. Now, Chen Xi had successfully completed the biggest administrative task of the first half of the year.

"Congratulations, Zi Yang! You truly are a genius. With this Liu-style accounting method, your name will be known throughout the land!" Chen Xi said, his smile genuine. After all, anyone who helped him finish the mid-year audit deserved sincere gratitude.

"Hahaha, thank you! If it weren't for that phrase, 'money for goods, goods for money—must be equal,' I wouldn't have thought of this new way of accounting. Hahaha, I'm going to send a letter to the Imperial Ancestral Court right away, so they can see my new accounting method. I, Liu Zi Yang of Huainan, will finally have my name known throughout the world!" Liu Ye, now like someone who had just passed the imperial examination, was utterly ecstatic after verifying the account books.

While Chen Xi might have found it a bit silly, Lu Su completely understood. In ancient times, the pursuit of fame far outweighed the pursuit of profit. The technical innovation that Liu Ye had come up with, which could benefit countless people, would greatly enhance his reputation. Once he had this fame, as long as he didn't overstep his bounds or challenge the emperor, trouble would avoid him. Even if he did something out of line occasionally, there would be plenty of people willing to support him. That was the advantage of being a well-known scholar...

"Bo Ning, Zi Jing, let's go celebrate! As for those petty officials who falsified accounts, Bo Ning, give me some face—today is a day of great joy for me. Just give them a warning and let it go!" Liu Ye turned, excitedly inviting Lu Su and Man Chong.

Originally, Liu Ye had planned to surprise Chen Xi with the results of the audit and then hand over the culprits to Man Chong. But after completing the audit, Liu Ye had an epiphany: everything else was trivial compared to his new accounting method, which would make him famous for generations.

Compared to that, catching a few minor offenders seemed insignificant. When a sage appears, they pardon the world. While Liu Ye wasn't a sage, he decided to forgive these unfortunate souls for the sake of a good omen.

"Minor offenses get warnings, major offenses will be dealt with according to the law!" Man Chong said with a stern face, seemingly giving Liu Ye no leeway. However, those who knew Man Chong understood that this was already a big concession. Otherwise, everyone would have been punished according to the law.

"Alright, alright, let's go drink! I have some fine wine stored at home. I'm inviting everyone. With my new accounting method, corrupt officials across the land are in for a rough time. Hahaha, let's go!" Liu Ye's sense of integrity wasn't particularly strong. Besides, Liu Bei generally allowed this group to indulge, so they had no qualms about skipping work. They all gathered their friends and left, with the entire upper echelon following. It was a pity that Jian Yong and Liu Yan were in Jingzhou; otherwise, they could have joined in on the feast.

Chapter 163: Expanding the Army with Adequate Grain Supplies

Liu Ye's big celebration naturally involved inviting Liu Bei, and when Liu Bei celebrated, it was inevitable that Guan Yu and Zhang Fei would be there too. Everyone staying in Fenggao came, including Zhao Yun, who had just returned from Licheng, and Qu Qi.

Although Qu Qi had an eccentric personality, he was very serious about agriculture. After hearing that Zhao Yun had scoured all of Taishan to collect every technique that could improve grain production, he didn't stay long in Fenggao. The next day, he left for Licheng, needing to study all the methods and find the best farming techniques.

Qu Qi's approach to education was straightforward: "When the granaries are full, people will know proper etiquette." This was the most practical method, so he focused heavily on high-quality farming techniques and seeds. His method of enlightenment was simple: once everyone was well-fed, they would naturally have the time to study proper etiquette.

As for the ideas he had previously read in books, Qu Qi dismissed them as castles in the sky. If people couldn't even fill their stomachs, how could anyone expect them to be cultured and polite? It was simply unrealistic! It was more practical to sit down and discuss how to feed everyone.

It took Qu Qi only five days to absorb everything Zhao Yun had to offer. Then, Chen Xi ordered Zhao Yun to return in preparation for the summer planting, while Zang Ba and Tai Shici were tasked with guarding the northern regions.

The reason for Zhao Yun's recall was simple: he had the people's trust. After last year's summer planting, the people of Taishan trusted Zhao Yun completely. As long as Zhao Yun instructed them on how to plant, they would follow his lead. If it were anyone else, they wouldn't gain the people's trust. After all, Zhao Yun had become familiar with the people last year and had done an excellent job; he was now recognized everywhere in Taishan.

Thus, all of Qu Qi's unconventional farming techniques were entrusted to Zhao Yun, who was the only one capable of successfully promoting them. If Qu Qi had to do it himself, no one would believe him. After all, the land determined the next year's food supply, so unless people had full confidence, the common folk of the Han Dynasty would rather stick to what they knew than risk trying new methods, even if it promised higher yields. Who would dare gamble their lives?

Qu Qi was somewhat resigned to this reality, feeling a bit like "I offer my heart to the bright moon, but the moonlight shines on the ditch." However, he didn't complain. Instead, he expressed his gratitude to Zhao Yun, showing that he wasn't the type to look down on others despite his youth and arrogance.

The banquet hadn't been going on for long when Fa Zheng, his hair disheveled, walked in with a hair crown, grabbing something to eat. The past ten days had exhausted him, as he constantly had to think about what Cao Cao in Yanzhou was planning. It was almost certain that a conflict with Yuan Shu was inevitable. How to fight, where to strike, and what would trigger the conflict—Fa Zheng's head was a tangled mess of thoughts.

Guo Jia and Jia Xu hadn't given Fa Zheng any hints. Jia Xu felt that the intelligence department was like a hot potato. On the first day, he didn't even handle the intelligence reports himself, leaving them for Liu Bei and Chen Xi to deal with, to avoid any suspicion.

Jia Xu knew that although he was currently without a lord, it was still a bit too much to be placed in such an important position immediately upon joining Liu Bei. Even with Guo Fengxiao's occasional checks, Jia Xu didn't want to leave a bad impression.

Therefore, Jia Xu didn't directly take over but assumed the role of the highest authority, delegating power to Fa Zheng after confirming things with Guo Jia. This was both to train Fa Zheng and to familiarize himself with Liu Bei's current situation.

Guo Jia, on the other hand, hoped to see Fa Zheng handle this event independently. If Fa Zheng could pass this intelligence test and discern Cao Cao's intentions from the strategies of Xun Yu, Xun You, Cheng Yu, and Xi Zhicai, it would indicate that Fa Zheng had limitless potential.

As for deploying forces, both Jia Xu and Guo Jia agreed to act as if they didn't see it. Whether Cao Cao annexed the state of Lu to provoke Yuan Shu or threatened Xuzhou, it would benefit Taishan. Securing Xuzhou, a major grain-producing region, was crucial for integrating it deeply with Taishan, a view shared by all of Taishan's strategists.

Guo Jia knew well that Fa Zheng's focus was undoubtedly on Yingchuan, not only because Yingchuan was home to Cao Cao's main civil officials but also because capturing Yingchuan and having Jingzhou reclaim Nanyang County would allow for an alliance, making it difficult for Yuan Shu to capture any territory. Moreover, having access to Jingzhou's grain supply would immediately solve the biggest issue and allow for rapid expansion.

However, Guo Jia was also aware that, given Cao Cao's temperament, he would definitely not target the well-defended Yingchuan at this critical time just before the summer harvest. The reason was simple: Cao Cao didn't have enough experienced soldiers to take Yingchuan. To put it more accurately, he didn't have enough veteran troops.

Liu Dai's death, along with the loss of his veteran troops, coupled with the fact that Cao Cao's veteran soldiers were wiped out during the pursuit of Dong Zhuo, meant that when Cao Cao took over Yanzhou, he had a bunch of new recruits who couldn't handle tough battles. Even with strong generals, it would be difficult to turn the tide in their favor. The new recruits might even flee at the first sign of trouble, potentially dragging the veteran troops along with them, or even causing them to rout.

In short, without at least a year or two of training and a few battles under their belts, new recruits could only serve as a facade. This was why Cao Cao was in such a difficult position now.

As for Taishan, the situation was much better. There were plenty of veteran soldiers, and when Chen Xi organized them, he made sure that each veteran soldier was paired with at most two new recruits. This was why, despite having over ten thousand veteran soldiers when they first arrived in Taishan, they now had only about forty thousand fully trained regular troops.

However, once this wave of veterans finished training the new recruits, expanding the army would be much easier. You could just integrate the new soldiers into each veteran regiment, and you'd be almost ready to go.

Given that Qingzhou was now under their control, the current four thousand regular troops weren't even enough to guard the passes, so expansion was necessary. As for the farm soldiers, Chen Xi never counted them as a real fighting force. Their combat effectiveness was mainly for show, useful for capturing prisoners or guarding the rear. In a real fight, they'd just be going through the motions.

Everyone was aware of this. Zang Ba, Tai Shici, Sun Guan, and other deputy generals who had not yet been promoted were just waiting for the summer harvest. Once they had the grain, they could be officially promoted to generals, take command of their troops, and begin rigorous training to establish their reputations. As for the horses needed by each unit, Zang Ba and others had already accounted for them. The warhorses that Hua Xiong had seized from Xiliang, along with the gifts from Gongsun Bogui, were more than sufficient.

However, neither Tai Shici nor Zang Ba had confidence in training cavalry, a high-level unit. In all of Taishan, only Zhao Yun and Hua Xiong were capable of training cavalry. It was clear that Zhao Yun, who would be forced into a civil servant role during the summer harvest and planting, wasn't reliable for this task. They would have to rely on Hua Xiong. When they thought about the two to three years needed to fully train cavalry, Zang Ba's face turned green. He was even considering asking Hua Xiong to give him a thousand cavalry and simply handing over his own horses to Hua Xiong, as a sort of gift to his superior.

Chapter 164: Cao Mengde's Fortunes Turn

Cao Mengde's days were not going well; he was severely short on grain recently. However, he heard from Xun Yu that the grain in the State of Lu was almost ready for harvest, and he planned to learn from the Yellow Turbans. But unlike the Yellow Turbans, who foolishly left nothing behind wherever they went, Cao Cao aimed to secure a grain-producing area for himself. It didn't need to be large, just enough to ensure his soldiers were well-fed.

Operating with only five days' worth of grain was a challenge. Cao Cao envied Liu Bei immensely whenever he thought about it. Mount Tai was a land of abundant grain, and with the strong support of Tao Gongzu in Xuzhou, Chen Zichuan pressured Ji Province, emptying the entire Nanpi granary. The world's wealthiest merchant, Mi Zizhong, supplied large amounts of grain, and the Lu family in Jiangdong ensured a continuous flow of water transport. As a result, large quantities of grain were shipped to Taishan and Qingzhou, supporting over a million Yellow Turban refugees without causing any unrest.

Cao Cao knew he needed to accelerate his plans. Liu Xuande was developing too quickly; in at most two years, he would fully digest all of Qingzhou. Meanwhile, for Cao Cao, this year was already a waste—without grain, there was no way to develop. Everything revolved around grain.

"Wenruo, when should we take action?" Cao Cao sighed as he spoke. He envied the prosperity of Yuzhou. If all his soldiers were veterans, he wouldn't have to worry so much; he was confident that even if his troops were outnumbered by Yuan Shu, he wouldn't suffer any losses.

"Three more days," Xun Yu replied with a sigh. "Zhicai will have everything arranged in Jingzhou. It's a pity that Liu Jingsheng refused our goodwill. Since that's the case, we'll have to force him to keep Yuan Gonglu occupied." Xun Yu was helpless. Liu Yan's influence had grown too large recently, forcing Xun Yu to take this renowned talker seriously. Liu Yan had become a significant obstacle after arriving in Jingzhou, where scholars ruled. Such a figure naturally drew the scholars of Jingzhou to urge Liu Biao to meet this famous guest.

Besides Liu Yan's pre-existing fame and his indiscriminate spending on hosting gatherings, his position as the creator of a significant innovation had also elevated his status. Without this accomplishment, he wouldn't have reached his current level of recognition in the scholarly world.

And what did Liu Yan achieve to warrant such recognition? It was simple: Chen Xi attributed the development of improved paper to Liu Yan, instantly making him a luminary in the scholarly world, a figure who could not be ignored. His contribution to the preservation of civilization was undeniable, and this catapulted him into the upper echelons of the literary world. When Liu Yan arrived in Jingzhou, even older figures like Huang Chengyan, Sima Hui, and Pang Degong came to greet him.

Liu Yan's achievement in solving a major problem for the transmission of knowledge made him a figure worth meeting in person. So, when Liu Yan arrived in Jingzhou, the reception he received left even him feeling overwhelmed, thinking he didn't deserve such honor.

Liu Biao personally hosted a banquet for Liu Yan, putting aside Mao Jie, who had come on behalf of Cao Cao to discuss attacking Yuan Shu. Liu Biao was already hesitant about fighting, and with Liu Yan's arrival, he found it even more inconvenient to make such decisions. Why rush?

Liu Biao knew very well that someone unfamiliar urging him to act would definitely benefit the other party, but whether it would benefit him was uncertain. So, Liu Biao wasn't in a hurry. Instead, he spent his time chatting and enjoying the company of scholars.

Liu Yan might not excel in many things, but his eloquence, demeanor, and appearance were impeccable. Combined with his significant achievement, he attracted everyone's attention wherever he went.

"Liu Yan has come from the north, and I am honored by the warm reception from everyone here. I've heard that Lord Jingsheng has the 'Three Elegant Vessels' for drinking. I have brought fine wine from the north. Would you all care to try it?" Liu Yan asked aloud.

The past few days had been wonderful for Liu Yan, who felt as though he was on a vacation. Following Chen Xi's advice, he wasn't there to act as an envoy but simply to visit. So, Liu Yan behaved candidly, without any ulterior motives, enjoying food, drink, and literary discussions with a clear conscience.

Meanwhile, Jian Yong had been sent off to some obscure corner, but he didn't mind. Since Liu Yan could do a better job, he accepted being sidelined, understanding the importance of the task. Jian Yong also

realized why Chen Xi had told them not to meddle but simply to maintain their refined demeanor. It turned out to be the right approach.

"Hahaha, I didn't expect Wei Shuo to have such elegance. Bring the 'Three Elegant Vessels'!" Liu Biao laughed heartily. He was known for his drinking prowess.

Soon, three large cups were brought forth. Liu Yan laughed as well. "As expected of Lord Jingsheng's drinking vessels, they are indeed large. But how can we have good vessels without good wine!" With that, he clapped his hands, and a servant brought out a jar of wine.

"Lord Jingsheng, please accept this. It's fine wine I acquired from the northern regions, a rare and potent brew. Today, I offer it to everyone here!" Liu Yan said as he removed the seal from the jar. A waft of the strong aroma filled the hall immediately.

Liu Biao, a known connoisseur of fine wine, recognized the quality of the brew as soon as Liu Yan removed the seal. The rich aroma made his mouth water.

Carefully, Liu Yan filled Liu Biao's three cups to the brim. The wine was as clear as spring water on stone, and its fragrance filled the air. One jar was just enough to fill everyone's cup.

"Excellent! Truly excellent wine!" Liu Biao exclaimed after downing his three cups. It felt as if he had swallowed a ball of fire, but the intense heat quickly turned into warmth, and Liu Biao found himself lost in the rapidly shifting sensations, thoroughly enjoying them.

Suddenly, one of the scholars collapsed, drunk. Liu Biao, who was feeling quite tipsy himself, laughed and called out, "Someone, get a needle and wake Yidu! We must keep drinking!"

But before he could finish his sentence, Liu Biao slumped over the table, muttering about continuing to drink.

After having everyone carried out, Liu Yan smiled at Jian Yong. Their mission was essentially complete. Someone like Liu Biao, who could drink five liters in one sitting, wouldn't be fit to handle state affairs for at least five days. And with Mao Jie also passed out, Cao Cao's request for joint military action was effectively stalled for now.

What Liu Yan and Jian Yong didn't know was that Xi Zhicai hadn't relied on Mao Jie's diplomatic skills at all. His habit was to handle matters personally, believing it was unwise to rely on others. When Xi Zhicai learned that Lu Bu had fled to Yuan Shu, he almost exclaimed, "Heaven helps me!"

As Xi Zhicai received the latest intelligence from Jingzhou, cold sweat dripped down his forehead. This was an unexpected but incredibly timely turn of events—too good to be true!

Chapter 165: Yuan Shu's Pride

Ever since Lu Bu sought refuge with him, Yuan Shu felt as though his world had suddenly brightened. His confidence, which had been relatively limited before, swelled immensely with Lu Bu by his side. Not only did he plan to humiliate the already defeated Yuan Yao further, but he also considered avenging Sun Jian in one fell swoop.

With the Imperial Seal in hand, a mighty general by his side, fertile lands under his control, and tens of thousands of seasoned soldiers, Yuan Shu believed that Heaven itself was guiding his rise. How could he refuse such an opportunity?

However, Yuan Shu was still a man of his word. He had promised not to take Sun Ce's Imperial Seal, and he stood by that promise. Yet, for reasons he couldn't quite explain, every time Yuan Shu saw Sun Ce, he couldn't help but admire the young man's striking appearance. Compared to Sun Ce, his own sons seemed weak and unworthy.

"Be my son, Bofu," Yuan Shu would say whenever he passed by the Sun residence and saw Sun Ce practicing martial arts in the courtyard. "My own sons are useless; I want you to be my heir."

Sun Ce was speechless. He couldn't understand why Yuan Shu kept insisting that he become his son.

Ignoring Yuan Shu, Sun Ce continued practicing, pretending not to hear him. By now, Sun Ce had realized that Yuan Shu harbored no ill intentions towards the Sun family, something Huang Gai and the others had confirmed.

Yuan Shu had seen the Imperial Seal that Sun Ce possessed. Though he had gazed at it with both fascination and greed, Yuan Shu had restrained himself, leaving without saying a word. This had even

impressed Huang Gai and the others. Though Yuan Shu might occasionally do foolish things, he was undeniably a man of his word, a hero in his own right.

"If only my sons were like you, I could die without regret," Yuan Shu sighed, shaking his head. "Keep up your training, Bofu. In a few days, I'll take you with me to deal with Liu Biao!" Yuan Shu had grown so fond of Sun Ce that he no longer addressed Liu Biao by his courtesy name, calling him by his given name to show his contempt.

"What?!" Sun Ce stopped mid-motion, turning to face Yuan Shu.

"I told you I would avenge your father," Yuan Shu laughed heartily. "Train well. I'll give you three thousand soldiers to lead as the vanguard. Oh, and you can take my token to see Fengxian. He's in Runan now. Ask him to give you some pointers. He truly deserves the title of the world's greatest general. After the Battle of Hulao Pass, he reached a new level, stronger than ever!"

With that, Yuan Shu laughed and left. Sun Ce, still processing the news, was soon joined by Zhou Yu, who had emerged from behind the main hall doors.

"Bofu, your opportunity has arrived!" Zhou Yu said with a smile.

"I've waited so long for this. I will kill Liu Biao!" Sun Ce exclaimed, slashing his sword through the air. The fake mountain in the courtyard was cleaved in two. "I've finally reached the peak of Qi Refinement and touched the threshold of internal energy projection. I will avenge my father!"

"I'll be your advisor when the time comes," Zhou Yu replied, smiling. "I'm seventeen now. It's time I made my mark on this world."

"I'll count on you," Sun Ce nodded. "But why have you been avoiding Uncle Gonglu lately? Before, you were always so straightforward with him."

"He wants me to be his adopted son..." Zhou Yu replied with a tone of helplessness. "He seems to be quite interested in me."

The two exchanged glances and sighed in unison, before bursting into laughter.

"Though I hate to admit it, Yuan Gong truly is a man of integrity. But he's easily swayed by others, often making decisions without much thought. If he's kept in check, he might show the qualities of a hero. But if left unchecked, he could cause a disaster," Zhou Yu reflected on Yuan Shu's past actions, feeling a mix of admiration and concern.

"Indeed. Before I came here, I even considered trading the Imperial Seal for shelter. But Uncle Gonglu didn't say a word about it," Sun Ce replied with a wry smile. He, too, was a man of honor.

Since arriving in Runan, Yuan Shu hadn't taken advantage of the Sun family. Instead, he had protected them and promised to avenge Sun Jian, never neglecting any member of the Sun clan. For this, Sun Ce was deeply grateful. Unlike other warlords, the Little Conqueror couldn't bring himself to betray someone who had shown him such kindness.

Sun Ce had made up his mind: once he avenged his father, as long as Yuan Shu continued to treat him and his family well, he wouldn't hesitate to serve Yuan Shu. As for becoming his adopted son, it wasn't an unbearable prospect. If he was going to pledge his loyalty, it made sense to strengthen their bond. Besides, staying close to Yuan Shu would allow him to better protect his family. As for grand ambitions, those were thoughts for another day.

"Report! My lord, we have news from Jingzhou. The entire leadership of Jingzhou has been heavily intoxicated after drinking with the famous scholar Liu Weishuo from Yuzhou. It's estimated that they'll be unable to handle state affairs for at least five days!" Yan Xiang reported, bowing slightly.

"Huh?" Yuan Shu was taken aback by the news. "Are you certain this intelligence is accurate?"

"My lord, we must march immediately! If we delay, we'll miss this golden opportunity!" Yan Xiang, though not a top strategist, knew the importance of seizing the moment. Especially now, with Lu Bu on their side, their army's ability to break enemy formations was unmatched.

"Good!" Yuan Shu exclaimed with joy.

At this point, Yuan Shu hadn't yet become arrogant or overly confident. Although he occasionally made rash decisions, his wealth and the pride of his noble lineage meant that he had no need to exploit the people under his rule.

In truth, Yuan Shu simply didn't care about the common folk, so while some criticized him for inaction, the people of Yuzhou lived in relative prosperity. They appreciated having a leader who left them alone, free from additional taxes or burdens.

In difficult years, someone like Yuan Shu might be seen as irresponsible. But thanks to Yuzhou's consistent good harvests, his inaction was viewed as enlightened governance. The common people were quite satisfied with an official who didn't interfere with their lives.

As long as Yuan Shu didn't demand higher taxes, Yuzhou remained peaceful. The local officials might curse his inaction, but the people enjoyed prosperity.

Yuan Shu's pride was evident in his governance of Yuzhou. To him, the local officials were mere servants of his Yuan family, and anyone who stepped out of line would be swiftly dealt with.

Because of this, talents like Zhou Yu, Lu Su, and Zhang Zhao acknowledged that while Yuan Shu might become arrogant if successful, they also recognized his potential as a heroic figure. Given the strength of the Yuan family in Yuzhou and the region's solid foundation, if Heaven continued to favor Yuan Shu, defeating him would be a formidable challenge.

In essence, Yuan Shu's future success hinged on favorable conditions. If fortune smiled on him year after year, even the most desperate efforts of Cao Cao and others would lead to their demise. Yuan Shu wouldn't need complex strategies to win; a simple, straightforward approach would suffice. Unfortunately, relying on good fortune is always a gamble...

Chapter 166: The Fall of Xiangyang City

Lu Bu led the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry, their imposing presence emanating a mix of golden sharpness and the searing heat of flames. A massive halberd, over five hundred meters long, sliced through the defensive cloud energy of Xiangyang's guards before they had time to react. With a single strike, hundreds of defenders were either killed or incapacitated.

After piercing through Xiangyang's defenses, the remaining force of the strike shattered the city gate. The Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry, along with the veteran soldiers led by Sun Ce, surged through the northern gate of Xiangyang, slaughtering all in their path as they made their way directly to Liu Biao's residence.

"Kill!" Sun Ce, with bloodshot eyes, charged at the forefront. He was utterly shocked by Lu Bu's god-like power—not just his martial prowess, but also his command in battle. Thirty li outside Xiangyang, Lu Bu had shattered the ranks of the old general Wang Wei's troops within just a quarter of an hour, cutting them apart and routing them completely.

Lu Bu then charged ahead, with the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry following his lead. Abandoning the chance to claim any immediate glory, they raced toward the city gate with unmatched speed. Before Xiangyang's defenders could fully react, Lu Bu's attack slammed into the city's protective barrier, shattering it before it could fully form. He then cleaved through the cloud energy that had begun to coalesce. The residual force of his strike demolished the city gate right before Sun Ce's eyes.

Sun Ce was left in complete awe. Lu Bu's actions were unbelievably bold, utterly reckless. Originally, Zhou Yu had estimated that it would take a siege of one or two years to break Xiangyang, yet the city fell in just one strike.

"Kill!" Sun Ce saw the hope of avenging his father. The residence of Liu Biao, Governor of Jingzhou, was right before him.

"Hahahaha!" Lu Bu unleashed his power with abandon.

Since his defeat at Hulao Pass, a blemish had marred Lu Bu's spirit. Although he had cleansed himself of that shame, he soon encountered the massive armies of Li Jue and Guo Si, where even the mightiest individual was but a joke. Lu Bu faced defeat once more, but it was a defeat with honor. He had charged alone into Guo Si's army, grievously wounding him and nearly killing him before the enemy formations closed in, forcing Lu Bu to retreat.

That brush with death, that moment of charging through thousands of enemies with unrivaled courage, had mended Lu Bu's heart. His nearly flawless martial spirit was cleansed, and he realized he didn't need to chase after the strengths of others—whether it was Zhang Fei's brute strength, Guan Yu's explosive power, or Zhao Yun's inhuman speed. He needed none of these. He was Lu Bu; he didn't need to pursue these things!

Lu Bu's confidence grew as he killed a Jingzhou general with one strike. He no longer needed explosive techniques; Lu Bu only needed to remain steady. With each strike, he was confident in his ability to suppress any enemy, whether it was Zhang Fei, Guan Yu, or Zhao Yun. Lu Bu had gained enough clarity to trust that he could kill any opponent before him.

As Sun Ce fought fiercely, slaying the guards around him, he finally broke into the Governor's residence in Jingzhou, only to be blocked by a general leading troops. However, driven by his deep-seated vendetta, Sun Ce fiercely suppressed his opponent, showing no sign of weakness despite his young age. His rage even seemed to fuel a slight transformation in his aura.

"Hurry, escort the Governor and Strategist away! Order the counties to resist at every turn, retreat to Jiangling!" The man who blocked Sun Ce shouted after forcing him back. Even now, Liu Biao's headache was so severe that he couldn't manage his affairs, and the other high officials in Xiangyang were equally incapacitated.

"Get out of my way!" Sun Ce roared, wielding the ancient Ding Blade his father had left him. He hacked down the soldiers beside him. In the midst of the slaughter, Sun Ce felt a transformation within himself. His speed increased, his strength grew, and his reactions sharpened. He even began to faintly sense the flow of cloud energy. Throughout the battle, Sun Ce never felt fatigued. The more he fought, the more powerful he became.

Sun Ce couldn't see the changes in himself, but his opponent, Wen Pin, could see everything clearly. He understood that the young man before him was close to reaching the final stage of a warrior's journey, perhaps just a step away from breaking through the final barrier.

At that moment, a golden radiance enveloped Sun Ce, with wisps of golden mist emanating from his body. As he continued to fight, the golden glow around him grew stronger.

In that instant, Sun Ce looked like a deity, wrapped in golden light that refined his body and began to open the path between his physical form and the energy of heaven and earth, drawing him closer to the level of internal energy projection.

This can't go on! If this continues, this kid might kill me and break through. We absolutely cannot let him achieve this breakthrough to internal energy projection. In our current situation, Jingzhou can barely handle one Lu Bu; if we have to face another Sun Bofu, it will be the end of us! Wen Pin thought, roaring as he thrust his spear at Sun Ce's waist.

"Ugh!" Wen Pin spat out a mouthful of blood. Sun Ce didn't dodge or block but took the hit head-on. Simultaneously, Sun Ce swung his ancient Ding Blade at Wen Pin, who barely managed to dodge, but the extended blade aura still tore through Wen Pin's armor, leaving him severely injured. Wen Pin's loyal steed, which had followed him for years, was sliced in half by the blow.

"Zhongye, retreat! Let me take care of him!" At that moment, a red-faced warrior charged in from behind, riding a chestnut horse. With a swing of his blade, he forced Sun Ce back and launched a flurry of attacks.

"He's yours, Wen Chang!" Wen Pin shouted as he was carried away, managing to stem the bleeding from his deadly wound with his internal energy. He would likely recover within ten days.

"Get out of here!" Wei Yan roared, not turning back. Although his words were fierce, he knew that in terms of skill, he and Sun Ce were evenly matched. But in such a situation, what mattered most was momentum. His strikes were powerful and lethal, keeping Sun Ce on the defensive.

Despite Wei Yan's efforts to suppress the seventeen-year-old Sun Ce, killing him was out of the question, even though Sun Ce had a wound in his abdomen. As the fight dragged on, Sun Ce grew stronger with each counterattack, his power visibly increasing as he neared the final stage of a warrior's journey.

This is bad! Wei Yan thought. He had no desire to die for Liu Biao. Though he was a Jingzhou native, Liu Biao's heavy favoring of scholars over warriors had left Wei Yan disillusioned. He had little interest in serving a lord who didn't respect him. He had only intervened because he was familiar with Wen Pin; otherwise, he would have fled.

Summoning all his strength, Wei Yan delivered a powerful strike that forced Sun Ce back. In this confined space, Wei Yan dared not use any of his more destructive techniques. The massive slash that Lu Bu had unleashed earlier still haunted his mind. He had no desire to draw Lu Bu's attention. At least he knew that without the power of someone like Huang Zhong, challenging Lu Bu would be a death sentence!

Chapter 167: If You Don't Want to Suffer, Take Action!

When Chen Xi received the intelligence report from Jingzhou, he almost spat out his tea in shock. Lu Bu's destructive power was beyond anything he could have imagined. In history, Lu Bu had stabilized Nanyang County for Yuan Shu after defecting to him, and shortly after, he moved to Yuan Shao's camp to help Yuan Shao crush the Black Mountain Army, allowing Yuan Shao to turn his attention to destroying Gongsun Zan.

Then, fearing that Yuan Shao might eliminate him, Lu Bu drifted over to Wang Kuang, only to be lured by Chen Gong and Zhang Miao to go after Cao Cao. But this time, Lu Bu had gone berserk! He directly attacked and captured Xiangyang. Was Yuan Shu trying to defy the heavens? With Xiangyang conquered, Jingzhou's most prosperous regions were reduced to Jiangling and Jiangxia. Yuan Shu had ordered Sun Ce and Ji Ling to run rampant north of the Yangtze River, pursuing Liu Biao. The situation was almost identical to when Cao Cao had pursued Liu Bei, except that Liu Biao's forces still had some strength to resist.

"This situation is a complete mess!" Chen Xi fumed. If Yuan Shu really managed to seize all the territories north of the Yangtze—Nanyang, Southern Commandery, Jiangxia—it would be disastrous. The Yuan family's power would be more than enough to force the entire Yangzhou gentry into submission. Those opportunistic clans had no sense of loyalty!

Chen Xi was sure that if such a scenario came to pass, even the Lu family, which currently had good relations with Taishan, would switch sides to Yuan Shu. After all, Yuan Shu's advantages would be too overwhelming at that point. He might have already secured control over a third of the country, and with such power, the Yuan family could easily rally the vast majority of the aristocratic clans behind them. After that, it wouldn't even be a matter of fighting anymore—they could just rely on their influence to bring others into the fold! If the Yuan family, with its legacy of four generations of high-ranking officials, gained absolute dominance, too many clans would flock to support them!

"Damn it! Can't we have a few days of peace?" Chen Xi cursed as he slammed the report onto the table. This time, even if you don't want to fight, you have no choice. The situation must be contained within controllable limits.

If Yuan Shu really did defeat Liu Biao at Jiangling, the Yuan family would have the prestige and resources to mobilize all their connections. The capable generals and strategists across the land would surely rush to join them, driven by the influence of the aristocratic clans.

Should Yuan Shu truly gain control over a third of the country while the major clans have yet to make their final decisions, there would be no stopping him. The Yuan family's long-standing connections would make it nearly impossible to defeat the momentum they could gather.

For someone like Chen Xi, a monarch's extravagance was not the issue. After all, no matter how extravagant one person could be, there was a limit. As long as the subordinates were capable, ruling the country wouldn't just be a dream!

From what Chen Xi knew of Yuan Shu, he was the type to trust someone completely once he believed in them. Yuan Shu was the kind of person who would hand over all his troops to Ji Ling without a second thought. Not because he was bold or particularly wise, but simply because he never considered the consequences if Ji Ling were to betray him.

Therefore, Chen Xi was certain that if Yuan Shu ever allied with someone like Zhuge Liang—a ruthless strategist—and if they hit it off, and Yuan Shu was already at a significant advantage, it wouldn't be far-fetched to think that Yuan Shu might actually unify the land.

Chen Xi was sure that besides Xun Yu, Xun You, and Xun Zhan, the Xun family must have more hidden talents. Similarly, other prominent families undoubtedly had their own cards up their sleeves. Even Li Dian's family, a relatively minor power, had hidden a talent like Li Jin, who had once bested Lu Bu in combat. Other families surely had cards that, while perhaps not spectacular, were far from weak.

In such a scenario, if Yuan Shu amassed enough prestige, the capable people drawn to him by the powerful families wouldn't be easy to defeat. The human connections of the great aristocratic families, when bound by absolute interest, would unleash a power that Chen Xi didn't even want to imagine!

"We have to fight. This time, Tao Qianzhu can't just rely on us; we'll have to handle this ourselves. We're going to have to cross provinces to fight. Let's hope Tao Qianzhu gives us face and doesn't force us to turn against him," Chen Xi muttered bitterly. He knew that Yuan Shu had to be curbed.

Chen Xi's expression was bitter. This was a clear case of a plan going awry. As Yuan Shu's invisible ally, Liu Bei was now forced to personally step in to curb Yuan Shu. For Tao Qian, who had supported both Yuan Shu and Liu Bei, supporting either side now would be problematic.

"Plans can't keep up with changes. Fa Xiaozhi has already sent his analysis over. Cao Mengde's target was Lu, but given the current situation, if Cao Mengde isn't a fool, he definitely won't go after Lu. He needs us to share the burden," Lu Su said with a wry smile. He too could see that this time, Cao Mengde was pulling everyone down with him!

"The strategists under Cao Mengde are no pushovers. They overturned the entire situation with one move. Xun Wenruo and the others are truly gifted!" Liu Ye had no choice but to acknowledge the brilliance of Cao Cao's advisors, even as he grew increasingly frustrated with the current situation.

"Sigh, we'll just have to follow their lead. They've done a fine job. Fire and oil, flowers and brocade—these are always the most dangerous moments. Yuan Gonglu's sudden rise, and the potential of him controlling three provinces, has made us all keenly aware of the threat he poses. Whether we like it or not, we must suppress Yuan Gonglu now!" Chen Xi sighed heavily. The favorable situation they had before had been completely disrupted by Cao Mengde's strategists, who had expertly exploited the chaos to secure victory.

Chen Xi felt powerless. From the moment Yuan Shu's army broke through Xiangyang, he knew that whether they liked it or not, Xun Yu and the others had already scripted the play. Everyone else had no choice but to follow it if they didn't want to face disaster. They would surely charge ahead, and if you didn't, Cao Cao wouldn't be able to handle it alone. If Yuan Shu's forces ended up controlling three or even four provinces, the others would be left to cry in regret.

Frustration was all Chen Xi could feel. Throughout this journey, he had been the one manipulating others, only to be forcibly dragged into the fray this time.

"Let's fight. Yuan Gonglu's power is far beyond what Cao Mengde alone can handle. Even if you add in Zhang Yangshu of Henei, Liu Zhengli of Yangzhou, Yan Baihu, Chen Gongwei, and Wang Jingxing, they wouldn't be enough. We have to take action now. It's a pity that Tao Qianzhu is too old," Chen Xi said with resignation. They needed to deal with Yuan Shu swiftly; once the aristocratic families started wavering, the situation could quickly deteriorate.

"But before we act, we should make sure that Cao Mengde doesn't get off easy!" Liu Ye said, still seething with anger. He was clearly upset by Cao Cao's manipulative tactics.

"Xun Wenruo and his men have likely already accounted for that. There's nothing left to plunder in Yanzhou. The population has already been relocated to Chenliu under the guise of military farming. Forget it, let them be. This time, we lost. There will be no more of the Shu Alliance in this world after this!" Chen Xi waved Liu Ye off. "Get ready to attack Yuan Shu. Since we've already made our move, let's not hold back. Yuan Gonglu and we were never on the same path!"

Xun Wenruo and the others had severed all potential threats this time. From the moment Liu Bei decided to act, Tao Qian remained on the sidelines, and Gongsun Zan was preoccupied, the once most powerful alliance in the land—with the richest lands, the largest population, and the mightiest cavalry—began to crumble.

Chapter 168: Let's Weaken Yuan Shu

Cao Cao's face darkened as he read the report in his hands. Weren't they supposed to attack Lu and force Xu Province to give up some grain? How could they even consider attacking Lu with the current situation?

"Master, don't hesitate. Put everything into attacking Yingchuan. Yuan Gonglu is destined to fail this time! His momentary triumph has made him the enemy of all the warlords, and anyone with even a shred of sense will rise against him. Of course, this is also an opportunity for Yuan Gonglu—if he can withstand this assault, he will be just a step away from ruling the world," Xun Yu advised with a calm smile.

Xun Yu understood all too well that Cao Cao was currently too weak to provoke Yuan Shu excessively. But if Cao Cao wanted to conquer the land, especially with Yuan Shao preoccupied in the north, Liu Bei eyeing him from the east, Yuan Shu's formidable power to the south, and the western territories of Yong and Liang locked down, Cao Mengde had to break free from this cage.

Cao Cao was surrounded by stronger forces on all sides, and apart from Yuan Shao, everyone else could be considered an enemy. In such a situation, Xun Yu knew that relying solely on internal development was no longer viable. All of their rivals had deeper foundations and were developing rapidly. The only option left was to use one enemy to defeat another!

So, Xun Yu and the others devised a strategy to create a powerful enemy—one so strong that all those with ambitions for the throne would see the necessity of opposing him.

After careful consideration, they chose Yuan Shu, because only the Yuan family had the strength to suddenly rise and stand alone against the world. As for the other contenders, their foundations were too weak. And compared to other regions, the benefits of controlling Yuzhou were most suitable for Cao Cao.

Yuan Shu did not disappoint. He decisively struck Liu Biao down, seizing Xiangyang. Following that, during the naval battles in Jiangxia, Huang Zu was defeated by Zhou Yu and Sun Ce in seven consecutive

battles, finally dying in the Yangtze River. His body was retrieved by Sun Ce and used to commemorate Sun Jian. Yuan Shu's forces pressed westward, advancing on Jiangling with the intent of swallowing up Jing and Xiang provinces.

In just fifteen days, the entire northern region of the Yangtze was abuzz with rumors of defection. Yuan Gonglu's momentum was unstoppable as he marched south and west. Within days, the cities of Yiling, Zigui, and other northern Yangtze towns fell into Yuan Gonglu's hands.

With the northern Yangtze secured, Yuan Shu's forces were sustained by the resources of the conquered lands. Seventy thousand infantry and cavalry advanced on Jiangling. Not long after, Sun Ce and Zhou Yu, who had defeated Huang Zu, led their water forces upstream, recruiting river pirates and capturing Jingzhou's navy. By the time they reached Jiangling, they had over a hundred ships and more than twenty thousand sailors.

Meanwhile, voices of allegiance were rising across the southern regions of Jing. Yuan Shu's control over Yuzhou and his growing influence over Yangzhou seemed to be cemented. At this point, his dominance appeared inevitable.

"Wenhou, drink this cup of wine!" Yuan Shu called out heartily to Lu Bu.

"Alright!" Lu Bu grabbed the large cup and downed it in one gulp. "Just watch—tomorrow, I will breach the gates of Jiangling!"

"Good, good, good! With Fengxian on our side, Liu Jingxuan's days are numbered!" Yuan Shu laughed loudly, oblivious to the dark look in Lu Bu's eyes as he spoke.

While Yuan Shu was reveling in his success, the other warlords across the land were shaken to their core. Only five still stood firm.

General White Horse, Gongsun Zan, chuckled when he received the latest news, thinking to himself, "Tomorrow, after I defeat Yuan Shao, I'll teach you, Yuan Shu, a lesson about trying to take the top spot."

Yuan Shao, upon reading the latest report, clenched it tightly, his knuckles turning white. Slamming the report onto the table, he shouted, "Ju Yi, get in here!"

"At your service, my lord!" Ju Yi quickly entered and bowed.

"Can you defeat the White Horse Cavalry?" Yuan Shao asked solemnly.

"The White Horse Cavalry will be defeated!" Ju Yi declared confidently.

"Good. Then I will entrust all the soldiers, including myself, to your command! If you fail, I will kill you!" Yuan Shao handed his treasured sword to Ju Yi, his entire demeanor exuding a chilling aura.

"Understood. If I do not crush the White Horse Cavalry, I will accept my death!" Ju Yi responded boldly, taking the sword from Yuan Shao with both hands.

Cao Mengde and Liu Bei shared the same thought: "Let's weaken Yuan Shu." They began preparing their forces, ready to whittle down Yuan Shu's strength, hoping to leave him so weak that he would never recover.

Meanwhile, in Xiliang, Han Sui casually tossed aside the report. The situation was too far from his concerns. He would rather focus on how to take down Ma Teng; Yuan Shu was too distant a threat.

Elsewhere, warlords across the land trembled at the news. Even Liu Yan, hidden away in Yizhou, broke out in a cold sweat as he felt the palpable threat Yuan Shu posed.

As for the warlords near Yuan Shu, they were all terrified. Within fifteen days of Yuan Shu's capture of Xiangyang, the regions of Lujiang and Jiujiang in the Yangzhou and Jiangdong areas had already submitted to him under the persuasion of local gentry. Yan Baihu, Liu Yao, Wang Lang, and the others trembled in fear, none daring to resist Yuan Shu's advance. It seemed that once Jiangling fell, the entire southern Jing and Jiangdong regions would be ripe for defection.

"This is happening too fast," Chen Xi remarked as he watched the intelligence reports, which seemed to change three times a day. He had already deduced Yuan Shu's situation with Liu Biao—utterly beyond

salvation. Jingzhou was engulfed in flames, and Liu Biao had lost control over most of the province. After all, it had only been a year since Liu Biao had subdued the gentry in Jingzhou after entering alone, and he had not yet fully consolidated his power.

"Master, we must divide our forces. This time, we have to pull Yuan Shu back. If Jiangling falls, there's a nine-in-ten chance that the Yangzhou gentry will collectively surrender. Now that Liu Jingxuan has completely lost control of southern Jing, if Yuan Gonglu manages to unify Jing and Chu, and dominate Yang and Yuzhou, his power will surpass that of the ancient state of Chu. We must ensure that Liu Biao does not fall!" Liu Ye advised, after quickly scanning the latest intelligence, a bitter smile on his face.

"Divide the forces, Lord Xuande. We need to put enough pressure on Yuan Shu this time. We must reach Ru'nian before Yuan Shu takes Jiangling!" Chen Xi stood up, stating firmly. This was now a race against time. If Yuan Shu captured Jiangling before Liu Bei could cut off his retreat at Ru'nian and Yangtu, then Yuan Shu, having nearly taken a third of the land, would simply overwhelm them with his momentum, crushing Liu Bei's cross-province campaign.

With the situation as dire as it was, Liu Bei could no longer afford to hesitate. He had to throw everything he had into capturing Yuzhou. Even though they might only end up with a relatively unimportant territory like Lu County, the alternative was much worse—allowing a massive threat to undermine all future strategies. Yuan Shu's power had become too significant to ignore.

And so, Liu Bei's army, having just captured Fan County and not yet fully rested, divided into three forces. The first, led by Guan Yu with Liu Ye as strategist, would attack Chen County. The second, under Liu Bei with Jia Xu as strategist, would target Qiao County. The final force, led by Chen Xi with Yu Jin and Hua Xiong as deputies, would head straight for Ru'nian to cut off Yuan Shu's retreat and force him to turn back.

Chapter 169: A Do-or-Die Battle

After fleeing to Jiangling, Liu Biao did not immediately take command of the Jiangling troops. Instead, he secluded himself in a room for three days to reflect. It wasn't until Yuan Shu's forces neared Jiangling that Liu Biao finally emerged.

"Master! Things are dire! Yuan Shu's forces have nearly captured all of the northern territories, and uprisings are breaking out all over southern Jing!" Kuai Yue reported anxiously as soon as Liu Biao stepped out of his room.

"What is there to fear? As long as Jiangling holds, I am still here. Victory and defeat are only temporary!" Liu Biao replied coldly. The weariness of the refined scholar, indulging in the pleasures of life, was gone. He now exuded a sharp, commanding presence.

"Jingzhou is rich with talent, and the Han dynasty still stands. If Yuan Gonglu thinks he can defeat me, he is gravely mistaken! Relay my orders: Summon Liu Pan and Huang Zhong from southern Jing to Jiangling, bringing all elite forces. We will abandon the southern regions entirely!" Liu Biao ordered without even pausing to gather any intelligence on the situation.

"What?!" Kuai Yue was shocked. This would be like cutting off their own arm! Without Liu Pan and Huang Zhong, who were essential to their military strength, southern Jing would be lost entirely to the uprisings.

"Understood!" Kuai Liang, who had been silent, smiled upon hearing Liu Biao's command. This was the Liu Jingxuan he had once admired. The man at Xiangyang had been a shadow of his former self, dulled by years of comfort.

"Brother!" Kuai Yue exclaimed, confused.

"Follow our lord's orders," Kuai Liang responded calmly.

Kuai Yue knew his brother well—though Kuai Liang appeared reserved, he possessed a mind as sharp as a blade. If he approved of Liu Biao's decision, then it was the right one. Kuai Yue nodded in compliance.

After leaving Liu Biao's residence, Kuai Yue could no longer contain his curiosity. "Brother, why does our lord insist on withdrawing the forces from southern Jing? Without them, we will have no retreat."

"It's a do-or-die battle," Kuai Liang explained, his eyes gleaming coldly. "If we win, the tides will turn. If we lose, everything is over. The forces in southern Jing are fickle at best. If we lose Jiangling, even an army of a hundred thousand in southern Jing would be useless. But if we win here, the uprisings in the south will be nothing more than a passing storm."

"I didn't expect our lord still had such courage. I thought the refined life of a scholar had sapped him of ambition," Kuai Yue said, calming down as he processed his brother's explanation.

"He may have been dulled, but this crisis has revived him. I was considering surrendering the city to Yuan Gonglu in exchange for favor, but now that won't be necessary. If our lord still has this kind of resolve, then let's see Yuan Shu die at the gates of Jiangling," Kuai Liang declared, a fierce determination in his eyes. He was ruthless and pragmatic; if Liu Jingxuan was no longer worth supporting, he had been ready to switch sides without hesitation. But now, Liu Jingxuan had regained his confidence, and Kuai Liang was prepared to fight to the end.

"What's your plan?" Kuai Yue asked, feeling a shiver run down his spine. He knew just how dangerous his brother could be—he might be quiet most of the time, but when he spoke, it often meant someone would die.

"The rainy season is coming," Kuai Liang replied with a chilling smile.

Kuai Yue's hair stood on end. Jiangling backed onto the Yangtze River, and it flooded every year. If Kuai Liang had anything to do with it, the flooding would be disastrous. A flooded Yangtze could easily drown Yuan Gonglu's army.

"This plan is too dangerous!" Kuai Yue immediately objected.

"We're not at that point yet. I've inspected Yuan Gonglu's encampment, and he has made no preparations for potential flooding," Kuai Liang reassured him, having already scouted the area in advance. Though he had initially considered surrendering, he had not wanted to tarnish his own reputation.

"Alright," Kuai Yue replied, cautiously wiping the cold sweat from his brow. He knew his brother well enough to suspect that Kuai Liang might have already started making preparations.

Yuan Shu's forces continued to flaunt their strength daily beneath the walls of Jiangling. But they had finally provoked a hornet's nest. Liu Pan and Huang Zhong, leading Jingzhou's remaining elite troops, arrived at Jiangling, narrowing the gap in strength between the two sides.

Yuan Shu had brought over sixty thousand elite soldiers from Yuzhou, and after successive conquests, his forces had swelled to more than twice that number. However, with Liu Biao mustering all of

Jingzhou's remaining elite forces to defend Jiangling, his own army now numbered nearly a hundred thousand.

The problem was that Yuan Shu's troops were riding a wave of unstoppable momentum, while Liu Biao's forces were demoralized. If it weren't for the walls of Jiangling, Yuan Shu's army would have easily routed Liu Biao in open battle. But with the city's defenses, Liu Biao still had a chance to turn the tables.

From the city walls, Huang Zhong watched the Yuan Shu army below with cold eyes. His gaze focused on an enemy officer taunting them, his eyes as cold as ice.

"Zhongxing, stay here. I'm going down to kill a few enemy officers," Huang Zhong said, turning to Liu Pan. Though Liu Pan was technically in charge in southern Jing, he held deep respect for Huang Zhong's strength and wisdom, often deferring to him. However, in recent years, Huang Zhong had become withdrawn, his hair turning white as he struggled with his son's illness. This time, Liu Pan had no choice but to bring Huang Zhong and his family along, as his son, Huang Xu, was nearing death.

"Be careful, Hansheng," Liu Pan responded with a bitter smile. He could tell that Huang Zhong was in a foul mood, likely because his son was close to death and he had no grandchildren. Huang Zhong seemed lost.

The gates of Jiangling creaked open just enough to let Huang Zhong and two thousand soldiers ride out.

"Ha! Has Jingzhou really fallen so low that they send out old men to fight..." The enemy officer's taunt was cut short as a flash of Huang Zhong's blade reduced him to dust. Without hesitation, Huang Zhong led his troops straight toward Yuan Shu's camp.

"Kill!" The soldiers' courage surged as they witnessed Huang Zhong's overwhelming strength. They had assumed they were on a suicide mission, but now they charged after Huang Zhong, shouting as they followed him into battle.

"The command flag?" Huang Zhong sneered as he took out his prized bow and aimed at a distant flag, still a small speck on the horizon. A gleaming arrow flew across the battlefield, obliterating both the flag and the officer guarding it.

"Kill!" Huang Zhong's sword swept through Yuan Shu's forward camp like a flood, his strikes methodical and deadly. Unlike the raw power of Lu Bu or the explosive force of Guan Yu, Huang Zhong's blade work was deliberate, each swing growing in size and intensity until eight spinning arcs of light plowed through the enemy ranks. The sight left the defenders on Jiangling's walls in awe—when had Jingzhou ever had such a fierce general?

With a thunderous crash, Huang Zhong's eight-fold sword light was blocked by an enormous halberd, wielded by none other than Lu Bu, whose presence alone was enough to send tremors through the battlefield.

"Lu Bu?" Huang Zhong recognized the man instantly. His appearance matched the descriptions he had heard—Lu Bu, crowned with a trident crest, wearing a robe of red brocade and a chain-link armor of fearsome design, mounted on the swift Red Hare steed, holding his famous halberd.

Lu Bu was also sizing up Huang Zhong. The eight-fold sword light had revealed Huang Zhong to be a master, yet he was surprised to see that his opponent was an old man with graying hair, clad in worn armor, wielding a long blade marred with rust, and riding a steed with a dull, shaggy coat. How could such a figure possess such power?

Chapter 170: The Son Who Troubles His Father

[Hero in Twilight?] This was the first thought that crossed Lu Bu's mind upon seeing Huang Zhong. He immediately tightened his grip on the Sky Piercer halberd. Lu Bu vowed that he would never let himself become like this—a fading hero. He had to prove his invincibility on the battlefield, just as he had in the past, when his presence alone made Dong Zhuo bold enough to depose an emperor, and now with Yuan Shu nearly ruling the world. Lu Bu wanted to demonstrate to everyone that he remained the most powerful warrior.

Huang Zhong tightly held the Crimson Blood Saber. Though he disliked the weapon's strange color, he couldn't deny that the blade he had found in Nan County was a true divine weapon, despite its unappealing appearance.

The overwhelming aura radiating from Lu Bu had little effect on Huang Zhong. He could unleash his own formidable aura, but he saw no need. For him, the only path was to kill his opponent and vent his pent-up rage.

"Where is Yuan Shu?" Huang Zhong's eyes flashed with a sharp light, and in that instant, his fierce aura cut through Lu Bu's like a blade through wood.

"Ha! I didn't expect to find such a mighty warrior here. Come then, defeat me, and Yuan Shu is yours to take!" Lu Bu laughed as he spoke, his golden and red internal energy swirling around him to form a detailed suit of armor. The halberd in his hands extended slightly at each end, while the red aura surrounding him flared up like flames, bursting with intense heat. Lu Bu was arrogant, but he knew better than to underestimate the man before him.

Huang Zhong's cold gaze locked onto Lu Bu as his own body began to emit an icy blue aura, which then solidified into armor as formidable as Lu Bu's. However, unlike Lu Bu, when Huang Zhong's internal energy flowed into the Crimson Blood Saber, the blade extended into a blood-red edge that exuded a menacing, almost sickly, aura. Encased in the icy blue armor, Huang Zhong appeared increasingly ominous.

"I am Huang Hansheng of Jingzhou. Lu Bu, prepare yourself!" Huang Zhong shouted as he spurred his horse forward, the steed's hooves leaving frost in their wake.

"Boom!" Huang Zhong's saber clashed directly with Lu Bu's halberd, the blood-red edge of the saber slicing toward Lu Bu. The impact sent shards of ice and waves of heat scattering in all directions.

Lu Bu's counterattack was deftly redirected by Huang Zhong at a bizarre angle, only to then arc back in a strange trajectory toward Lu Bu again.

"Crack!" Their horses passed each other, and in that brief exchange, both men had taken each other's measure. Huang Zhong had lost out in terms of strength and the power of his steed, but in all other aspects, they were evenly matched.

"Again!" Lu Bu charged once more, his halberd spinning through the air, each strike heavier than the last. The fiery heat and the gleaming edges of his halberd ravaged the surrounding camp as they fought, the battle dragging them from the front camp to the left and right flanks. Their combat was intense, leaving both Yuan Shu's and Liu Biao's soldiers awestruck. The force of their attacks was so great that the surrounding environment was devastated by the clash of their energies.

Huang Zhong's expression remained stoic, but the battle was reigniting the bloodlust within him. His strikes with the Crimson Blood Saber grew increasingly powerful. Ever since his son, Huang Xu, had fallen gravely ill, Huang Zhong had all but abandoned his martial training, devoting himself entirely to his son's care. But Huang Xu's condition only worsened by the day, and more than once, Huang Zhong had nearly taken his anger out on the local healer, Zhang Zhongjing.

Now, Huang Zhong felt that his strength had diminished compared to a few years ago. Back then, in his thirties, if his son had been healthy and he had continued training, he might have fully mastered the dual-color internal energy by now. But after his son fell ill, his progress had stalled, and his attempts to master dual-color internal energy were disrupted when the water element overwhelmed the other, leaving him with an unwelcome ice attribute that even restricted the output of his internal energy during certain techniques.

As a result, Lu Bu found the situation perplexing—his opponent's strength seemed to fluctuate. When Huang Zhong was strong, Lu Bu was caught off guard; when Huang Zhong was weak, Lu Bu could easily overpower him.

In one swift move, Huang Zhong repelled Lu Bu, swiftly switching from saber to bow. An icy blue arrow shot from the string, hurtling straight toward Lu Bu.

Lu Bu dodged the arrow with all his might, but the wind force generated by the arrow still managed to slice a small cut across his arm, causing blood to drip from the wound.

Huang Zhong sighed inwardly. He needed to find a way to resolve his issues. Lu Bu was incredibly strong, and even if his son had never fallen ill and he hadn't neglected his training for years, Huang Zhong estimated that defeating Lu Bu would still be challenging. As it stood now, while Lu Bu might struggle to kill him, it wouldn't be difficult for Lu Bu to defeat him. Huang Zhong cursed his misfortune, feeling that his son had inadvertently caused his current predicament.

Thinking of his son, Huang Zhong's mood darkened. Just as he was about to declare a truce and withdraw, Lu Bu roared, "It's rude not to return a favor!" and fired a volley of arrows at Huang Zhong.

Huang Zhong laughed, confident in his superior archery skills. If it came down to archery, Lu Bu was no match for him.

Huang Zhong once again fired a single icy blue arrow, but as soon as it left the string, it split into countless beams of light. The thin beams deflected Lu Bu's arrows, converging into seven distinct arrows that targeted Lu Bu from all sides.

"Hah!" Lu Bu swung his halberd with all his might, managing to disperse six of the arrows. However, the seventh arrow slipped through his defenses, slicing through his armor and leaving a cold, chilling sensation in its wake.

Huang Zhong sighed again. Lu Bu might have other tricks up his sleeve, but Huang Zhong knew that he himself was already at his limit. If his most powerful technique couldn't seriously injure Lu Bu when he was unprepared, it would be even more impossible to kill Lu Bu once he was on guard.

"Lu Bu, we shall meet again!" Huang Zhong declared, his cold eyes fixed on Lu Bu. By now, Ji Ling had reacted quickly, and the army was already beginning to form ranks.

Lu Bu said nothing, simply turning his horse around. He knew that the white-haired warrior before him wasn't someone he could force to stay in battle. The time wasn't right. Gripping his halberd tightly, Lu Bu vowed that next time, he would kill this man.

Huang Zhong watched Lu Bu's retreating figure. Now would have been the perfect moment to kill Lu Bu, but his honor wouldn't allow him to shoot a man in the back. So, he too turned his horse around and swiftly left the battlefield. Once Ji Ling's troops fully formed their ranks and their collective aura negated his internal energy, Huang Zhong knew he would be at risk of capture.

"General, you were magnificent!" As Huang Zhong entered the city, he was greeted with loud cheers. He sighed, casually removed his helmet, and tossed it to Liu Pan before dismounting. Then he noticed that Liu Biao had come out to greet him personally.

"Greetings, my lord!" Huang Zhong said with a bow, though his tone lacked deep respect. After all, Liu Biao bore much of the blame for Jingzhou's current state, and Huang Zhong had never truly served under him before.

"Rise, General," Liu Biao responded warmly, not taking offense at Huang Zhong's casual attitude. He had clearly seen Huang Zhong fight Lu Bu to a standstill—the very Lu Bu known as the mightiest warrior in the land. In Liu Biao's eyes, Huang Zhong had every right to be proud.