

Mythical 181

Chapter 181: Zhou Yu's Thoughts

Although Yuan Shu had issued a gag order, news travels quickly among well-informed individuals. When one person knows something, it's a secret; when three people know it, it's common knowledge, and once a group of people knows it, there's no stopping the spread.

Yuan Shu now found himself in this situation. Despite his efforts to keep the information under wraps, word had spread throughout the camp that Yuzhou had fallen. Suddenly, the morale in his army plummeted.

Surprisingly, under intense pressure, Yuan Shu's usual dim-wittedness seemed to disappear, and his intelligence appeared to spike. He began to distribute rewards, and not just small ones—he offered a full ten percent of the spoils from conquering Jingzhou to his troops. He also declared with fierce determination that anyone who helped capture Jiangling would see their rewards tripled. Even if they tried their best but failed, they would still be rewarded, but anyone who slacked off would face collective punishment.

The icy tone in Yuan Shu's voice as he spoke those final words made it clear to everyone that he was dead serious. For a moment, Yuan Shu's fierce resolve and commanding presence shocked everyone, showing a side of him that rivaled Yuan Shao's grandeur and matched Cao Mengde's decisiveness. However...

"Yuan Gong is truly..." Zhou Yu muttered as he reviewed the latest intelligence. He had already understood the situation in Yuzhou well. Initially, Zhou Yu thought Yuan Shu's retreat was inevitable, but Yuan Shu's decision shocked even him. Such boldness left Zhou Yu awed, but the glaring flaw in Yuan Shu's reasoning left him even more astounded.

"I knew Uncle Gonglu was always a bit...unusual. See? I was right!" Sun Ce said triumphantly, as if to confirm his ability to judge people. "He always keeps his word, even if it's sometimes unreliable. But once he sets his mind on something, nothing can stop him. Just like back when the Imperial Seal was right in front of him, and he just turned away. Once he's decided, he won't back down—Jiangling will fall!"

"It's indeed surprising," Zhou Yu nodded in agreement. "But if Yuan Gong succeeds in capturing Jiangling, the political landscape will shift dramatically. However, even if he succeeds, it's meaningless at

this time. We should have done as Taishan's Liu Xuande did: take the spoils back home and consolidate our base, rather than expanding our territory recklessly. The occupied areas in Jingbei still have Liu Biao's influence."

"Does this mean Uncle is bound to fail?" Sun Ce asked, alarmed. Although Sun Ce trusted Zhou Yu completely, hearing his assessment left him tense. "Gongjin, what should we do?"

"There's nothing we can do except block the Yangtze River," Zhou Yu replied calmly. "Send patrol boats everywhere and don't give Liu Jingsheng any opportunities. Also, Bofu, it's time for you to have your own personal troops."

Sun Ce hesitated at first but eventually nodded, agreeing with Zhou Yu's suggestion.

The original three thousand soldiers under their command had grown to nearly twenty thousand waterborne troops after defeating Huang Zu in Jiangxia, with over a hundred ships. This force was equivalent to that of a major regional power.

Despite his own growing power, Yuan Shu had allowed Sun Ce to lead this force without any oversight, a gesture that moved Sun Ce deeply. Even veteran generals like Cheng Pu and Huang Gai no longer had any reason to criticize Yuan Shu. Yuan Shu had indeed done everything he could to protect the Sun family without asking for anything in return, which earned him their genuine loyalty.

After agreeing to Zhou Yu's proposal, Sun Ce suddenly realized something. "Wait, why are we blocking the Yangtze River?"

"To prevent Liu Jingsheng from acting out of desperation. These next ten days will be Yuan Gong's final push. It's unlikely that Jiangling will fall, but if it becomes endangered, Liu Jingsheng might just lose his mind and do something drastic, like tampering with the Yangtze River." Zhou Yu explained, exasperated by Sun Ce's slow comprehension. Despite Sun Ce's moments of brilliance, Zhou Yu's exceptional intellect often made Sun Ce seem lacking in comparison.

Sun Ce wasn't stupid; he understood some things well. "If Liu Biao did that, he'd have no future left. Jingzhou relies on the local gentry for stability. If he pulls a stunt like that, he can forget about remaining as the Governor of Jingzhou. He'd be dead either way, so why ruin his reputation for 'benevolence'?"

Zhou Yu chuckled at Sun Ce's sarcastic analysis. "Liu Biao wouldn't do it, but Kuai Yue (previously confused with Kuai Liang) might."

Sun Ce paused, trying to understand Zhou Yu's reasoning, but quickly gave up and simply asked, "Why?"

Zhou Yu's face showed his frustration. Sun Ce seemed determined to rely entirely on him, having almost stopped using his own brain since Zhou Yu's arrival, focusing instead on physical training.

"Because you will absolutely kill Kuai Yue. His intelligence won't save him; he has to die, no matter what," Zhou Yu explained wearily, lamenting Sun Ce's lack of initiative.

Sun Ce's carefree demeanor instantly vanished, replaced by a cold, calculating expression. "So you're saying Uncle might fall because of him?"

"That's why we're going to block the Yangtze and not give him the chance," Zhou Yu nodded. "Also, you should pick five thousand elite troops skilled in both naval and land combat. If Yuan Gong orders a retreat, take eight hundred of them to ambush here, while the rest can cover the rear under the command of our veteran generals." Zhou Yu pointed to a valley on the map, just a few dozen miles from Jiangling.

Sun Ce didn't fully grasp why they needed to do this, but that didn't stop him from following Zhou Yu's plan—after all, Zhou Yu hadn't made a mistake yet.

Bofu, you don't understand, Zhou Yu thought to himself as he looked at Sun Ce. I want you to become a ruler in your own right, not just another warlord's subordinate. Don't blame me for this. With five thousand elite troops, prepared for both land and sea battles, you can secure your position in Yangzhou if necessary. I can't shake the feeling that Yuan Gong will make a disastrous mistake one day. We need to be prepared in advance. Your noble bearing is that of a true leader, Bofu. Trust me, I won't betray your confidence—I'll help you become a king!

Unaware of Zhou Yu's thoughts, Sun Ce remained entirely loyal to Yuan Shu. Neither Sun Ce nor his family's retainers harbored any resentment toward Yuan Shu. They were not ingrates and never considered the idea of establishing their own kingdom.

Chapter 182: Using a Borrowed Sword

After distributing a large amount of silver, Yuan Shu's army exhibited an astonishing level of combat prowess. With both sides' generals' advantages neutralized, the fight now became a pure contest of strength. The soldiers, driven by the lure of wealth, finally gave Yuan Shu a glimpse of the possibility of conquering Jiangling within ten days.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" Ji Ling roared as he led his elite troops into battle, wielding his double-edged spear. His unwavering loyalty to Yuan Shu drove him to fight bravely on the front lines, despite nearly being killed by Huang Zhong earlier. But now, with Yuan Shu's orders, Ji Ling fearlessly charged at the city walls, leading his men as if he were not the army's commander but just another soldier.

With Ji Ling, the army's general, leading the charge, Yuan Shu's troops were galvanized. They carried ladders and repeatedly assaulted Jiangling's walls. The sounds of battle, neighing horses, and dying cries intertwined along the banks of the Yangtze River.

After nine days of relentless fighting, the supposedly impregnable walls of Jiangling had sustained significant damage. The once-pristine stone walls were now stained with blood, and the moat, nearly twenty meters wide, had been filled with corpses and debris.

Kuai Yue sat atop the city wall, his once-genteel demeanor now tainted by blood. The once-proud Kuai Yue had abandoned all pretense of nobility, fighting alongside the soldiers to defend the city. He knew that while others could surrender, he and Liu Biao could not. For them, defeat meant certain death.

Defeat equaled death, so Kuai Yue no longer cared about appearances or dragging others down with him in these final moments. He wasn't the head of his family; even if he went too far, Kuai Liang could just disown him, so Kuai Yue had let go of all reservations. His mind was clear, unaffected by others' opinions.

After nine days of brutal slaughter, Kuai Yue had shed his scholarly airs, defending the walls alongside the troops. He had an inexplicable feeling that he was no longer controlling his own body but watching himself from a distance. In that moment, his thoughts became exceptionally clear. All the details fell into place, and he gained a comprehensive understanding of the world's situation, seeing through Yuan Shu's facade of strength.

"So that's how it is," Kuai Yue thought, a smile forming on his face as his mental clarity grew. "Yuan Shu likely can't hold out much longer. Victory is mine." He could see the probability of Yuan Shu retreating

and even predicted the possibility of an ambush in the valley—perhaps involving five hundred to eight hundred men. He knew it wouldn't be Ji Ling or Lu Bu covering the retreat.

"No, wait. On the Yangtze River, Sun Ce might heed Zhou Yu's advice and ambush there. The Sun family and the Yuan family are not the same. Zhou Yu is a wise man; if he left Yuan Shu to join Sun Ce, then he might seize this opportunity to give Sun Ce a reason to command his own troops." Information continued to flow through Kuai Yue's mind, and in this moment, he seemed to stand outside the chessboard, observing the game.

"If it's Sun Ce, then..." Kuai Yue's expression turned cold as he planned how to utterly defeat Yuan Shu's forces.

Suddenly, a sharp pain stabbed through Kuai Yue's head, shattering the serene state he had entered, where he had calmly observed the unfolding events as if they were a game of chess. He screamed in agony and collapsed, unconscious.

Kuai Yue had unknowingly awakened his mental abilities at that moment. Under the influence of this power, he could visualize the world's situation as a chessboard and consider all possible moves coldly and rationally. As the one holding the pieces, he wouldn't concern himself with the fate of the pawns.

Kuai Yue was carried down from the city wall, his mind still reeling in pain. But upon seeing Liu Biao, he forced himself to recall the crucial matters at hand.

"Master, quickly make an announcement: Yuan Shu will retreat within five days, and remember, Cao Mengde cannot be trusted. There is a ninety percent chance that all of this is Cao Mengde's design—he is gambling with the world's fate!" Kuai Yue struggled to convey his analysis to Liu Biao, though the pain in his head twisted his expression.

"What? Yuan Shu will retreat in five days?" Liu Biao was stunned but then burst into joy. After all, during these past ten days, Yuan Shu's relentless attacks had left Jiangling's defenses exhausted and on the verge of collapse. Yuan Shu had already spread word that those who surrendered would be spared, causing panic within Jiangling. If not for the city's high walls and Liu Biao's residual influence, Yuan Shu might have already taken Jiangling.

"Within five days, he will retreat!" Kuai Yue repeated with difficulty. "Master, please prepare yourself. When that happens, we can restore Nanjun and Jiangxia in one fell swoop."

"Kuai Yue, tell me more," Liu Biao urged. After enduring so much, he was desperate for good news.

Kuai Yue hesitated briefly as the pain in his head intensified, but he managed to recall the critical information he had analyzed earlier.

"Master, remember this: As soon as Yuan Shu ceases his assault, have General Huang challenge him to a duel. If no one responds, immediately order a pursuit. Yuan Shu might forget this, but Zhou Gongjin will not forget to set up an ambush to secure glory for Sun Ce!" Kuai Yue struggled to articulate, beads of sweat streaming down his face. "As for the matter of breaching the Yangtze, please forgive me for my previous rashness; it is no longer a possibility."

"If there's an ambush, why pursue? Shouldn't we focus on reclaiming lost territories from Yuan Shu instead?" Liu Biao asked, puzzled.

"Use one enemy to kill another! This is a scheme to sow discord!" Kuai Yue closed his eyes in pain, struggling to speak as sweat continued to pour down his face.

"A brilliant plan!" Liu Biao exclaimed, then quickly realized the brilliance of the strategy. By using Yuan Shu's forces to eliminate potential traitors within his ranks and handing the credit to Sun Ce, he would incite Sun Ce's ambition to establish his own rule.

"All others should focus on reclaiming the lost territories in Jingbei. As for Xiangyang, Master, you must give it up. Firstly, we lack the strength; even if we take Xiangyang, it would be a pyrrhic victory. Secondly, if we do take Xiangyang, we open the gateway to Nanyang, and then we'll have to face Cao Mengde, that hungry wolf! If Yuan Shu is defeated at Jiangling, Cao Mengde will surely seize Wancheng!" Kuai Yue's eyes were bloodshot, revealing the immense strain he was under.

"Kuai Yue, you need to rest. Leave the rest to me!" Liu Biao, seeing the pain on Kuai Yue's face, couldn't bear to push him any further.

Reassured by Kuai Yue's analysis, Liu Biao was finally able to relax. He then summoned all his civil and military officials.

As he surveyed his officials' reactions—ranging from disdain and confusion to sneers—Liu Biao smiled. Indeed, another round of restructuring was necessary; Kuai Yue's suggestion of using one enemy to kill another was the perfect approach.

"Everyone, please be at ease. I have an important announcement," Liu Biao said, his eyes cold as he looked at the gathered officials, half of whom, he thought, deserved death.

A murmur spread through the crowd. At this point, with Jiangling on the brink of collapse, Liu Biao's authority had significantly diminished. The noble families weren't too concerned about the city's fall—they saw it as merely a change in leadership, as long as their own positions remained secure.

"Bang!" Liu Biao slammed the table, silencing the room, then laughed heartily. "Within five days, Yuan Shu will retreat!"

Chapter 183: Yuan Shu's Retreat

Whether Liu Biao's words were believed by those present or not, it didn't matter much at this point. Whether Yuan Shu retreated five days earlier or later made no difference; these people were indifferent, merely waiting to see if Liu Biao's prediction would come true. If Yuan Shu didn't retreat after five days, they would feel justified in surrendering, using it as an opportunity to undermine Liu Biao's authority. This would also provide them with a topic of conversation when they eventually negotiated with Yuan Shu.

The day Liu Biao made his declaration, Jiangling City nearly fell to Yuan Shu's forces. The city's defenses wavered, and several of Yuan Shu's soldiers breached the walls. If it hadn't been for Huang Zhong, who managed to kill several of Yuan Shu's advancing officers with his arrows, and Liu Pan, who led the reserves to push Yuan Shu's troops back out of the city, Jiangling might have already fallen.

Witnessing this, the various noble families who had retreated to Jiangling with Liu Biao sneered. Whether Yuan Shu retreated in five days or not, the question remained whether Liu Biao could even hold Jiangling.

That night, Yuan Shu, persuaded by Yang Hong, began a slow retreat under the cover of darkness. This time, however, Yang Hong, usually not the sharpest strategist, remembered the importance of leaving troops to cover their retreat.

The next day, Yuan Shu's camp was eerily silent. Liu Biao's troops, though exhausted, remained vigilant. After a long wait, Huang Zhong, with his keen eyesight, noticed through the gaps in the open tents that the camp was empty. He was stunned for a moment, then quickly informed Liu Biao. It seemed that Huang Zhong had regained some of his fighting spirit recently. His son might be gone, but there was still hope for the future—after all, if Liu Biao could have children, why couldn't he?

With Liu Biao's promises of medicine and hope for his future, Huang Zhong found a renewed purpose and began to respect Liu Biao more, now addressing him formally as "Governor Liu" instead of his previous indifferent manner. It turned out that having a goal in life made all the difference.

"Zhongxing, quickly inform Governor Liu that Yuan Shu has retreated!" Huang Zhong called out to Liu Pan after discovering the empty camp.

"What?" Liu Pan was initially stunned, then overjoyed as he rushed down from the city walls. Soon, the entire city of Jiangling erupted in cheers.

"What's all the noise outside..." Kuai Yue, his eyes sunken and cheekbones protruding, asked weakly. Since using his mental abilities that day, he had been bedridden, even needing assistance to eat. He had lost a significant amount of weight, but his spirit remained uncharacteristically sharp, despite the constant pain in his head.

"Master, the Yu Province army has retreated!" his servant said, a hint of excitement in his voice. The ever-present sounds of battle had filled the servants with dread, fearing that Jiangling might fall at any moment, ending their current way of life.

"So the Yu Province army has retreated. I see." Kuai Yue's expression remained calm, but internally, he felt a surge of emotion. After this battle, Liu Biao would likely favor the Kuai family even more, and Kuai Yue himself would become one of Liu Biao's most trusted advisors.

As for the noble families Kuai Yue had marked for destruction, whether they survived or not, they would no longer have the power to interfere in Jingzhou's affairs. After this, Jingzhou would likely become more unified, its strength not diminished but increased.

"Yuan Shu has retreated?" Liu Biao was momentarily stunned when he received the news, then broke into a joyous laugh. When he had declared in front of everyone that Yuan Shu would retreat within five days, he had appeared confident, but deep down, Liu Biao knew he was taking a gamble. Kuai Yue had fallen into a deep sleep before he could fully explain his reasoning, leaving Liu Biao uncertain. At that moment, there was no turning back. His declaration of five days was both a delaying tactic and a testament to his trust in Kuai Yue. Little did he know, Kuai Yue's prediction was spot-on!

"Quickly mobilize the troops and send a force to pursue them!" Liu Biao wrote out orders, which he handed to a messenger with an air of authority. This time, he was ready to wield the sword decisively. He trusted Kuai Yue's judgment—using one enemy to kill another was the perfect strategy!

This kind of pursuit, harassing a retreating enemy and forcing them to sacrifice their rear guard to protect their retreat, was the favorite tactic of all the rank-and-file soldiers eager to earn military merit. The Li, Yin, Qi, and other prominent families, upon receiving Liu Biao's orders, were overjoyed. They saw it as a gesture of goodwill from Liu Biao, an attempt to placate them. They eagerly mustered their private armies and tenant farmers, ready to take down the fleeing Yuan Shu.

As for their secret negotiations with Yuan Shu over the past few days, those were quickly forgotten. All talk of their illustrious lineage and Yuan Shu's promises were now overshadowed by the imminent military achievements within their grasp. To them, turning Yuan Shu into military merit was the most tangible benefit they could gain—everything else could be set aside.

Liu Biao stood on the city wall, sneering as he watched tens of thousands of troops rush out. He admired their courage but was even more certain that they had little chance of returning. Kuai Yue had pinpointed a location where an ambush by five hundred elite troops would seal their fate. With Yuan Shu's forces blocking their retreat, these hastily trained tenant farmers and serfs, despite their numbers, would be slaughtered in minutes!

"Huang Hansheng, hear my command!" Liu Biao turned to the few who were genuinely loyal to him.

"I am here!" Huang Zhong hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward, clasping his hands in salute.

"Take one thousand soldiers and march west along the river to reclaim Yiling, Zigui, and other cities. Yuan Shu didn't have time to replace their garrisons, so you should be able to take them without resistance. Continue west, consolidate your forces, and when you reach Wuxian, regroup and head north. Take down every city and fortress you encounter until you reach Xiangyang!" Liu Biao's joy grew as he saw Huang Zhong bow his head. He then lavished rewards upon him.

Huang Zhong was taken aback by the authority he was being given. He looked up at Liu Biao's smiling face and sighed. "I will follow you, my lord."

"Hahaha, there is no need for such formality, General. Quickly take command. All supplies, provisions, and troops you encounter on your path are yours to command!" Liu Biao laughed heartily. He wasn't giving Huang Zhong this much power out of generosity but because he knew that only Huang Zhong had the capability to swiftly reclaim most of Nanjun. Liu Biao was willing to gamble that such generosity would win Huang Zhong's loyalty.

"Understood!" Huang Zhong clasped his hands in a formal salute, exuding a newfound sense of dignity. He accepted Liu Biao's orders and immediately began selecting troops for his campaign. "If my lord treats me as a national treasure, I shall repay him with loyalty worthy of a national treasure!"

After seeing Huang Zhong off, Liu Biao assigned tasks to Cai Mao, Wang Wei, and Wen Pin. The Jingzhou navy had been devastated by Huang Zu, and even Cai Mao's fleet, though intact, struggled to leave port due to Zhou Yu's dominance.

Having absorbed Huang Zu's forces, Zhou Yu's navy was now on par with Cai Mao's in terms of manpower and ships. More importantly, Zhou Yu's intelligence far surpassed Cai Mao's expectations.

As for Wei Yan, he had already escorted Jian Yong and Liu Yan back to Taishan. When he would return was uncertain, given that Wei Yan was not part of Jingzhou's official forces.

Lying in ambush in the valley, Sun Ce's heart leaped with joy when he saw dust clouds in the distance. Zhou Yu's prediction was spot on—Jingzhou forces had indeed pursued and taken this route. Glory awaits!

Chapter 184: If You Want My Position as Head of the Family, Come and Take It!

Chen Xi scratched his head as he read the latest intelligence report. It seemed that Yuan Shu's retreat could be considered a strategic withdrawal rather than an outright failure.

"Zijian, make sure we've taken everything valuable from Runan. If there's anything left, we need to take it now," Chen Xi said, setting the report aside. Although Yuan Shu had returned, the likelihood of him retaking Pingyu was almost nonexistent.

"We've already taken everything worth moving. Meng Kang has transported all the goods back. We've stripped Runan of its resources," Hua Xiong replied with great satisfaction. He had managed to secure quite a bit of profit from this operation, and even his soldiers had gained a few extra pounds.

"In that case, send Yuan Shu a letter that allows both sides to save face," Chen Xi said casually. He felt no real pressure from Yuan Shu. If Yuan Shu had successfully captured Jiangling and hadn't been cut off by him, Liu Ye, Cao Cao, and others, then perhaps all of China would be wary of him. But now, if a conflict were to break out, although it might benefit others, it certainly wouldn't benefit Yuan Shu.

On the other side, in Yingchuan, where all his generals had gathered, Cao Cao finally relaxed after receiving the latest report on Yuan Shu. The final step of his strategy to disrupt the Central Plains could now be implemented.

"My lord, can you rest easy now?" Xun Yu asked with a smile.

"Without the efforts of all of you, how could I, Cao Mengde, possess such a prosperous land?" Cao Cao laughed heartily, not forgetting to acknowledge the strategists who had helped him design this plan.

"My lord should quickly march on Wancheng. Now that Yuan Shu's morale is shaken, we should lock down Wancheng, capturing half of Nanyang's fertile lands. With that, we will have the resources to conquer the world!" Cheng Yu advised, stroking his beard.

"Good. I will muster the troops and march on Wancheng at once. If we seal off that area, Nanyang will be divided into northern and southern parts. The northern lands, close to Yingchuan, will become ours. However..." Cao Cao, now in his thirties and at the height of his ambition, was known for his swift and decisive actions.

"My lord need only focus on taking Nanyang. Zhong Yao is one of our Yingchuan kin," said Chen Qun, who had recently joined the circle of strategists, reassuring Cao Cao with a smile.

Yingchuan was truly dominated by the Xun and Chen families. With Chen Qun siding with Cao Cao and the Xun brothers, Xun Yu and Xun You, also in his camp, it took only a minor exertion of influence by these three to bring all of Yingchuan under Cao Cao's control. The local officials in Yingchuan had deep, entangled connections with these two families.

Cao Cao glanced at Xun Yu, who was seated nearby. Xun Yu gave a slight nod, and Cao Cao, whose mind was already sharp, instantly grasped the entire plan.

On the map, the territories under Cao Cao's control were not contiguous, but Chen Qun's words strongly hinted that Zhong Yao was making moves in Chang'an, possibly leveraging the influence of court officials. This would give Cao Cao a legitimate reason to intervene in Zhang Yang's territory and enter Yongzhou and the capital region under the guise of supporting the emperor.

The capital region, ravaged by Dong Zhuo, was now a desolate wasteland, while Cao Cao, who had taken control of Yanzhou, gathered tens of thousands of Yellow Turban soldiers, annexed southern Yu Province, and merged it with Yingchuan, was thriving.

Moreover, with Liu Bei's stronghold fortified in strategic locations, defending against Cao Cao would be the wisest course of action. In the plains of Yanzhou, it would be nearly impossible for Cao Cao to defeat Liu Bei. Without cavalry, occupying Yanzhou was already stretching Cao Cao's lines too thin, worsening an already precarious situation. As Chen Xi had previously said, under the right circumstances, Zang Ba's three thousand cavalry could wreak havoc across Yanzhou, thoroughly embarrassing Cao Cao.

For this reason, Xun Yu was not optimistic about the situation in Yanzhou. However, despite his concerns, life had to go on. Xun Yu constantly calculated the balance of power between the two sides and finally found a path forward. Certain less critical areas of Yanzhou could serve as a buffer zone with Liu Bei. After relocating the population, the resulting uninhabited zone, stretching hundreds of miles, would pose a significant challenge for any invader.

As for where the relocated population would live, Xun Yu had already devised a solution—developing the capital region. This had been part of Xun Yu's plan for some time. The land in the capital region was fertile, and although the area had been devastated by war, the local noble families had lost their power to resist. This made the region ideal for land distribution.

Xun Yu also had his eye on the elite troops left behind by Dong Zhuo—the Xiliang cavalry. Although the constant warfare in the capital region had turned these soldiers into battle-hardened veterans prone to skirting their duties, they had seen real combat. If Cao Cao could absorb the entire Xiliang cavalry and retrain them, they would become a formidable force capable of challenging any warlord in the land.

Moreover, Xun Yu harbored a thought he had yet to voice: the development of Taishan was happening too quickly. Liu Bei's power was growing at a pace that drew the attention of the entire country. Xun Yu's instincts told him that Liu Bei might eventually become Cao Cao's greatest rival.

With these considerations in mind, Xun Yu was compelled to act early. What was initially planned as a war of conquest to be waged years later had to be launched immediately. Similarly, the planned actions against the capital region and the Xiliang cavalry had to be moved up to the present. Although acting this early was risky, it was better than being caught unprepared. By taking this path, there was still hope of unifying the land.

In truth, Xun Yu knew he was being somewhat hasty. If Cao Cao could fully absorb Yanzhou, all of Yu Province except for Taishan, and half of Nanyang, he would control over five million people. With such a base in the heart of China, blessed with wise ministers and fierce generals, and abundant resources, Cao Cao would have the strength to challenge any warlord, even Yuan Shao. There was no need to rush.

"Wenruo, are you unwell?" Cao Cao asked with concern. His current prosperity was due in large part to Xun Yu's efforts. If something happened to Xun Yu, chaos would likely ensue across his territories.

"Thank you for your concern, my lord. I am fine. I was merely thinking too deeply," Xun Yu replied, shaking his head. He did not mention the specifics of his thoughts, but he did not notice the faint smirk on Chen Qun's lips.

Chen Qun had originally intended to delay his entry into public life, preferring to travel and observe the various warlords up close. However, Chen Xi's actions—defeating a million Yellow Turbans, pressing Yuan Shao in Jizhou, and seizing Nanpi—had shaken the Chen family to its core. Under such circumstances, Chen Qun could no longer afford to maintain his aloofness.

Upon seeing Chen Xi's accomplishments, Chen Qun understood why Chen Xi had acted as he did—because Chen Xi was just like him, equally proud! When Chen Qun saw the report detailing Chen Xi's

achievements, he recognized that Chen Xi deserved to be placed on the same level as himself. Chen Xi had earned the right to be proud.

This was a chaotic era, and it had its own rules. In this time, noble status was no longer determined by blood alone but by raw power. Whether they were bastards, cadet branches, or distant relatives, anyone with the right lineage had the right to claim leadership of their family.

Chen Qun had no intention of relinquishing what was rightfully his. Even if he did not care much for the position of family head, if Chen Xi wanted to take it from him, he would have to fight for it. They would see who was truly the stronger between them!

Chapter 185: The Newly Crowned "Number One Warlord in the Land"

Chen Qun's desire to put pressure on Chen Xi was something that Chen Xi was completely unaware of. Even if he had known, he might have just chuckled. Xun Yu was someone who could make Chen Xi feel a bit conflicted, but Chen Qun? Not so much. While Chen Qun was undoubtedly intelligent, there was still a thin line separating him from the very top tier of strategists. And that thin line was enough for Xun Yu to completely overshadow him.

To Chen Xi, Chen Qun simply didn't have what it took to go toe-to-toe with him. Chen Xi's status was on par with Xun Yu, while Chen Qun was better suited to contend with Chen Xi's right-hand man, Lu Su. After all, in Chen Xi's view, it was a battle between equals—king against king, general against general. Chen Qun just didn't make the cut.

If Chen Xi had known about Chen Qun's recent machinations, he would have held him in even lower regard. Petty schemes wouldn't be enough to topple Xun Yu, unless, of course, Cao Cao no longer needed him. But considering Xun Yu's impeccable character and vast network of allies, it was clear that Xun Yu was indispensable to Cao Cao.

As for whether Chen Qun could ever surpass Xun Yu, Chen Xi could only sigh. That was nothing but a pipe dream. Even if Chen Qun had arrived earlier than Xun Yu, he might have stood a chance at vying for influence. But given that Xun Yu had not only been first to join Cao Cao but had also established himself as an essential advisor, any attempt by Chen Qun to displace him was doomed to fail.

The fact remained that Chen Qun and Xun Yu's skills overlapped far too much, and in the area of governance—which was precisely what Cao Cao needed most—Chen Qun was essentially a watered-

down version of Xun Yu. In such a situation, it was only logical that Cao Cao would grant Chen Qun a high-ranking position, but keep the real power firmly in Xun Yu's hands.

Meanwhile, Yuan Shu had retreated back to Xiangyang, leaving Jiangxia County to Sun Ce, who had performed admirably in covering the retreat. Yuan Shu also officially recognized the five thousand soldiers Sun Ce had brought from the boats, incorporating them into Sun Ce's personal forces. Sun Ce, overjoyed by this development, vowed to defend Jiangxia and the surrounding regions.

"Master, we've received the latest intelligence from Yu Province. The Liu Bei forces that occupied four counties in Yu Province have now fully withdrawn. Except for Chen Zichuan's central force, which is still in the interior, the other two forces have retreated to the borders and are likely to leave the province soon. The central force is also slowly pulling back," Yang Hong reported to Yuan Shu, his head bowed.

"Liu Bei has withdrawn?" Yuan Shu was momentarily stunned, then elated. This meant that he hadn't lost his base in Yu Province after all. He had expected a tough battle upon returning to Nanyang, but to his surprise, Liu Bei's forces had already pulled out.

"Master, we initially overestimated the situation and forgot that Liu Xuande has no way to fully occupy Yu Province. His power base is in Taishan, and he has recently absorbed Qing Province. The fact that he was able to defeat our garrison forces speaks volumes about his strength. But occupying an entire province requires far more resources than merely winning a battle. Liu Bei would need to commit at least fifteen to twenty thousand troops just to suppress any local resistance," Yang Hong explained with a wry smile. There were some things he left unsaid.

"Does that mean we shouldn't have retreated?" Yuan Shu's anger flared as he stared at Yang Hong.

"Master, Liu Xuande's situation mirrors our own. We don't have enough forces to fully occupy all this territory either. Even if we had captured Jiangling, we wouldn't have the manpower to defend it properly. Our resources are stretched thin," Yang Hong said, exasperated as he tried to make Yuan Shu understand just how large his domain had become.

"Our forces are stretched thin?" Yuan Shu asked, astonished that he hadn't realized this sooner.

"Master, it may seem that we've only taken Nanjun and Jiangxia, but we never fully controlled Nanyang. Liu Biao had already infiltrated the area with his influence. Now, we've secured all of Nanyang, and

during our campaign in Jingxiang, both Jiujiang and Lujiang have surrendered to us,” Yang Hong added, his expression filled with pride. He hadn’t expected his earlier efforts to sow discord in those regions to pay off so handsomely.

“What?” Yuan Shu was taken aback, then burst into laughter. “Hahaha! Truly, I, Yuan Gonglu, am destined by heaven! Well done, Ziheng! With these two counties, our territory in Yu Province and northern Jing Province are now fully connected, eliminating any risk of separation!”

“Congratulations, Master!” Yang Hong shared in Yuan Shu’s joy.

“In that case, let’s cease our campaigns for now and allow Liu Jingsheng to live a little longer. Hmm, make sure to appease Sun Bofu and ensure he doesn’t get any wrong ideas. Also, send Lu Bu to teach Cao Cao a lesson and bring me the head of the Chen family patriarch. How dare they seize my Yingchuan!” Yuan Shu, in high spirits, was now inclined to let things rest for the moment. He had gained new territories and felt it was time to consolidate, but he hadn’t forgotten his desire to deal with Cao Cao.

As for Liu Bei, the intelligence Yuan Shu had gathered all pointed to one conclusion: this man was no weakling. Yuan Shu appreciated Liu Bei’s restraint in not pushing further against him, so he decided to focus on dealing with Cao Cao and the meddlesome Chen family in Yingchuan.

After all, Yuan Shu was not one to take a hit without retaliating. He couldn’t catch up to Liu Bei, but Cao Cao, who dared to occupy his Yingchuan, would have to be taught a lesson. Yuan Shu felt it was only fitting as the newly crowned “Number One Warlord in the Land.”

“Ziheng, send Zhang Xun and the others back to Yu Province to regroup and train new recruits. By this time next year, I want to see fifteen thousand new soldiers!” Yuan Shu ordered confidently. Although Yu Province had suffered some losses due to Liu Bei’s raids, Yuan Shu was certain that the province’s deep roots would allow it to recover quickly.

“Yes, Master!” Yang Hong quickly recorded Yuan Shu’s orders.

“Ensure that Qiao Rui’s family is well taken care of! Although he was somewhat unreliable in life, he stood up when it mattered most. Inform his family that his eldest son will inherit his position once he comes of age!” Yuan Shu added. Although Qiao Rui had failed to hold Pingyu, he had died fighting to

protect the Yuan family, and for a man like Yuan Shu, known for his sense of loyalty, ensuring Qiao Rui's family's well-being was a matter of personal honor.

Chapter 186: Relocating the Scholars of Yu Province

Cao Cao couldn't care less whether Yuan Shu was favored by the heavens or not. Once Xun Yu had decided on a strategy to seize Wan City, Cao Cao was determined to take it!

That's why, before Yuan Shu could even react, Cao Cao had already captured Wan City. Xun Yu and his companions were not the type to resort to a siege unless absolutely necessary. Moreover, at that time, Wan City was a hub of commerce, with both the Xun and Chen families operating businesses there.

Before Yuan Shu's defeat at Jiangling, Xun Yu had already anticipated Chen Xi's tactics for attacking Pingyu by recruiting grave robbers. He had then arranged for wells to be dug in Wan City.

However, Wan City was not under lockdown at that time and remained a commercial center. Goods flowed in and out freely, and with the right bribes, no one bothered to inspect anything closely. Taking advantage of this, Xun Yu and Chen Qun used their family trade routes to conceal their activities and dug a tunnel leading outside the city before Yuan Shu's return.

Thanks to this tunnel, Xiahou Yuan was able to lead a rapid, covert march to Wan City, arriving without detection. He used the tunnel to capture the city overnight. The wealthiest city in the land had changed hands, and by the next morning, many of its residents were unaware that anything had happened.

Following this, Cao Cao's forces swiftly swept through the northern part of Wan City, seizing half of Nanyang with lightning speed, bringing over a million people under his control.

By the time Chen Xi received word of these developments, he was already nearing Taishan. Chen Xi had taken so much from Pingyu, which was the most prosperous area in Runan, the gem of Yu Province, that he had stripped it clean. From the treasury to the population, anything Chen Xi deemed valuable was taken.

First, Chen Xi seized the grain and money from the treasury. Even though Yu Province, known as the "Granary of the World," had not yet collected the summer taxes, the treasury still held over two million bushels of grain. Chen Xi wasted no time in commandeering all the carts in Pingyu to transport the grain, knowing that filling his own stores was the best course of action.

After clearing out the grain and money, Chen Xi began selecting literate scholars from Runan. As long as they weren't from aristocratic families, he rounded them up, whether they were willing or not, and relocated their entire families. He offered generous benefits: a hundred acres of land, a house, and provisions—essentially a guaranteed livelihood in exchange for moving to Qing Province.

Despite these generous offers, half of the scholars in Runan refused to leave. In the end, Chen Xi resorted to forcibly relocating them, packing up their entire families along with all their belongings, even pets, and sending them to Qing Province.

Chen Xi was well aware that these scholars would eventually adjust their attitudes once they saw the grand library in Taishan. He understood that Yu Province would soon face chaos, and that bringing these scholars to Qing Province to enrich its cultural landscape was the best course of action.

After packing up the scholars, he turned to craftsmen—blacksmiths, miners, carpenters, doctors, and even those skilled in making sugared hawthorn sticks. Another group was packed onto carts and sent away. Unlike the scholars, the craftsmen were much easier to deal with; as soon as Chen Xi's soldiers showed up with swords drawn, they were more than willing to follow orders.

With their families packed up, Chen Xi realized he had relocated nearly 300,000 people. Fortunately, Lu Su was well-organized, and the Qing Province soldiers maintained order during the migration, resulting in minimal casualties along the way.

Hua Xiong couldn't understand why Chen Xi was doing all this, and even Lu Su and Liu Ye thought it was unnecessary. Both had opposed Chen Xi's forced relocation of scholars.

As for Li You and Jia Xu, they hadn't expressed any opinions at the start; they simply went about their own business.

These two had too much experience. As soon as Chen Xi began his operations, Jia Xu followed suit by relocating craftsmen from Qiao County. His methods were so efficient that they made Chen Xi feel inadequate. Chen Xi even suspected that Jia Xu had long wanted to do this but had been waiting for someone else to take the blame.

Liu Ye thought the relocations were unnecessary, and Chen Xi had a hard time convincing him otherwise. By the time Chen Xi learned how Li You and Jia Xu were convincing the scholars to move, he realized just how naive he had been.

Li You distributed many books, all in paper format. When these books fell into the hands of various scholars, Li You would retrieve them and inform the scholars that the Taishan Library would allow them to borrow such books, provided they registered their household in Taishan or Qing Province.

Li You even showed them a household registration card, demonstrating the process. His experience and foresight left Chen Xi feeling helpless; it was no wonder this man had once held power over the entire empire. His methods were unparalleled—one move to solve both the relocation and future household registration issues, all without coercion, but rather by making the scholars beg for it.

The scholars were not fools. Upon learning that registering in Taishan would grant them access to borrow books, and seeing Li You's kind demeanor, those who had found books quietly made plans to move. In the end, most of them did not return the household registration cards to Li You. As for the few who refused to admit they had found books, Li You simply ensured they would learn their lesson.

The scholars realized that settling in Taishan would allow them to borrow thousands of books freely. Considering their current circumstances, they had no reason to hesitate. Moving was the only sensible choice.

As word spread, scholars from all over Pei County began making their way toward Taishan and Qing Province. Even some disillusioned sons of aristocratic families joined the migration, drawn by the prospect of a library filled with free books. For a scholar in the late Han period, a place where one could read without charge was a rare treasure. Moreover, traveling was a common practice for scholars, provided their shoes could withstand the journey.

When Chen Xi learned of this, he immediately ordered his men to spread the word about the benefits of settling in Taishan. Whether the scholars believed it or not, they would see the truth for themselves once they arrived. It was also an opportunity for Chen Xi to redeem his reputation!

By providing this information now, once the library was built, these scholars—who had benefited from the relocation—would be less likely to harbor resentment, and any negative remarks would have little impact on Chen Xi's standing.

After all, once the library was established, Chen Xi's prestige would be beyond reproach.

Chapter 187: The Zhang Clan Comes North

On his way back home, Chen Xi was calculating all the things he needed to do and realized there was quite a lot on his plate. Some of these tasks couldn't be handed over to Lu Su, like getting married...

Originally, his wedding was scheduled for May, but due to the battle with the Yellow Turbans, the date was missed. Afterward, Chen Xi was granted a title of nobility, which delayed the wedding further. Chen Xi could only shrug helplessly at the traditional customs of the time—ceremonial obligations were indeed cumbersome, but living in this era meant adhering to its norms.

Then, Fan Liang sent word, suggesting that when he marries Chen Lan, he should also marry Fan Jian. Well, that was a bit inaccurate—it was actually suggested that when he marries Fan Jian, he should take Chen Lan as a concubine since Fan Jian would be his main wife.

After sorting through all the arrangements, Chen Xi realized that marrying Fan Jian might have to wait until the end of the year. The three formal letters and six ceremonial gifts would need to be re-arranged, and Fan Jian's elders would have to come to Taishan in person since Chen Xi's status now required proper formalities.

While the wedding could be postponed, building the new library and Liu Bei's new residence couldn't wait—they needed to be expedited as time was running out.

On top of that, there were other tasks like reorganizing household registration, managing the influx of population, adjusting the military, and reforming the tax system. Chen Xi felt overwhelmed. Although he had anticipated how difficult it would be to achieve his initial goals within three years, now that the responsibilities were truly upon him, he felt on the verge of collapse. But there was no other choice—rapid progress while ensuring a stable foundation required hard work.

"Zichuan, you're finally back!" Liu Bei appeared outside the carriage as soon as Chen Xi arrived at Fenggao.

"Thank you for coming to meet me, Xuande Gong," Chen Xi replied with a wry smile.

"You look exhausted, Zichuan!" Liu Bei laughed heartily, then turned to Hua Xiong, saying, "Zijian, take your troops back to the camp. Tonight, I will host a banquet in your honor."

"Thank you, my lord!" Hua Xiong and the others saluted.

"Zichuan, come into the city and take a look. You'll be in for a big surprise!" Liu Bei said firmly, though there seemed to be a hint of something unpleasant in his tone. It was clear that, despite returning only ten days before Chen Xi, Liu Bei had experienced some troubling events.

"It seems like there are a lot more arrow slits on the walls," Chen Xi observed as he examined the fortifications. He clearly remembered that when he left, Fenggao's city walls had only a few dozen arrow slits, but now, there seemed to be one every twenty meters.

"You'll be even more surprised once you're inside," Liu Bei said, though his smile seemed forced.

Chen Xi's heart sank as he noticed the stone-paved roads and the three massive iron-clad, gleaming city gates. It pained him to see such extravagance.

This kind of ostentatious design certainly wasn't something Lu Su would have done. After all, city gates in this world weren't meant to rely on their own defensive strength; like ships, they relied on the city gate commander and soldiers to transmit internal energy to maintain their strength. Cladding the gates with iron was entirely pointless—just a waste.

"Zichuan, you don't look well. Are you feeling unwell?" Liu Bei's last glimmer of hope shattered as he noticed that Chen Xi, like Li You, Jia Xu, and Liu Ye before him, had turned pale with a bitter smile. But still, he clung to a sliver of hope...

"Xuande Gong, how much did you spend on this?" Chen Xi asked, his voice strained.

Liu Bei held up a finger, and Chen Xi breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness, Xuande Gong didn't go overboard. One million coins is still bearable. I knew Zijian wouldn't let things get out of hand."

"Ten million coins..." Liu Bei said, somewhat embarrassed.

"Did you pave the entire city?" Chen Xi asked, forcing a smile.

"The entire city," Liu Bei whispered.

"Wenru didn't stop you?" Chen Xi asked, incredulous.

"I didn't consult Wenru. I thought it was a small matter, especially since neither you nor Zijong spent money when building cities," Liu Bei admitted with a wry smile.

"Xuande Gong, how many times have you told others to surprise me with this news?" Chen Xi asked helplessly, guessing that Liu Bei must have told many people already.

"I've told everyone who returned," Liu Bei said, looking somewhat dejected. He had thought he had done a good deed by making Fenggao cleaner and more orderly, only to be met with bitter smiles from every advisor who returned.

"Has Zijong been too busy with administrative work to notice how Fenggao has changed? And, by the way, you haven't paid for it yet, have you?" Chen Xi asked, covering his face. It was embarrassing.

Sure enough, Liu Bei's expression turned even more troubled.

"What family could be so generous to pull off something like this?" Chen Xi asked, exasperated.

"Spending ten million coins like this, I can't think of any family that could."

"Xuande Gong, don't worry about it. Ten million coins is nothing we can't afford. Making Fenggao clean and orderly is a good thing, even if I wouldn't have spent a single coin on it," Chen Xi said, comforting Liu Bei while simultaneously dealing a heavy blow. However, Liu Bei was remarkably broad-minded, having grown accustomed to setbacks, and merely offered a sheepish smile.

"Chen Zichuan, you're as sharp-tongued as ever, though I must admit your wisdom," came a female voice from nearby, rich and melodious, full of wealth and grandeur.

Chen Xi and Liu Bei turned to see a woman in her thirties standing beside a luxurious carriage, her face adorned with a gentle smile. Though her words were directed at Chen Xi, she bowed gracefully to Liu Bei, saying, "This humble woman, Zhen Zhang, greets Xuande Gong."

"Xuande Gong, this is the true head of the Zhen family of Jizhou," Chen Xi immediately understood the situation and introduced her to Liu Bei.

"A pleasure to meet you, Madam," Liu Bei said, momentarily taken aback but maintaining his composure as he returned the greeting.

Chen Xi was internally resigned. This woman certainly held a grudge; she didn't bow to him, even though he now held the title of marquis—a rare honor in the Han dynasty, not to be confused with the devalued titles of the Three Kingdoms era.

"Xuande Gong, there's no need for such courtesy. I'm here to apologize for my previous rudeness. Fenggao is the most magnificent city I've ever seen. I hope Xuande Gong won't mind that the Zhen family took the liberty of making some adjustments," Zhang spoke humbly, in stark contrast to her previous arrogance in Jizhou.

"I should be thanking the Zhen family instead. Fenggao has never looked so clean and orderly, all thanks to your efforts," Liu Bei said with joy. Sometimes slow to grasp things, he was quick to understand this time. He instantly recognized Zhang's intentions and felt a growing sense of goodwill toward the elegant lady, especially since she had taken responsibility for his earlier mistake, attributing it to the Zhen family.

Chapter 188: Recruit Some Female Officials to Make Adjustments

Although Chen Xi felt that spending ten million coins to pave the entire Fenggao City was indeed somewhat wasteful, since the money didn't come from his pocket, he decided to just pretend he hadn't seen anything.

This incident, however, served as a reminder to Chen Xi that Liu Bei's personal finances and the state treasury must be kept separate. Otherwise, if Liu Bei inadvertently made a costly decision like this again, even with good intentions, it could lead to resentment among his subordinates. Ten million coins was no small sum—enough to support a strong army—so spending it on paving Fenggao was indeed a bit extravagant.

Once their finances were separated, any lavish spending Liu Bei indulged in would be with his own money, and no one would have the right to criticize him. In fact, Chen Xi thought it might be necessary to allocate more resources to Liu Bei and teach him how to spend money wisely, preventing him from engaging in unnecessary projects.

"I'll discuss this with Zijing and the others when I see them. We must ensure that the state treasury and private funds are never mixed." Chen Xi thought to himself. It was a small step to limit the power of the highest authority, and the timing was appropriate. If they waited until Liu Bei had control over the entire country, it would be much more difficult to implement, with many people likely citing precedents about the relationship between the royal family and the state.

"Zichuan, you're lost in thought again," Liu Bei said with a smile, looking visibly relieved after being freed from the burden of that ten-million-coin expense.

"Ah, I just remembered there are a lot of things that need to be dealt with. Please don't take offense, my lord, Madam Zhang," Chen Xi responded with a gentle smile, his demeanor calm, showing no embarrassment at being caught daydreaming.

"Zichuan, you certainly have a lot on your plate," Liu Bei laughed, and Zhang Shi (Madam Zhang) hid her smile behind a silk fan. Everyone knew how "busy" Chen Xi was.

"It's just a lot of mental work," Chen Xi said with a serious expression. Liu Bei and Zhang Shi were taken aback, quickly realizing that the current situation in Taishan and Qingzhou was indeed the result of Chen Xi's hard work.

Liu Bei had once seen Chen Xi's strategic plans during their return to Qingzhou after the Battle of Hulao Pass. Reflecting on the current situation, though many unexpected events had occurred, the overall direction had steadily followed Chen Xi's earlier projections.

"To have Zichuan's assistance is indeed a blessing from heaven. Heaven has not forsaken our Han dynasty!" Liu Bei paused and respectfully bowed to Chen Xi, while Zhang Shi's eyes flashed with admiration.

"Xuande Gong..." Chen Xi sighed, having been through this ritual many times before. What should he say this time?

"Zichuan, let's go. I'll treat you to some beef," Liu Bei said, not giving Chen Xi a chance to respond, and rarely offered to treat him to beef.

"There's always one or two unruly cattle. Sigh, now that the summer planting is done, it's time to eat the disobedient ones," Chen Xi said, resigned. He remembered when Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping brought back cheap cattle from the northern territories. After being domesticated, they were used as draft animals. Combined with other cattle they had scrounged up, the four or five thousand head of cattle distributed for summer farming had helped win the people's favor.

Now that the cattle had served their purpose, it made sense that the unruly ones would be eaten. In the Central Plains, eating draft animals was a crime, but eating cattle used for farming was permissible. So, Liu Bei had decided to be generous...

"Madam, please join us. Although the Zhen family's wealth means you can get anything you want, and we in Taishan may not have much to offer, it's only proper to extend our hospitality as the hosts," Liu Bei said, still not quite accustomed to his elevated status.

Back when Liu Bei was poor, he was quite sensitive about his humble origins. Now that he was wealthy, he no longer cared about having once woven mats and sold shoes. In fact, he even took some pride in it, thinking that if his ancestor had risen to the throne despite his rough beginnings, then his own humble origins were nothing to be ashamed of.

Reflecting on it, Liu Bei's mindset and demeanor had changed drastically over the past two years. He was no longer the struggling man from before. Now, if someone called him a mere cobbler, Liu Bei would laugh it off, something that would have embittered him in the past.

Given more time, after surpassing all his ancestors and reaching the pinnacle of power, Liu Bei might even respond to such taunts by boasting of his achievements and claiming that even selling shoes could be honorable as long as he governed well and was seen as a wise and benevolent ruler.

This was the biggest change in Liu Bei over the past two years. During the alliance at Hulao Pass, he might have held some reverence for the other warlords. Now, he viewed them with detachment,

confident in his own position. Most of them were not even as successful as he was—there was no need to fear them. If anyone dared challenge him, he was ready.

With this newfound confidence, Liu Bei retained some traits from his humble beginnings, but his overall demeanor had matured, making him more appealing, even to women...

"How could I decline the invitation of Liu Shijun (Governor Liu)?" Zhang Shi replied with a soft smile, bowing gracefully. It was clear she held Liu Bei in high regard.

Feeling that his presence was somewhat awkward, Chen Xi made his excuses and slipped away before Liu Bei could rope him into anything.

As Chen Xi walked through Fenggao City, though the stone-paved streets made his heart ache a bit, he had to admit that Zhang Shi's aesthetic sense was impeccable. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that her perspective differed from that of Chen Xi and Lu Su.

The cleanliness of Fenggao now was enough to pressure the residents into not littering or dumping dirty water in the streets. The city had become significantly cleaner as a result.

"Indeed, some tasks are better suited for women. When Lu Su and I were in charge, the result was a bit too rough. Hmm, maybe I should ask Lady Mi (Mi Zhu's sister) to help with city planning. I heard she's good at painting—maybe she could design the city layout."

As Chen Xi took in the sight of the city, he realized why it had cost ten million coins. It wasn't just about paving the streets with stone; some buildings had been demolished, making the city layout much more reasonable. Most importantly, there were no thatched huts left in Fenggao. All the homes were now uniform earthen houses, each with a small courtyard garden where flowers, trees, and vegetables were planted...

Indeed, if this had been left to Lu Su and Chen Xi, they wouldn't have given it much thought. Providing earthen houses was already the best they could do—anything beyond that wasn't even on their radar.

"It seems we need to recruit some female officials. We've already passed the most difficult period, and with ample resources now, it's time to focus on improving the cultural atmosphere and living

environment in Fenggao. Women in these roles might be more meticulous, even if it costs a bit more." Chen Xi thought with a sly grin. With such a good environment and cultural atmosphere, it was only natural that land prices would skyrocket.

Chapter 189: The Prisoned Flower in the Cage, the Happiness of the Gilded Sparrow

Chen Xi, intending to first return home to comfort his wives and concubines, left Liu Bei and headed straight for his residence. After all, he had transported several billion coins back home, and he wondered where Fan Jian might have stashed all the money.

"Master, you've returned," Old Chen, the head steward, greeted him with a smile as Chen Xi arrived. Chen Xi had finally shed his title of "young master," but the idea of an 18-year-old being called "master" still felt a bit odd.

"Old Chen, you should take more rest. Leave the gatekeeping to the guards; your job is to oversee the household, not to stand at the gate. In a few days, I'll find you a lovely companion; you should focus on enjoying your golden years and maybe even having another son," Chen Xi said with a cheerful tone. As a loyal servant who had stayed with the Chen family even through its decline, Old Chen deserved some peace and joy in his later years.

"How could I let these youngsters guard the gate? They might cause trouble, and that would reflect poorly on the household. Now that you're a marquis, Master, it's important that we maintain the proper decorum," the old steward said, glancing back at the upright guards with a slight shake of his sleeve. Clearly, someone among them had slacked off in their duties at some point.

"Alright, alright. I'll have a small pavilion built for you in the courtyard so you won't have to stand at the gate anymore," Chen Xi relented, acknowledging that Old Chen was indeed meticulous in his duties.

As soon as Chen Xi stepped into the inner courtyard, he was greeted by a chorus of delicate voices from a group of maids, all bowing respectfully.

Chen Xi couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. Compared to the last time he returned, it seemed that the number of women in his household had increased by at least a dozen, and they were all strikingly beautiful. What was going on?

Feeling a bit exasperated, Chen Xi mused that Liu Bei had likely been bored and sent more women to his household. After all, there were only two men in the household: Old Chen, who also served as the steward and occasionally watched the gate, and himself. As for the guards, they didn't count, making the gender imbalance in the household even more pronounced.

"I might as well make them all handmaidens..." Chen Xi thought wickedly, though he quickly dismissed the idea. With his physical condition, he might be able to visit a brothel once every few days, but indulging too frequently could lead to health issues. He was certainly not like Guo Jia, who treated debauchery as a daily routine.

"Jian'er, why are there so many new maids in the house?" Chen Xi asked as he entered the room, where Fan Jian was sitting on the bed, sewing. This time, she was using a thimble on her finger, likely to avoid pricking herself again. Chen Xi's invention had become quite popular, indicating that in this era, almost every woman was skilled in needlework—unlike in later times.

"Hmph, how should I know?" Fan Jian pouted, clearly displeased. The first thing her husband asked upon returning wasn't about her well-being, but about the new maids.

Chen Xi rolled his eyes. If Fan Jian hadn't agreed to it, those maids would never have entered the household. However, he wasn't in the mood to figure out Fan Jian's thoughts. Though she was fairly straightforward, guessing her feelings would ruin the fun.

After some coaxing, Chen Xi finally got the full story from Fan Jian.

The newly arrived maids in the Chen household included eight sent by Liu Bei when he returned recently. Liu Bei's gifts were always of high quality, although they were certainly not on the level of a talented woman like Cai Yan.

Another five were sent by Madam Zhang, along with various other gifts. The remaining maids had been sent by the madam of the brothel that Chen Xi had nearly swindled when he was short on money. They ranged in age from eleven to twenty-two, and they were all high-class courtesans—a rather significant gift.

Fan Jian also informed Chen Xi that the brothel, once located in a small, obscure alley, had now moved to the main street, occupying a prime location. Chen Xi could only shake his head in exasperation.

It wasn't hard for Chen Xi to figure out what had happened. While Chen Xi and the others were off dealing with Yuan Shu, Lu Su had been working tirelessly, and when someone came to change locations using a voucher Chen Xi had written, Lu Su had probably granted them a prime spot on the main street without asking what kind of business they ran. After all, Chen Xi's reputation carried weight, and thus, the brothel ended up on the main street.

As for the idea that the madam had always planned to upgrade to a better location, Chen Xi didn't dwell on it. It wasn't that he held Han dynasty merchants in high regard, but rather, what merchant would dare to scheme against a marquis with real power?

What a joke. He could crush them at any moment. Just as the aristocrats of this era conducted business without fear of being swindled, not because they trusted merchants' ethics, but because they could easily destroy them. For example, the Mi family, without Liu Bei's backing, wouldn't stand a chance against the Zhen family in Jizhou, no matter how wealthy they were.

"Was that voucher really written by you, husband?" Fan Jian asked curiously, her hand gently resting on Chen Xi's chest, though her posture suggested she was ready to take action.

"Haha, that was just to redeem someone for Tan Zhi. I didn't have any money on me," Chen Xi laughed awkwardly, but when he saw Fan Jian's indifferent expression, he decided to answer honestly.

"Do you think I believe that?" Fan Jian asked, her eyes fixed on him.

"Probably not, but it doesn't really matter," Chen Xi said, dropping the pretense after her second question. There was no point in pretending to be scared.

Fan Jian was taken aback, her intended response lost as she sat on Chen Xi's lap, staring at him in silence. After a long pause, she finally spoke in a quiet voice, "Husband, do you find me so unlikable?"

"It's not about dislike or annoyance," Chen Xi said with a complicated expression. He knew that the cold approach would work well here, even if it would hurt their relationship. But some things needed to be said clearly.

“Since you already know, there’s no need to ask. Just do what you’re supposed to do. I’m being honest with you—I don’t want to explain further. You’ve been here long enough to understand. There’s no need to ask me. Actually, Lan is very good; she never asks about these things. You should know that besides Lan, I haven’t touched anyone in the household. You should also know what things are like outside,” Chen Xi said calmly.

“It’s okay to be jealous, and it’s okay to be unhappy, but please focus on your duties. I’m doing what I’m supposed to do, and I expect you to do the same. Don’t worry—no one can take away your position as my legitimate wife,” Chen Xi added, understanding the pressure Fan Jian must have been under. The women sent by Zhang Shi were clearly well-trained and cultured, which must have made Fan Jian feel inadequate.

Fan Jian looked at Chen Xi with teary eyes, feeling wronged. Chen Xi sighed and pulled her into his arms, whispering gently in her ear, “Jian’er, you don’t need to feel that way. What I can give you is the position of the main wife, and no one can take that from you. I can’t say I love you, but I can promise you what you want. The Chen family will always have you as its matron.”

“Let’s move to my residence from now on,” Chen Xi said, sensing that this might be the simplest solution.

Fan Jian cried softly on Chen Xi’s shoulder, feeling a mix of emotions as she thought about the growing number of maids in the household and the long periods of time when she didn’t see her husband. The situation was both realistic and straightforward.

Chen Xi placed no restrictions on her, which made Fan Jian feel insecure. Moreover, Chen Xi had never promised her anything. From the moment she arrived in Taishan, each time Chen Xi returned, his status changed. What started as a down-and-out young master had now become a marquis, and with each return, the gap between them seemed to widen.

Chen Xi rarely stayed with Fan Jian, though he didn’t spend much time with Lan either. However, whenever he was in Fenggao, he would visit Lan every few days, while he rarely visited Fan Jian.

“Alright, stop crying. I’ll give you everything you want,” Chen Xi said, wiping away Fan Jian’s tears with his thumb. He looked at the girl before him, a sixteen-year-old in the prime of her youth. In his time, she would have been just a high school student. Yet, in this era, she had to worry about so many things.

Fan Jian's tears fell in large droplets, as if she were trying to wash away all the grievances she had endured. Chen Xi quietly held her, saying nothing, just holding her close.

Chen Xi looked up at the intricate carvings and silently sighed. "A bird in a cage has its own happiness." If Fan Jian wanted that kind of happiness, he would give it to her. He couldn't give her all of his love, but he could give her enough happiness. After all, she wasn't asking for much. A girl's dream shouldn't be shattered by the hands of her husband.

"I can't give you romance, but I can give you a wedding. I can't give you a garden full of flowers, but I can show you the splendors of the world. I can't grow old with you, but I can ensure you live a life of wealth and honor." Chen Xi thought to himself. A girl's dreams and reality often diverge, but he could provide the latter.

Having shattered one girl's dreams before, Chen Xi was much more cautious this time. Even though he offered Fan Jian reality, he still left her plenty of room for her dreams. While a caged flower may have chosen its own prison, dreams and reality are always different. Although Fan Jian may feel she doesn't need her wings to fly, Chen Xi didn't want to strip them away from her.

Chen Xi smiled wryly as he looked at Fan Jian, who had fallen asleep in his arms after crying herself to exhaustion. She was still so young, too young. He gently brushed aside a strand of hair from her face and leaned down to plant a soft kiss.

Chen Lan, watching quietly from the window, smiled softly. The excitement of her elevated status as a concubine had long passed. As someone who had gone from being a mere singer to a concubine of a marquis, Chen Lan had endured many hardships. She knew her place and performed her duties diligently. Having spent more time with Chen Xi, she understood his character well—distant and cold, yet loyal to those he acknowledged. As long as one didn't overstep their bounds, Chen Xi would never forget them.

Chapter 190: Using Anger to Drive You to Work Hard!

Gently placing Fan Jian on the bed and covering her with a blanket, Chen Xi let out a sigh of relief. Holding her for a short while was fine, but doing so for too long made his legs numb and his arms ache. Even though Fan Jian was light, she was still a sixteen-year-old girl, and no matter how well she was raised, there was only so much weight she could lose.

"You look so gentle, husband," Chen Lan said with a smile, leaning against the window.

"You're easier to take care of," Chen Xi replied helplessly.

"That's how it should be for a lady," Chen Lan said cheerfully, naturally accepting Chen Xi's words.

"Perhaps, but she thinks too much. By the way, have you finished embroidering your wedding dress?" Chen Xi asked, feeling that the previous topic wasn't appropriate and quickly changing it.

"No," Chen Lan shook her head.

In ancient times, weddings were typically held with some level of formality. Originally, Chen Xi was just an ordinary person. After he had removed Chen Lan's slave status, Chen Lan had guessed that Chen Xi intended to marry her as a concubine and had started working on her wedding dress. It took her half a year to complete it, but before she could wear it, Chen Xi was ennobled as a marquis.

With the wedding postponed, many things had to change, starting with Chen Lan's wedding dress. The wedding ceremony had to match Chen Xi's new status, which meant that the dress prepared for a "Daifu" (a middle-ranking official) was no longer appropriate. Now, it had to meet the standards for a "Marquis" level ceremony, which required much more intricate embroidery. However, this was a challenge Chen Lan found exciting and enjoyable.

"Haven't finished it yet, and you're still out here playing? Go back to your room and finish your dress," Chen Xi said, tapping Chen Lan's forehead lightly. "I'm telling you, if it's not done in time, don't blame me if I marry Jian'er first and not you. With my achievements, if you're part of the dowry, you'll get a formal document for the title of 'lady.' But if you miss the timing, you'll lose that chance."

"I'm going to finish my dress right away!" Chen Lan's eyes lit up with excitement, not realizing that Chen Xi intended to secure her a formal title.

"Go on, then," Chen Xi said, waving her off.

In the Han Dynasty, the title of "lady" was not easy to obtain. If Chen Xi hadn't genuinely taken down over a million Yellow Turbans, and if the Han court hadn't felt that he was too young and only given him an honorary title, there would be no way to get formal documents for two ladies. A concubine was just a

concubine, but now that imperial authority had waned, many things were overlooked, and documents for two ladies were already prepared.

After all, Chen Lan had stayed by his side through thick and thin as a loyal servant, and it seemed unfair to leave her with just the status of a concubine. Therefore, he arranged for a document granting her the title of "lady." With this document, Chen Lan could enjoy the same treatment as a wife, both inside and outside the household, and even receive a modest stipend.

In the Han Dynasty, the status of a wife was equal to that of the husband, meaning both enjoyed the same privileges. A concubine, however, was merely a companion—at best, a concubine from a good family who wouldn't be easily dismissed or killed at the wife's whim. After the wife's death, a concubine might have the opportunity to be promoted to wife. In short, the title of "lady" in the Han Dynasty was unique, very different from the titles granted in the Tang Dynasty. It was only given to the legitimate wife of officials with a rank of two thousand shi or higher, making it a rare and prestigious title.

Given Chen Xi's current status, securing the title of "lady" for Fan Jian required no effort. After completing the three letters and six rites, the document for her title would naturally be issued, as Chen Xi's current rank and title were already sufficient. However, obtaining the same for Chen Lan was much more difficult.

Fortunately, it was a time of chaos, with imperial authority diminished after the court had been ravaged by Dong Zhuo and later by Li Jue and Guo Si. The new Minister of Rites was clearly a pragmatist, and Chen Xi, through Mi Zhu, easily secured the documents by providing a generous bribe. Of course, the minister warned that if the emperor ever investigated, he would deny any involvement, but Chen Xi didn't take that seriously. By that time, Liu Xie wouldn't have the power to interfere.

As for the official who would proclaim the document, Liu Bei, Chen Xi was confident that Liu Bei would turn a blind eye and pretend nothing had happened.

With any potential issues at home resolved, Chen Xi headed straight for the government office, determined to put on an angry display and whip Lu Su and the others into shape. Every cog in the machine he had designed needed to start turning at full speed!

"Hey, uh, Ruan Yuliang, give me your sword!" Chen Xi, after perfecting his furious expression in front of a mirror, marched toward the government office. Upon dismounting and seeing Ruan Yuliang standing at the entrance, he realized he was missing something. Without hesitation, he grabbed Ruan Yuliang's sword and stormed inside.

"BANG!" Chen Xi slammed the sword onto the table, glaring at the people in the room. Today was a good day—everyone, including Sun Qian, was present!

"Zijing, explain to me what happened with Fenggao!" Chen Xi roared at Lu Su.

"Wenru! What's going on with the lord?" Chen Xi demanded before Lu Su could respond, turning to Li You.

"Boning, where's your new law?"

"Fengxiao, you're still drinking! Liu Jingxuan nearly drank all of Jingzhou away!"

"Wenhe, what's going on with Yuan Shao? Why has the recent news been so vague? What do you mean by 'both sides fought at Jieqiao, but the outcome remains unclear'?"

"And you, Ziyang, why are you smiling? Is your governance model completed?"

Chen Xi's tirade stunned everyone in the room. They had all been sitting around, sipping tea, eating snacks, and casually handling official duties, but now they felt a pang of guilt, realizing how much they had left unfinished.

"Calm down, calm down," Lu Su, ever the peacemaker, thought Chen Xi was venting after being infuriated by the situation outside and hurriedly tried to soothe him, offering him tea. "Drink some tea, calm yourself."

"Separate the lord's personal wealth from the finances of the entire Taishan territory. Let him have his salary—just give him a bit extra if needed!" Chen Xi said, his face darkened. His mental energy seeped from his eyes, sweeping over everyone in the room.

No one dared to provoke Chen Xi when he was this angry, especially since they had all discussed this issue before and agreed that separating the finances was a good idea. And so, the decision was quickly made, with everyone agreeing to shoulder the responsibility together.

"Second, the census. Zijing, how much is left?" Chen Xi asked Lu Su, who looked troubled. Chen Xi's eyelid twitched, sensing something amiss, and tentatively asked, "You haven't started, have you?"

Lu Su smiled bitterly. Recently, he had been busy with the summer harvest, distributing and registering the spoils of war, managing the housing and land distribution for the incoming population, classifying external craftsmen, and handling various other tasks. He simply hadn't had time for the census.

"Fine, I'll help you with that later," Chen Xi said, exasperated. Seeing Lu Su's expression, he knew it hadn't been done. Turning to Man Chong, he asked, "Boning, what's the status of the new law? You've been working on it for a while now. Is the tax law ready?"

"I'm good with criminal law, but I think we need someone skilled in fiscal policy to help with the tax law. Mi Zhu would be suitable, but I fear he might not be entirely impartial given his status as a merchant," Man Chong replied with a wry smile.

"Handle the sentencing guidelines, and leave the rest to me," Chen Xi said, softening his tone.

"No news from Jieqiao is actually the best news, as it means the battle is still unresolved. However, I've examined the terrain near Jieqiao, and it's very unfavorable for the White Horse Volunteers. Gongsun Bogui is too overconfident," Jia Xu explained before Chen Xi could ask, having closely followed Yuan Shao's precautions at Jieqiao.

Turning to Liu Ye, Chen Xi saw him smiling wryly as he said, "I'll get right on it. You can trust that I'll finish it."

Finally, Chen Xi looked at Li You, who sighed deeply, "This was indeed my oversight. I got a bit too complacent."