

Mythical 191

Chapter 191: Everyone Has a Task

It was good enough that they admitted their mistakes. Chen Xi had long been dissatisfied with these guys, especially with Li You. Wasn't it a bit much to have been slacking off more than Chen Xi himself? When they were fighting in Peiguo, Jia Xu and Zhang Fei were holding the front, while Liu Bei had sneaked off to Pei County to visit the birthplace of the Liu family, and Li You had gone along for the fun. They acted as if Zhang Xun wasn't even worth considering!

When Chen Xi found out about this, he was stunned. He had deliberately assigned Li You and Jia Xu to Liu Bei's route for Liu Bei's safety. With these two, plus Zhang Fei and Xu Chu, even if the enemy were of the caliber of dragons or phoenixes, they could hold their own. But instead, they went off to play! They even went to Pei County and didn't take me along!

What's worse, after going off to have fun, Liu Bei ended up in this current situation. Chen Xi didn't bring Li You in to keep Liu Bei company; that was what entertainers were for. You're a guy with an IQ of 180 doing this kind of thing—isn't that beneath you?

Chen Xi stared at Li You, who remained unfazed. Indeed, those who had held high positions and experienced much were not easily swayed by Chen Xi's words, showing neither guilt nor shame.

"Fine, I'll let it go this time. Help Zijong handle the household registration issue. Wenru, you're experienced in top-down management and seem to be good at it. I'll work on the new laws." Chen Xi sighed, realizing that someone like Li You wasn't easily reprimanded.

"Alright," Li You nodded, accepting the task as a way to make up for his previous lapse.

"Wenru, I'll rely on you to take care of it. You seem to be good at this kind of thing," Lu Su, the ever-amiable person, had no objections to Li You stepping in, as he didn't see it as a threat to his authority.

"Ziyang, by this time next month, if you haven't distributed the governance templates, don't blame me if I start causing you trouble," Chen Xi said coldly, glaring at Liu Ye. This guy needed some pressure, otherwise, he'd forget things. "You're allowed to recruit people to help. There are about 30,000 literate students in Taishan. If you have the ability, you can recruit them. I'm giving you the authority to do so."

"Understood. I'll get it done," Liu Ye said, his sense of urgency spiking under Chen Xi's icy gaze.

"Fengxiao, Xiaozhi, you two keep an eye on Sun Bofu, Zhou Gongjin, Yuan Gonglu, Cao Mengde, and Lu Fengxian. Monitor the southern battlefield, and if the situation turns against us, you're allowed to intervene," Chen Xi said, eyeing the drunken Guo Jia and the snack-stealing Fa Zheng. He sighed internally—truly, when the upper beam is crooked, the lower beams become askew too. Fa Zheng had once been proud and aloof, but now, under Guo Jia's influence, he had become somewhat of a rascal.

"Understood, I will," Fa Zheng said excitedly.

"I'm counting on you, Xiaozhi. I have high hopes for you," Chen Xi said, handing over his plate of fruit to Fa Zheng. Typically, if Guo Jia was too drunk to function, Fa Zheng could make decisions in his stead. Fa Zheng had already succumbed to Guo Jia's influence, forcibly molded into a junior disciple. Although the identity of the master remained unclear, it was a small consolation that Fa Zheng wasn't actually an apprentice.

"Hold the northern front and make things difficult for those in Chang'an. Help ensure that Cao Mengde doesn't have an easy time either. If Yuan Gonglu can defeat Cao Mengde, who has newly trained soldiers defending fortified cities, then it would be quite surprising. I believe Cao Mengde's plan is to pin down Yuan Gonglu and train his troops..." Chen Xi turned to Jia Xu, explaining things only partially. He knew Jia Xu would understand how to proceed.

"Hehehe..." The eerie laugh sent shivers down everyone's spine, and all eyes, except Li You's, glared at Jia Xu.

"Just drink your tea," Liu Ye said grumpily, pushing a cup towards Jia Xu, who seemed ready to let out another chuckle.

"Jianchang, you continue hosting gatherings and banquets. Recently, try to find some high-level mystics to evaluate Fenggao and write something about it. We've spent ten billion coins, so we need to get some return on that investment! You can claim it's a land of dragon's prosperity or something!" Chen Xi said, having already made significant investments. He was subtly giving everyone a hint about their future strategy.

Sure enough, Liu Yan's eyes sparkled at this suggestion. Recently, boasting about the Central Plains overlord had become a bit dull, especially since just two months ago, they had been aggressively promoting Yuan Shu as the number one warlord in the world. It had been so excessive that it was almost unbearable to watch. With their current strength, there was no need to keep hyping the Central Plains overlord...

The others had similar reactions, with subtle, unspoken thoughts crossing their minds. Fa Zheng, however, was already so excited he could barely contain himself, once again proving his temperament needed more refinement.

"But don't overdo it. We need to keep things within reason. I trust you can manage that, right, Weishuo?" Chen Xi added, after some thought, deciding to be cautious. Liu Yan's propaganda skills were too powerful—if taken too far, it could backfire.

"Leave it to me!" Liu Yan nearly thumped his chest in assurance. "I'll invite Xu Lingxiu, Zhou Konghe, and Xu Lingxiu to Taishan in a few days."

Chen Xi almost wanted to slam his head against the table. Before arriving in this world, he might have only known about one of them, but by now, he was well aware of how powerful the other two were.

Liu Yan casually mentioned inviting the three biggest names. Xu Lingxiu's divination, Zhou Xuan's dream interpretation, and Xu Liang's physiognomy—if these three came and spoke, whatever they said would become reality.

"Find someone a bit less influential. If these three come, it'll be hard to manage," Chen Xi quickly advised. If they came and exaggerated Liu Bei's qualities to an absurd degree, it would be difficult to backtrack.

"Huh?" Liu Yan was puzzled. These three were easy to find. He had just been chatting with Xu Lingxiu on Taishan recently—they had a connection, a bond. When it comes to metaphysics, you want to bring in the best, right? Otherwise, who would take it seriously?

"Just go find someone," Chen Xi said, resigned.

But with Liu Yan's earlier comment, everyone present who could think straight understood the caliber of people he was talking about. Maybe those people weren't great strategists, but in their fields, a single word from them could lock you in place, rendering you powerless to argue for over a decade.

Chen Xi waved his hand, signaling Liu Yan to proceed, before turning to Jian Yong. "Xianhe, you take over the work Zijing was doing with the incoming population. Try to disperse the literate ones as much as possible."

"Understood!" Jian Yong replied with a smile. "So that means Zijing will be working with you on Qingzhou matters?"

"Yes, after training here in Taishan for so long, Zijing should be ready to handle Qingzhou. It'll save me some trouble. We can't afford any more incidents this year. Anything that can be resolved quickly must be resolved quickly!" Chen Xi nodded, his demeanor not overly stern, but everyone could feel his determination.

"Gongyou, the ongoing construction projects in Fenggao are all yours now, along with the city's planning. Also, recruit some female officials to help with the adjustments. Women often see things from a different perspective, and they might catch issues we've missed. This is all on you, but when the materials come in, don't hesitate to use them!" Chen Xi said with a smile. Sun Qian's workload seemed light, but when the materials arrived, Chen Xi was certain Sun Qian wouldn't have it easy.

"Understood," Sun Qian replied, bowing.

Chapter 192: Expectations for the Ruler and the Future

"When Zijing returns, send him to my house. I have something important to discuss with him. But if I have to wait too long, I won't hesitate to hand the matter over to the Zhen family. You should know that Lord Xuande seems to have sensed the goodwill from the Zhen family," Chen Xi said with a smile. Everyone in the room, including himself, had surely accepted favors from Mi Zhu and would have been notified.

Just by looking at Guo Jia's indulgent lifestyle, one could guess how much money was involved. Despite high salaries and rewards, it was clearly not enough to sustain such a lifestyle, especially when Guo Jia always demanded the best. According to Fa Zheng, even his own salary had been confiscated by Guo Jia.

"Zijing is currently in Yizhou. The last I heard, he said he was planning to establish contact with the Wu family. He mentioned that to expand the commercial alliance, powerful merchants needed to join, so he asked me to write a letter to the Yizhou governor for him," Lu Su explained. Although Lu Su was somewhat wealthy, he was nowhere near the level of Mi Zhu, who could rival a nation's treasury. Therefore, Lu Su typically approved such harmless requests without much concern.

"Yizhou, huh? Then I'll wait a bit longer," Chen Xi nodded. If Mi Zhu was going to discuss matters that would determine the future of the Mi family, it would make sense for him to go in person, rather than sending a steward like an ordinary merchant. "But if the new tax laws are finalized and he hasn't returned, then I'll have no choice but to give this incredibly lucrative business opportunity to someone else."

The room fell silent. Though only a few people were present, when Chen Xi wasn't in a rage, everyone was content to sip tea, eat snacks, or nibble on fruit. But now, the room was quiet, and no one spoke. Everyone respected Chen Xi's ability to generate revenue, even though he wasn't involved in commerce himself.

"Zichuan, why not share the details with us so we can have a clearer understanding?" Jian Yong, being one of the earliest members of Liu Bei's group, naturally took the lead in asking.

"Although Fenggao's geographical location isn't ideal, once Mi Zhu returns and we officially launch, it's possible the tax revenue could surpass that of the entire Nanyang Commandery within a year," Chen Xi said with a smug smile. He finally had the authority to implement such plans, and with a strong military backing, there was no need to worry about other warlords trying to interfere.

"Hiss!" Everyone present drew a sharp breath. They all knew what Nanyang Commandery represented. Even before the decline of the Eastern Capital Luoyang, the prosperity of Nanyang's Wan City was enough to make the world take notice. For Chen Xi to claim that one city could surpass Nanyang in tax revenue was nothing short of astounding.

"That's about it. There's a lot of profit to be made, so I think Zijing should return soon," Chen Xi said, resting his head on his hand casually.

"Keeping the wealth in the family? Does the Zhen family count as family? Poor Zhang Shiping and Su Shuang..." Fa Zheng muttered quietly.

Chen Xi shot a glare at Fa Zheng, and seeing everyone else giving him peculiar looks, he sighed and explained, "The profit margin is too large. Only the top five wealthiest merchant families can qualify, and that's the simple truth."

"Enough about that. Let's all head to Lord Xuande's place. I can already smell the meat roasting. It's getting better, just as I hoped. It's not a waste of my efforts. Do any of you have other requests?" Chen Xi sighed. Though he had changed the topic, there was still a mountain of tasks waiting for him.

"Isn't it true that you were the one who wanted to cultivate such refined tastes?" Liu Ye remarked casually, then added with a smirk, glancing at Jia Xu.

"Fine carriages and beautiful women are also essential," Jia Xu chimed in.

"Books and culture are a must as well," Li You added, patting Chen Xi on the shoulder as he left.

"We're still short on luxurious mansions and wealth!" Lu Su sighed.

"A domineering presence that looks down on the world."

"A spirit that encompasses all."

Jian Yong and Sun Qian each added another comment as they stood up.

"Fair and just, without bias," Man Chong stated matter-of-factly.

"To sleep on the mountains and wake to rule the world," Guo Jia, still drunk, added with a flourish as he and Fa Zheng passed by Chen Xi.

"Do you have something to say too?" Chen Xi growled, glaring at Liu Yan.

"Just following the crowd," Liu Yan replied with a wry smile. The pressure from the group staring at him was immense. With a determined look, he declared, "Bravery, wisdom, diligence, humility, love for the people—all that the ancient sages sought and all that the people desire, will be fulfilled!"

Chen Xi nearly choked on his own breath. Liu Yan's expectations were far more demanding than all the others combined.

Listening to the laughter outside, Chen Xi quietly cursed himself. "That's what I get for being too smug and saying one more thing. Now I'm in trouble!"

What had started as Chen Xi being proud of how well he was cultivating Liu Bei turned into a series of additional expectations from everyone, each one raising the bar higher and higher. The task was now more daunting than ever, as it had gone beyond mere training of noble offspring to embodying the group's hopes for Liu Bei's future—a burden so heavy it was almost unbearable.

"Weishuo, you'll pay for this!" Chen Xi roared in frustration. The final challenge Liu Yan had set was simply impossible to achieve!

"Do you think we were too harsh on Zichuan?" Liu Ye asked as they walked, reflecting on the group's demands. "Especially Weishuo's—it was a bit much."

"Are we tormenting him, or is he tormenting us?" Lu Su replied calmly, turning his head to look at Liu Ye. It was clear that the so-called "good-natured" man could be merciless when needed, showing no guilt or hesitation. This realization sent a chill down Liu Ye's spine—he had no idea Lu Su had this side to him, effortlessly causing trouble without feeling any pressure.

"We only get to do this a few times a year, though," Lu Su said, as if recalling something wistfully. "Don't you think Zichuan and Xiaozhi are worlds apart?"

"Now that you mention it..." Jia Xu turned his head to scrutinize Lu Su. "Zijing is barely twenty, right?"

The group fell silent.

"Fengxiao and Ziyang are only twenty-two, if I'm not mistaken," Li You added, picking up the conversation. Until now, they had focused on the talents of this group, but now that they thought about it, the oldest among them was Man Chong, who was only twenty-four.

"The younger you are, the greater the advantage for our lord," Jia Xu said, shaking his head. He and Li You had little room for further growth, while the others still had years to accumulate experience. In a few years, they would be able to support the lord for at least three more decades.

"Ah, no wonder Chen Zichuan is always talking about nurturing the next generation. If the next generation is as prosperous as this one, and the ruler can delegate like our lord, an eternal legacy is not out of reach!" Jia Xu thought to himself. Someone like Lu Su could be placed in any position with just a bit more refinement. Even if the previous generation decayed, this one would be strong enough to overthrow them. Youth was indeed a powerful asset.

Jia Xu glanced at Fa Zheng, who had yet to mature but was already brimming with potential. In just three years, Fa Zheng might rival the brilliance of Guo Jia today. "It seems Chen Zichuan isn't just supplementing the education of noble offspring for our lord. He's also focusing on the elite education of civil and military talents, like Tanzhi and Xiaozhi..."

Chapter 193: This Is What You Said, Please Take It as a Reminder!

Chen Xi and the others were now focused on one thing: intervening to disrupt the budding connection between Zhang and Liu Bei, pulling Liu Bei away from the prospect of a marriage to a woman of equal status and steering him back towards the simpler option of taking a maidservant as a concubine.

Chen Xi kept his head down, sipping tea. He finally understood why the beef was particularly delicious today. Liu Bei wasn't hosting this meal just for him and his group; rather, when Jia Xu and the others barged in, Liu Bei had been exchanging affectionate glances with Zhang. It seemed that Zhang Shiping and Su Shuang had been forgotten, and Liu Bei was thoroughly enjoying the company of the female family head. Though it might not seem proper to court someone with charm, the fact that Liu Bei was an ideal match couldn't be denied.

When Jia Xu led the others in, they walked in calmly after a brief awkward pause. All were thick-skinned enough not to make a scene, so they each took their seats and continued to eat and drink with Liu Bei as if nothing had happened. As for Zhang, after acknowledging the arrival of Jia Xu and the others with a polite bow, she was led by a maid to the inner courtyard, where Lady Gan, Liu Bei's only officially recognized concubine, would entertain her.

Of course, having Lady Gan, a concubine, receive Zhang was not entirely appropriate according to etiquette, but with Liu Bei lacking a formal wife, she was the only option. At Liu Bei's level, choosing a formal wife was a complex matter that required careful consideration.

Had it not been for Cai Yong's unfortunate actions, Cai Yan would have been the perfect candidate for Liu Bei's formal wife—her reputation, lineage, and background were all impeccable. However, due to Cai Yong's misdeeds, Cai Yan was no longer a viable option, leaving Liu Bei without a good solution. Cai Yan's status made it impossible for her to be a concubine, so Liu Bei could only lament his misfortune.

As for Zhang, she was actually a very suitable match for Liu Bei's formal wife. If the two truly found common ground, there was little that Chen Xi or anyone else could do to intervene. Even though it would disrupt the established historical dynamics of "Wei had good men, Wu loved young girls, and Shu was full of male camaraderie," political ambitions took precedence, and there was little that couldn't be justified.

Turning back to Cai Yan, Zhang, Mi Zhen, and Zhen Ji, these women had clear roles—either they could be married as wives or not at all. Mi Zhen could potentially become a concubine, but given how hard Mi Zhu was working to amass wealth for her dowry, making her a concubine was unthinkable. In Liu Bei's previous life, even after becoming the governor of Xu Province, he still took Mi Zhen as his legitimate wife, not a concubine. So, unless you were a prince of the blood, the idea of Mi Zhen as a concubine was purely a fantasy.

On the other hand, if you did reach the level of a prince, then those high-status women might indeed end up as concubines...

In short, it was extremely difficult to court these women unless you were single and of very high status. Someone like Chen Xi, if he were still an unmarried nobleman, might have a chance with any of these women. But now, with Fan Jian as his primary wife, that possibility was out of reach—no prominent family would risk their reputation by marrying their daughters into such a situation.

That's why Chen Xi now viewed Cai Yan and Mi Zhen purely with admiration, without any ulterior motives. Mi Zhu, knowing this, felt entirely at ease. Even when Mi Zhen visited Chen Xi's home, Mi Zhu had no fear that Chen Xi would suddenly lose control and take advantage of her.

After the usual banter and meal, Chen Xi finally stood up. "Lord Xuande, I have a request to make."

As soon as Chen Xi spoke, everyone else at the table, as if following a coordinated signal, set down their chopsticks. Liu Bei neatly arranged his own chopsticks on the plate, then straightened up in his seat. It was clear that his etiquette training had had some effect.

"Zichuan, if you have anything to say, please speak. If I have made any mistakes, I ask that you all help correct them," Liu Bei replied, showing no dissatisfaction despite not knowing what the issue was. He maintained his composure and nodded for Chen Xi to continue.

"I often read in historical records about emperors who, due to their love of luxury, led the national treasury to ruin and caused the people to suffer. This has always puzzled me," Chen Xi said with a troubled expression.

"This time, the fault is mine," Liu Bei immediately admitted, understanding that Chen Xi was referring to the incident with the lavish spending on the city's paving.

"Well, I believe that blaming the depletion of the treasury on an emperor's love of luxury is misguided. The lack of funds for disaster relief, too, shouldn't be placed solely on the emperor. After all, a nation employs so many officials to manage affairs—how much can an emperor really spend?" Chen Xi said, turning to glance at everyone present.

"May I ask, Lord Xuande, how much of the nation's tax revenue could a ruler possibly spend?" Chen Xi's question was strange, as it didn't directly blame Liu Bei for anything.

"About one percent of the state's tax revenue should be enough," Liu Bei hesitated briefly, even when considering extravagant luxuries and grand mansions. But one percent seemed more than sufficient.

"So where does the other ninety-nine percent go? That's the root cause of a nation's downfall. The emperor can't possibly spend that much, and the idea that luxurious tastes lead to national ruin is just a joke. How extravagant can one be?" Chen Xi said with a cold laugh. "To be blunt, if Lord Xuande wanted to build the most magnificent mansion in the world, not only could I do it without spending money, but I could even make a profit. So, luxury isn't the issue. Spending money isn't a problem either; the incompetence of officials is the real issue."

"The rulers always wish for everyone to live better lives. This can be said of emperors, the Three Dukes, and the Nine Ministers. They work for stability in the kingdom, whether for the sake of the country or

their own families, they strive to keep the world in order," Chen Xi said, looking at Liu Bei. He wanted Liu Bei to understand that the world wasn't simply about right and wrong.

"The ambitions of a schemer aren't inherent; they're forced out by the pressures of the world. The fault lies with everyone. A world plunged into chaos is the fault of all its people. We shouldn't focus on the mistakes of those who came before us. Sometimes, even if one doesn't wish to do something, they may be forced into it by circumstances. Do you understand what I'm saying, Lord Xuande?" Chen Xi asked, smiling as he saw the confused look on Liu Bei's face.

Liu Bei nodded, then shook his head. Chen Xi looked around at the others. He knew Jia Xu and Li You understood perfectly. Guo Jia was also clear on the matter, while Liu Ye appeared to be overthinking it. Lu Su seemed to have some objections, and Man Chong looked dissatisfied. Each person had their own reaction.

"Lord Xuande, you don't need to fully grasp this right now. Just keep it in mind, and over time, it will become clear. But you did mention how much of the national tax revenue would be sufficient for an emperor's spending," Chen Xi said casually, scratching his ear as if he hadn't heard Liu Bei clearly.

"One percent of the nation's tax revenue should be enough for an emperor's expenses," Liu Bei repeated, prompting Jia Xu and Li You to exchange glances.

"Since Lord Xuande believes that one percent of the national tax revenue is sufficient for an emperor's spending, we will allocate the same proportion of our territory's revenue for your salary. I ask for your understanding in this matter, Lord Xuande. And I hope that you will continue to seek out capable ministers and talented officials, for the broader your rule and the more prosperous your people, the higher your salary will be," Chen Xi said with a bow.

Chapter 194: If It Comes to This, Then There Is No Destiny!

Liu Bei was momentarily taken aback but quickly nodded in agreement. This incident indeed served as a wake-up call for him. If his personal finances were clearly delineated, then spending ten billion coins could be justified as his own expenditure. But in the current situation, it was hard to make such a claim. Chen Xi's method could indeed solve many issues.

Liu Bei clearly did not possess the kind of long-term vision that transcends time. Chen Xi could guarantee that half of the people present understood why he was making these preparations. The earlier certain things are addressed, the less damage they cause, and the easier they are to manage.

[Chen Zichuan really plans ahead. Once implemented, this will be difficult to change in the future. If the emperor's finances are controlled, the national treasury becomes pure, and the emperor lacks the authority to use it. Public and private finances will be completely separated, so even if a future emperor becomes extravagant, it will be seen as a personal flaw, not a matter of state.]

Jia Xu and Li You exchanged glances, each seeing a hint of surprise in the other's eyes. Since arriving in Taishan, they had noticed that Chen Xi always had a very long-term perspective, like a chess player placing pieces strategically across the board. As the situation unfolded, these pieces would reveal their surprising effects, as if Chen Zichuan had foreseen the end from the very beginning.

"Please prioritize the people, Lord Xuande!" Liu Yan, playing the role of the clumsy ally, spoke up, delivering a heavy blow to Chen Xi.

Chen Xi felt his gaze could bore holes through Liu Yan, who still maintained a righteous, impassioned demeanor, as if he were truly speaking for the people.

Jia Xu quietly lowered his head, counting ants on the ground. Li You sipped his wine slowly, hiding his expression, while Liu Ye furiously chopped at his beef as if it were his mortal enemy. Guo Jia was completely inebriated, his eyes unfocused, and Fa Zheng stuffed his mouth with food, pretending to choke to avoid speaking.

"Haha, Zichuan, there's no need for that look. Whether for the people's sake or for any other reason, I agree with your proposal. So, no need to glare at Weishuo like that, hahaha!" Liu Bei, however, did not feel pressured or cornered. Instead, he laughed heartily at Chen Xi's frustrated expression, Liu Yan's righteous indignation, and everyone else's feigned ignorance.

"Lord Xuande is wise," came the chaotic chorus of replies. Despite the small number of people, the responses were still jumbled, causing Chen Xi to briefly wonder how chaotic a large court assembly would be. Clearly, historical dramas aren't very accurate!

With Liu Bei's agreement, Chen Xi felt much more at ease. He planned to have Liu Bei sign a contract later. Not only would this not diminish the legacy of Liu Bei's ancestors, but with the current situation, restoring the Han dynasty seemed increasingly possible!

As something signed by Liu Bei, a revered ancestor in a Confucian society like the Han dynasty, future emperors would be obliged to honor it. If Liu Bei's descendants truly surpassed their ancestors, this contract would gain even more authority. Future emperors, when considering large expenditures, would have to rely on the national treasury, reducing the likelihood of draining resources and causing widespread chaos.

In the backyard, Lady Gan carefully attended to Lady Zhang. Knowing she had been chosen to receive a distinguished guest, Gan understood that her status had risen significantly above that of the other singers and concubines in the household. She also realized that this visitor's status could have a profound impact on her future.

Lady Zhang, too, sensed this but chose not to address it directly. She admired Liu Bei, having seen firsthand the prosperity from Napi to Taishan. The flourishing cities along the way rivaled even Ye City in Jizhou, making a far greater impression than any intelligence report. Moreover, upon arriving in Taishan, she learned that Liu Bei had defeated the Yuan family's scion, Yuan Shu of Yuzhou.

Initially, Lady Zhang thought this was mere propaganda to boost morale, but after witnessing the endless stream of goods and artisans being transported back, she realized this was not just a local victory. It could very well be true that four counties of Yuzhou had been conquered!

Although Zhang did not understand warfare, she grasped the implications of victory and defeat. Seeing Liu Bei's triumphant demeanor upon his return, she knew he had won. The continuous influx of spoils further confirmed Liu Bei's strength.

This victory was the perfect opportunity for Zhang to visit, but she knew that her past behavior toward the Zhang and Su families, as well as her earlier abandonment of Liu Bei, was a thorn in his side. She decided to wait for one person: Chen Xi.

Without going to Qingzhou or Taishan, Lady Zhang could never have believed that someone could achieve such a feat. The Zhang family's defeat at the hands of such a person was not disgraceful—this was her first impression upon seeing Taishan's prosperity.

Understanding this, Lady Zhang realized it was better to wait for Chen Xi's return before seeking to restore her relationship with Liu Bei. She had already prepared to spend ten billion coins to win Liu Bei's favor, so timing was crucial.

The Zhang family's wealth gave Lady Zhang the courage to make such a move, while Liu Bei's power left her apprehensive. She finally understood why Chen Xi had looked at her with such indifference before—Chen Xi truly had the power to crush her family as easily as she could crush a merchant. The sheer disparity in strength rendered all schemes ineffective.

Flattery and accommodation were the best choices. As a noblewoman from a prominent family, Lady Zhang knew when to make the right decisions. Liu Bei was powerful, powerful enough that Lady Zhang felt he could potentially unify the North and conquer the entire realm. This realization only increased her interest in him.

Aligning with Yuan Shao was no longer a viable option; this was a consensus within the Zhang family. Therefore, they followed Chen Xi's plan to secretly ally with Liu Bei. However, after what happened with Yuan Shao, the Zhang family became much more cautious. What if the supposedly virtuous and heroic Liu Bei turned out to be no better? After all, wasn't Yuan Shao also praised for his benevolence before committing heinous acts?

Thus, the Zhang family sent their upper echelons to Qingzhou to investigate. This time, it wasn't just Lady Zhang—most of the Zhang family's senior members were in Qingzhou, gathering more complete information on Liu Bei. But before they could even collect that information, they were already stunned by Taishan's prosperity. It was hard to believe that this once run-down city now rivaled the wealth of Nanpi.

For a family on the brink of placing a major bet, these observations were crucial. They concerned the lives of everyone involved, so the Zhang family had no choice but to be cautious.

Chen Xi, upon seeing Lady Zhang, had already guessed the Zhang family's intentions. With few options left, the Zhang family was almost cornered. That's why he stepped back, not wanting to play the third wheel, and subtly encouraged Lady Zhang to focus her attention on Liu Bei.

After all, with Chen Xi present, he would always be Liu Bei's greatest asset. Sometimes, a ruler should rely not on his subordinates but on his own charisma and strength to win people over.

The Zhang family had been pushed into a corner by Chen Xi. If Liu Bei couldn't win over this powerful family, then Chen Xi would have to conclude that the great families of this world and Liu Bei were simply not meant to be.

Chapter 195: Gan Ning - The Test Subject of Maritime Expeditions

While Chen Xi and his group were making diligent progress in Fenggao, Gan Ning's large ship had once again set sail on the sea. By this point, Gan Ning had already cursed Lu Jun several times. The ships from the Lu family were clearly using him as a test subject, constantly undergoing modifications that left Gan Ning wary of venturing too far from the coastline.

Lu Jun, feeling grateful for Gan Ning's loyalty, had initially given him a modified version of the family's unfinished tower ship. Gan Ning, who had only ever piloted small sailboats, was ecstatic to receive such a grand and luxurious ship. Without hesitation, he sailed the tower ship down the Yangtze River. The journey was smooth until they reached the mouth of the river, where a strong sea breeze capsized the ship.

Feeling ashamed, Gan Ning returned to the Lu family and admitted that he had underestimated the power of the sea wind. He requested that the Lu family prepare another ship, as he still intended to venture out to sea.

Upon learning what had happened, the Lu family's craftsmen prepared a batch of smaller boats for Gan Ning to test the waters. Unfortunately, they encountered a whale. Imagine what it would be like to face a whale at the Refining Qi into Steel level—one that also carried the power of clouds!

Even the mightiest Gan Ning was nothing more than a mosquito to this massive whale. Naturally, his fleet was wiped out, as the whale's wave alone overturned half of Gan Ning's ships. Fortunately, they were not too far from the Yangtze River's mouth—less than a hundred miles—and the crew managed to swim back.

To Gan Ning, encountering a mythical creature like the Kun and suffering defeat was expected. Though he had lost, he felt there was no shame in it, so he once again went to the Lu family. This time, after confirming that the waves had indeed capsized the ships, the Lu family's craftsmen made further improvements and sent out another fleet.

On his third attempt, Gan Ning grew wiser. Before entering the sea, he had his well-trained water bandits form a formation. By using the clouds' cover to strengthen the ships' defenses, they slowly entered the sea. The most challenging part of naval warfare is maintaining formation, which, while reducing speed, increases resilience against enemy experts who could otherwise wipe out the fleet single-handedly.

With the addition of cloud energy, the ships' defensive capabilities were significantly enhanced. When cloud energy and internal energy are infused into physical objects, the objects' strength increases dramatically, and they can even be nurtured by the energy. For example, Guan Yu's Green Dragon Crescent Blade, originally just a fine weapon made of refined iron, would grow stronger with use, becoming increasingly comfortable for Guan Yu to wield. However, this nurturing process typically requires internal energy of extremely high quality and is measured in decades, which is one downside of inanimate objects.

Returning to the topic of cloud energy's counteracting effect on internal energy: Internal energy is incredibly destructive, and without cloud energy, a powerhouse like Guan Yu or Zhang Fei could easily fight against tens of thousands of soldiers.

For instance, during the early Han dynasty, when people had not yet understood these concepts, Xiang Yu single-handedly fought and defeated Liu Bang's thirty thousand elite troops. This was because, at the time, no one understood the workings of cloud energy, while Xiang Yu, as the only person capable of externalizing his internal energy, was akin to a protagonist with divine favor. While others were still pondering how to transform their internal breath into gang energy, Xiang Yu had nearly reached the pinnacle of martial arts, much like Lu Bu today—already at the peak!

When internal energy encounters the combined power of the heavens and earth, along with the unconscious life energy emitted by living beings, it is significantly neutralized by cloud energy!

This is why, despite city gates being made of wood, Guan Yu wouldn't bother chopping them down. The reason is simple: the cloud energy of the soldiers atop the city gate is primarily concentrated on the gate itself. Slashing at the gate with externalized internal energy would be ineffective; it would be better to use the blade to cut the gate directly. But doing so would be riskier than just attacking the stone walls, as using internal energy on stone walls is safer than hacking at the gate.

The same principle applies to ships. The more people on a ship and the better the fleet's formation, the higher the resistance to experts. For example, a large tower ship capable of carrying nearly a thousand people would be difficult for even someone like Zhao Yun to damage with a single strike. However, if those people were not present, Zhao Yun could sink an entire fleet in minutes.

Moreover, because ships are on water, the fleet's formation, the flow of cloud energy, and other factors primarily protect against waves rather than internal energy. For example, while Zhao Yun might not be able to shatter a tower ship, he could create massive waves to capsize it. An excellent formation is designed to prevent this by dispersing the impact into the water. If your naval command is truly top-notch, taking a tower ship to the sea is not out of the question...

With his fleet arranged in formation, Gan Ning felt quite pleased. This time, even though the sea winds were fierce, they didn't capsize his ships. Although they were somewhat carried by the waves, it was far better than the previous instances where they capsized upon entering the sea.

Then, Gan Ning once again encountered the mythical creature from before—the Kun. Being someone who holds grudges, Gan Ning thought that, even though the Kun was a legendary creature, he might be able to take it down.

What followed was predictable. Gan Ning's ship sank again, though this time he managed to drag the Kun back with him. Unfortunately, on the way back, they were attacked by an even more ferocious group of fish, and all that remained when they returned was the Kun's skeleton.

Though this was embarrassing for Gan Ning, he still shamelessly traded the bones for a new ship. Naturally, this time he made sure to inform the shipbuilders of the issues, such as the ship's weak bow, insufficient structural integrity, and poor resistance to wind and waves.

Lu Jun, with a wave of his hand, assured him that these were minor issues. After modifying the returned ships, the craftsmen began working on the ships they had built previously. Once more, they sent Gan Ning off, indicating that he could go and play.

After four or five attempts, even though Gan Ning wasn't as clever as Lu Jun, he finally realized what was happening. The Lu family was using him as a test subject to improve their maritime shipbuilding!

With this suspicion in mind, Gan Ning paid closer attention and eventually concluded that sometimes ignorance truly is bliss...

Having suffered so many losses, Gan Ning's first action upon reaching the sea was always to pray that the Lu family's ships wouldn't fail this time, followed by cursing their misfortune. But it seemed that, after five shipwrecks, the Lu family had gained enough experience. This ship had been at sea for three months, and there had been no issues, whether on the sea or the Yangtze River. Gan Ning had even tested it in battles against pirates, winning decisively each time. The sixth-generation tower ship had earned Gan Ning's approval.

Although Gan Ning was sure that the seventh-generation ships would be even better, he no longer wanted to experience being chased by sharks for nearly a hundred miles. Those rows of teeth made him realize that the Yangtze River was indeed weak in comparison.

Having been humbled by the sea multiple times, Gan Ning now looked down on the Yangtze River. To him, it was just a small stream. "Zhou Tai, Jiang Qin, you two weaklings, come to the sea—I'll make sure you learn some respect!" Having been toyed with by the sea multiple times and survived, Gan Ning had become somewhat arrogant.

Chapter 196: The Advisor Must Have a Deeper Plan...

After three months of testing on the sea, Gan Ning finally gained confidence in the combat capabilities of the sixth-generation tower ship. Just as he was about to return to the Yangtze River to beat up those river pirates who were once on the same level as him, a letter from Chen Xi arrived.

The letter ordered Gan Ning to sail north along the coast, transporting supplies to Gongsun Zan and escorting a person along with a small group of guards to Youzhou to assist Gongsun Zan and ensure his safety.

Upon receiving this news, Gan Ning was disheartened. As the commander of the navy, he had finally gotten his ship in good shape and was ready to live the life of fighting whoever he wanted. Now, he was being reduced to a transport officer? It was a disheartening turn of events.

To make matters worse, the letter mentioned escorting someone else. Gan Ning felt even more frustrated. He thought, "I'm capable of fighting on land too! I'm a top-tier fighter! Why was this mission given to someone else? My Jin Fan Troops are a formidable and rare force, capable of naval battles, sea battles, and land battles. This is really underestimating me!"

But orders were orders. Although Gan Ning was somewhat reluctant, he accepted the mission. After all, an army is maintained for moments like these. He kept his dissatisfaction to himself, intending to carry out the mission first and then voice his complaints later. So, he set sail, and within a few days, he arrived at Qingzhou, where Taishi Ci had been waiting for quite some time.

It was Gan Ning's first meeting with Taishi Ci, but it was clear that Gan Ning was annoyed. He couldn't understand why Taishi Ci got to go to the main battlefield while he was relegated to transport duty. He had such a large fleet with over three thousand men, yet instead of engaging in battles, he was assigned to transport goods. This was a blow to his pride.

In the end, the only way to resolve this was through a fight. It turned out that both of them were evenly matched. After two intense battles, Gan Ning and Taishi Ci, recognizing each other's abilities, shook hands and made peace, their previous animosity dissipating.

With that settled, Gan Ning no longer had any complaints. After loading the supplies and taking on an additional thousand of Taishi Ci's soldiers—at the cost of reducing food and water supplies—Gan Ning was ready. He had already prepared himself for the possibility of having to raid a few coastal towns in Jizhou to resupply.

Taishi Ci was equally unconcerned. After all, ever since Zhao Yun left, he and Zang Ba had been the highest-ranking commanders in Qingzhou responsible for defending against Jizhou. They had fought countless skirmishes against Zhang He and Gao Lan, and over time, Taishi Ci had come to see Jizhou as the enemy. Raiding the enemy was just part of the strategy; it was expected!

"Ziyi, I heard you're going to assist General Gongsun. But I've also heard that Yan Liang and Wen Chou are both internal energy masters. Do you need my help? I'm quite interested in testing my strength against the experts of the north," Gan Ning said to Taishi Ci as they chatted idly by the ship's railing.

Taishi Ci glanced around to ensure no one was listening, then whispered, "Xingba, to be honest with you, I'm not actually going to assist General Gongsun. The strategist sent me to lead General Gongsun in a retreat if the situation turns unfavorable. The strategist's letter made it clear that he isn't optimistic about General Gongsun's current situation, which is why I'm being sent to keep an eye on Yuan Shao's army."

"You're not joking?" Gan Ning asked, stunned, lowering his voice.

"No, that's exactly what the strategist wrote."

"Why don't I understand? If they've already predicted that General Gongsun might fail, why not send a large army to help? What are they thinking? This is giving me a headache. Can someone explain this to me?" Gan Ning ranted, frustrated. He had been transporting supplies to Gongsun Zan multiple times and had become familiar with the officials in Youzhou. To him, Youzhou and Qingzhou were allies. If they suspected General Gongsun might lose, why not send reinforcements?

"How would I know?" Taishi Ci shrugged, scratching his head in thought before speaking again. "But I remember Zilong once mentioned that General Gongsun is proud and dislikes accepting help from others. If we send too many people, General Gongsun might take offense. So maybe the strategist is just sending me to give him a reminder. After all, General Gongsun is strong; even if he loses temporarily, it's not a big deal."

Gan Ning fell silent, his expression shifting through various emotions before finally settling on a look of realization. A smile crept onto his face, growing wider until he burst into laughter. He believed he had finally figured out why Chen Xi had sent him to escort Taishi Ci.

"Why are you laughing, Xingba? What's making you so happy?" Taishi Ci asked curiously.

"Hahaha! I've figured out the strategist's plan," Gan Ning said excitedly. "It's no wonder there's no battle—this time, we're heading straight to the battlefield!"

"Tell me more?" Taishi Ci asked, his excitement growing as well. He had been puzzled by this mission, but now that someone seemed to have figured it out, he was eager to hear the explanation.

"Ziyi, do you know my official position?" Gan Ning asked proudly, thumping his chest.

"You're the naval commander, right?" Taishi Ci replied, still puzzled.

"Exactly! I'm the naval commander, in charge of all naval operations. I have the authority to deploy forces independently and absolute control over the navy. The strategist sent me to escort you to Youzhou, but while you don't have troops, I do!" Gan Ning explained, his excitement mounting.

Gan Ning was convinced that he had deciphered Chen Xi's plan. The mission to escort Taishi Ci to protect Gongsun Zan was just a cover. With this excuse and the task of transporting supplies, Gan Ning could position himself exactly where he needed to be.

"Huh?" Taishi Ci was taken aback, staring blankly at the excited Gan Ning. He had a feeling that Gan Ning might have misunderstood, but when Gan Ning brought out a map, Taishi Ci couldn't help but consider the possibility that Chen Xi might have actually planned it this way.

"What do you think? Isn't this a great opportunity?" Gan Ning said excitedly, pointing to Jieqiao on the map. "Look at this waterway—isn't it perfectly set up for me? In just one night, I can cut off their supply line and force them to retreat without a fight!"

Taishi Ci's strategic sense wasn't much better than Gan Ning's, but he knew that cutting off an enemy's supply line was a highly effective tactic. However, the method Gan Ning proposed had both high risks and high rewards. If executed well, Yuan Shao could be defeated without a fight. If not, everyone involved could be doomed. After all, this plan involved deep penetration into enemy territory.

"I'm sure the strategist planned it this way. After all, if he didn't intend for this, why would he send me, the naval commander with decision-making power, to escort you? There must be a deeper meaning!" Gan Ning said confidently. This seemingly dangerous mission had ignited his passion, perfectly aligning with his fiery nature. As for the danger? What danger?

Taishi Ci couldn't argue with that logic. After all, Gan Ning's reasoning made too much sense. If the mission was just to escort him, why specifically send the naval commander with decision-making authority? There were plenty of ships between Youzhou and Qingzhou, and even by land, he would likely go unnoticed.

"Maybe the strategist really did have this in mind..." Taishi Ci admitted, feeling a bit numb. Who could really know what the strategist was thinking? He was known for his unconventional strategies. Perhaps the strategist had indeed considered Gan Ning's personality and deliberately left hints for him to figure out on his own...

Chapter 197: Deeper Meanings and Insights

After some reflection, Taishi Ci realized that he couldn't control Gan Ning no matter how much he tried. Whether it was the mutual disdain between the army and the navy, Gan Ning's authority, or the envy and jealousy from commanders like Guan Yu and Zang Ba due to Gan Ning's unrestricted power to deploy troops, it was clear that no one could stop him from doing what he wanted.

Realizing this, Taishi Ci felt a bit helpless. He also wished he had such authority over military matters. Just look at how Gan Ning could do whatever he wanted at sea. Now, Gan Ning was even talking about attacking Yuan Shao, and there were no legal obstacles—he had the highest level of authority. He could fight however he pleased.

"In that case, Xingba, you might as well give it a try," Taishi Ci said cautiously, unsure of the situation. After all, Gan Ning had the highest authority over the navy. Although Chen Xi hadn't explicitly stated the level of power granted to Gan Ning as the naval commander, the rumors suggested that Gan Ning at least had the authority to conduct independent operations.

"I guarantee you, the strategist must have a deeper plan in mind. So, after I deliver you to your destination, I'll stay along the coast of Youzhou and Jizhou, waiting for the right moment!" Gan Ning said confidently, fully convinced of his judgment. After all, a commander as strong and capable as he was, and with the navy just beginning to take shape, it made perfect sense for Chen Xi to give him a test.

Gan Ning was bold, confident, and liked to show off. He had just perfected what he believed to be a powerful navy and was ready to make a grand return and deal with Zhou Tai and Jiang Qin. But then, Chen Xi gave him this mission, which made Gan Ning overthink the situation. He thought to himself, "Look at the land armies; even Zang Ba and Sun Guan have had their moments to shine. Isn't it my turn to show off now?"

He looked at the map. "Wow, this is dangerous and challenging. If I succeed, it will be incredibly impressive. This kind of tough and glorious mission is perfect for someone like me!"

As Gan Ning connected the dots, he realized that this mission was likely designed for him. It was an opportunity to act when the moment was right and to test whether he really possessed the "battlefield intuition" that Chen Xi had mentioned when sending him off.

Gan Ning recalled Chen Xi's words when he left. "When it's time to act, don't hesitate. As a commander with independent authority and the power to deploy troops, you must have an excellent eye for opportunity. You need to learn to 'seize the moment'!"

The more Gan Ning thought about it, the more he believed this was a test. It was likely that the land army wasn't satisfied with the power he had, so the higher-ups created a test without explicitly stating it. If he passed, he could continue his naval adventures from the South China Sea to the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea, and they would have a reason to silence the land army's complaints. If he failed, then it would mean he wasn't fit for the role. This reasoning was so sound that he couldn't refute it.

Gan Ning had always believed that one's abilities should match their authority. As the naval commander, he remembered and agreed with Chen Xi's words. If he couldn't seize the moment, what was the point of giving him the power to deploy troops?

The thought of possibly losing his commander's authority sent a chill down Gan Ning's spine. This was a matter of his reputation. If he lost this power because of incompetence, it would be utterly humiliating.

Taishi Ci suddenly noticed the malicious look in Gan Ning's eyes. Was he planning to throw him off the ship?

Taishi Ci chuckled nervously, "Xingba, why the sudden change in expression? You wouldn't be planning to tie me up and go to Youzhou alone, would you?"

"Hmph, don't think I don't know what you're thinking. You just want me to go back, don't you?" Gan Ning said with a smug expression, his face practically radiating the words "I've seen through the land army's scheme."

"Uh, aren't you going back?" Taishi Ci's face twitched. How did Gan Ning turn into this in such a short time?

"Hmph, I'm not going back!" Gan Ning said proudly. "I'm the naval commander, with the authority to deploy troops independently. I can veto any unreasonable requests related to the navy, and I can attack any force that might become an enemy at any time! As for forces already deemed hostile, I can engage them directly without needing to report!"

Taishi Ci listened to the extent of Gan Ning's authority, growing more and more astonished. By the time he heard that Gan Ning could unilaterally start a war, his jaw practically dropped. This power was enormous! Sure, everyone knew Gan Ning had significant authority, but not this much.

Taishi Ci stared enviously at Gan Ning. Everyone knew that Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Hua Xiong had the power to deploy troops independently, and Zhao Yun had the authority to intervene in any battlefield at any time. These four were already envied by many, but now it turned out that a rarely-seen figure had even more power than all four combined!

But then, Taishi Ci realized that perhaps Chen Xi really did have a deeper plan. If there was no deeper meaning, it would be unthinkable to send someone like Gan Ning for this mission.

Before long, Taishi Ci and Gan Ning, who shared similar levels of intelligence, came to the same conclusion, and they both looked at Gan Ning with a knowing, teasing smile.

"What are you laughing at?" Gan Ning wasn't stupid; he saw the teasing look in Taishi Ci's eyes and knew what was going on.

"Good luck, Xingba. I'm rooting for you!" Taishi Ci said, patting Gan Ning on the shoulder. "Don't embarrass yourself. If you lose your commander's hat, tsk tsk tsk!"

"Hmph, I already know what to do. I plan to be the naval commander for life, making certain people envious until they die!" Gan Ning boasted.

Taishi Ci almost choked, staring at Gan Ning in confusion. He was indeed envious, but did Gan Ning really have to say it out loud? He suddenly felt a bit irritated.

"Do you want to fight?" Gan Ning asked, baring his teeth in a menacing grin when he saw Taishi Ci's unfriendly expression.

"Bring it on!" Taishi Ci grabbed his spear, staring down Gan Ning, who also grabbed his large machete.

"Clang!" The sound of metal clashing rang out as the two warriors unleashed their power. They both leaped back, landing firmly on the deck, and then charged at each other again, starting their thirty-fifth duel since boarding the ship.

There were no bursts of internal energy, no overpowering techniques—those were all neutralized by the ship's collective aura. The only thing left to compare was skill, and it was clear that they were evenly matched, with neither able to gain the upper hand.

Chen Xi had no idea that his order for Gan Ning to deliver supplies had been interpreted with such deep meaning, nor that Gan Ning had flaunted nonexistent authority, leaving Taishi Ci in shock.

If Chen Xi knew, he would likely have a headache. But he was already dealing with enough headaches.

The porcelain kiln Chen Xi had used to fire white porcelain had reopened, but this time it was for firing tiles. Compared to white porcelain, tiles were much simpler since color didn't matter as much. However, it seemed there was a problem with the location in Fenggao. Half of the tiles that came out of the kiln were red, and not even uniformly red. These haphazardly red tiles posed a serious challenge for Chen Xi, who planned to use them.

At this time, porcelain was still considered a luxury item. The crimson-colored tiles were even more dazzling to people like Jia Xu, who saw them as a treasure trove worth billions.

"You want to use these tiles to roof the lord's house?" Sun Qian asked, shocked as he held one of the counterfeit red glazed tiles.

"And I want to cover the exterior walls with these," Chen Xi said, handing Sun Qian a red tile.

"These are too..." Sun Qian murmured in disbelief.

"And this will be the flooring!" Chen Xi ordered someone to bring in a two-foot by two-foot white porcelain tile. There weren't many of these, but they were easier to make than white porcelain cups.

Sun Qian swallowed hard. "This is too luxurious..."

"Bring me the glass window," Chen Xi shouted out the door. Soon, someone brought in a three-foot by one-foot glass window. Unfortunately, it wasn't transparent and had a few impurities. Given the current level of craftsmanship, even glass cups weren't perfectly clear.

This time, Sun Qian was completely stunned. In his eyes, this was akin to using a priceless treasure for a window.

"Don't be foolish; just build it as I said. Remember, our goal is to make sure the lord is never tempted by another mansion again! Do you understand? A little bit of money is nothing compared to this," Chen Xi said proudly. He was used to seeing these things in his time, so he didn't find them impressive. But to the people of two thousand years ago, these were extreme luxuries, far beyond what they could afford.

"Zi Chuan, how much did all this cost?" Sun Qian asked, clutching his chest, bracing himself for a number that would make him faint from shock.

"Oh, if I sold them, they'd probably fetch about a billion or so in money," Chen Xi said, noticing that Sun Qian's eyes were starting to roll back. He laughed and reassured him, "Don't worry, Gongyou. These things only cost a bit of labor, nothing more. The total cost couldn't be more than a thousand coins, so relax."

"Huh?" Sun Qian was stunned. He had prepared himself for an astronomical number, but Chen Xi had given him a bargain-bin price. "Zi Chuan, tell me the real price. I can handle it, don't worry."

"Sigh, nobody believes me when I tell the truth. Whatever, think what you want. Just get it built, and make sure even the toilets are tiled!" Chen Xi waved dismissively. Then, as if remembering something, he warned, "And keep a close eye on everyone. Anyone caught embezzling, just kill them!"

Chapter 198: Chen Xi's Method of Education

Chen Xi's final command, though unnecessary, was something Sun Qian would have done regardless. From Sun Qian's perspective, these materials were simply too valuable to be handled carelessly. However, he now understood why Chen Xi had mentioned that the real challenge would begin when the actual construction of those buildings started.

Building a mansion wasn't inherently difficult, especially since Sun Qian didn't need to do much besides overseeing the process. But with the inclusion of such valuable materials, Sun Qian would undoubtedly lose sleep over it, naturally increasing his stress.

After explaining the construction materials clearly, Chen Xi returned to the government office. Although he was reluctant, there were too many matters that required his attention. He had already explained the basics of the new tax law to Man Chong, but implementing and testing it would be much more complicated.

In the end, Chen Xi instructed Man Chong to first draft the trade tax he had mentioned. As for whether it was right or wrong or had any flaws, Chen Xi wasn't worried. If there were significant issues, he could always claim that the policy was canceled due to certain merchants exploiting loopholes. He was confident that if such a beneficial tax policy were to be canceled because of one merchant, that merchant would become universally hated.

Moreover, Chen Xi intended to let merchants find loopholes, not because he was careless, but because he was confident in controlling them. Liu Bei's power was not to be underestimated. Crushing a few scheming merchants would be effortless. In fact, given Liu Bei's current strength, even destroying a family wouldn't provoke much trouble, provided there was a valid reason.

With absolute power as a guarantee, Chen Xi wasn't concerned about merchants acting foolishly. Faced with the choice of death or profit, no one in their right mind would choose to court death, especially in a chaotic world where no one dared to provoke Liu Bei.

When Chen Xi returned to the government office, the people present stared at him as if they had seen a ghost.

"Isn't it a bit rude to stare at me like that?" Chen Xi said with a smile as he pulled up a grand chair and sat down at the head of the table, looking at the others.

"Zichuan, don't you think we're going a bit overboard with this construction?" Liu Ye asked with a wry smile. Everyone had seen the materials Chen Xi had brought in earlier, and calling it luxury didn't even begin to cover it.

"No problem. Just build it as I've instructed. It needs to be grand, magnificent, and dazzling. It should be a landmark of Fenggao, something that makes all other lords envious and jealous," Chen Xi said arrogantly. "I want Lord Xuande's residence to become the symbol of Fenggao! I want all the lords to think of his mansion whenever they think of Fenggao, making them green with envy!"

"But don't you think this is too ostentatious?" Jian Yong asked, holding his forehead. He had initially thought they were merely building a luxurious residence, but this had gone far beyond that. The cost of this mansion was likely more terrifying than simply piling up money to match its volume.

"Ostentatious?" Chen Xi sneered.

"Don't you think that with such a grand mansion, Lord Xuande will feel more confident when facing other regional lords? He might even scorn their inferior residences. My philosophy has always been that if we're going to do something, we should do it to the best of our ability. I refuse to believe that once

we've created the best, any other external temptations could sway Lord Xuande!" Chen Xi's expression exuded a unique and unyielding pride.

"I think we should keep a lower profile," Jia Xu rarely spoke up. "It's better to keep a low profile and avoid drawing too much attention. And what I fear most is not external temptations but that your elite family education method might backfire."

Jia Xu initially agreed with Chen Xi's approach to shaping Liu Bei's character and broadening his horizons, removing the limitations imposed by his humble origins. Therefore, Jia Xu was very supportive of Chen Xi's ongoing efforts in elite family education.

In Jia Xu's view, if Liu Bei could remain unmoved by beauty and untroubled by luxury, many potential problems in the future would become minor issues. He was even prepared to spend millions to cultivate this mindset in Liu Bei. However, when Jia Xu saw Chen Xi's recent actions, he was stunned.

This wasn't elite family education; it was setting Liu Bei up for failure. Starting with everything at the highest level was fine, but progress should be gradual. If you give Liu Bei everything at once, won't he lose his drive? Many heroes remain resilient during tough times, but once they reach the top, they quickly fall into decadence. Look no further than Dong Zhuo—his empire crumbled after being corrupted. Are you trying to ruin Liu Bei?

There was a soft "crack" as a white porcelain cup was smashed to the ground, breaking into pieces.

"Chen Zichuan, what are you doing?" Liu Yan asked angrily.

"Someone, fetch another set from my home," Chen Xi ordered calmly, ignoring Liu Yan's anger and the glaring eyes of Liu Ye and the others.

The room fell silent as everyone stared at Chen Xi, waiting for an explanation. But Chen Xi simply sat in the chair with his eyes closed, resting until a guard returned with an entire set of white porcelain cups.

"Crack, crack, crack..." Chen Xi casually smashed each cup, along with the teapot, then turned to the guard who had just left. "Have the housekeeper bring the set with the figures on it."

“What are you doing, Chen Zichuan?” Even the mild-mannered Lu Su finally lost his temper after the guard left. “What’s wrong with you today?”

Chen Xi looked at the others. Aside from Jia Xu, who seemed deep in thought, the others were all filled with anger. He sighed.

“Wenhe, why don’t you explain it? I think you’ve figured it out,” Chen Xi said, turning to Jia Xu.

“The actual cost of these items should be low, probably like paper. Chen Zichuan can use paper worth a thousand gold as toilet paper. To those unaware, it seems like extreme luxury, but those who understand know it’s nothing,” Jia Xu said with a sigh.

Jia Xu had finally grasped Chen Xi’s approach. Indeed, the mansion being built might seem extravagantly luxurious to those unaware of the true cost, but to those in the know, it was nothing more than a facade.

Jia Xu also realized that as long as Chen Xi didn’t reveal the truth, these items would indeed be perceived as priceless. He also understood Chen Xi’s plan for Liu Bei’s elite education—to make Liu Bei accustomed to, or even numb to, a lifestyle where items worth a thousand gold were mere playthings, discarded without a second thought.

Once Liu Bei became desensitized to such luxury, Jia Xu couldn’t imagine what kind of wealth could ever tempt him.

“Sigh, Zichuan, I must admit your methods are impressive,” Jia Xu said with a bitter smile.

Chapter 199: Everyone’s Mental Abilities

The intelligence network in Mount Tai was exceptionally effective. With silver being scattered everywhere, the moment Liu Biao deployed his troops, Mount Tai’s intelligence network had the information. The entire intelligence analysis and processing department was supported by just three people: Guo Jia, Jia Xu, and Fa Zheng.

However, Jia Xu barely showed up for work, and Guo Jia was constantly drunk. So, in reality, the workload fell almost entirely on Fa Zheng. Of course, while it seemed like this on the surface, both Jia Xu

and Guo Jia kept an eye on things. As long as Fa Zheng didn't make any significant mistakes, they let him handle it, making Fa Zheng the actual head of intelligence processing in Mount Tai.

"Is this just giving away free kills?" Chen Xi's face twitched when he heard the news. The troop distribution seemed like a setup for Sun Ce and Zhou Yu to gain experience and accolades—perhaps even capture a few generals.

Jia Xu didn't respond immediately. He had received intelligence from Guo Jia indicating that Zhou Yu's abilities fluctuated greatly. At his peak, Zhou Yu was so formidable that even Guo Jia found him difficult to handle. But at his low points, Zhou Yu barely managed to be a first-rate commander and advisor.

Regardless of whether Zhou Yu was at his best or worst, Jia Xu believed Wang Wei and Wen Pin were no match for him. He agreed with Chen Xi's assessment that this deployment was essentially giving away kills.

However, this assessment came without full knowledge of Zhou Yu's abilities. If Jia Xu understood Zhou Yu better, he would realize that Wang Wei and Wen Pin were essentially courting death. Zhou Yu's mental abilities were incredibly potent, especially when applied against his enemies.

Zhou Yu's talent could weaken the intelligence of anyone whose mental strength didn't match his, and complete immunity required twice his mental and intelligence levels. No one in the entire Three Kingdoms could meet that criterion. As a result, even Jia Xu would find his intellect slightly dulled if facing Zhou Yu at his peak, which could have significant consequences.

"If Zhou Yu is at his best, Wang Wei and Wen Pin don't stand a chance," Jia Xu would have said if he knew the full extent of Zhou Yu's abilities. Zhou Yu's talents made him a nightmare for less experienced opponents, turning them into mere obstacles to be easily overcome.

"Maybe they underestimated Sun Ce's forces. Five thousand soldiers seem like easy pickings," Liu Ye said, rubbing his chin. "But Liu Biao is being reckless. Even though he's regained most of his lost territory, his overall strength has been severely depleted."

"Overconfident, perhaps," Fa Zheng said arrogantly. "Yuan Shu's main forces have gone to Wan City to fight Cao Mengde, and Liu Biao thinks he can swoop in for easy gains. I think he's doomed."

“I wouldn’t say doomed,” Lu Su said after reviewing Fa Zheng’s report. “As long as Huang Zhong and Kuai Yue are with him, Liu Biao’s army won’t be easily defeated. Huang Zhong is the same formidable warrior Chen Xi often mentioned—capable of going toe-to-toe with Lu Bu.”

“Yes, that’s him,” Chen Xi confirmed. “With a general like him, the army’s morale will be incredibly high, and such a powerful warrior might even awaken his own special abilities.”

The possibility of generals awakening special abilities was something Chen Xi had accidentally learned from Zhao Yun. It hadn’t been recorded in history because there hadn’t been many such warriors in the past four hundred years. When Zhao Yun noticed something unusual about his troops after activating their cloud qi, he had consulted Chen Xi, leading Chen Xi to suspect that high-level warriors might indeed possess such abilities.

“Awaken abilities? That reminds me,” Fa Zheng said after some thought. “According to the information I’ve gathered, Lu Bu’s cavalry is about ten percent stronger than any other general’s cavalry.”

Jia Xu glanced at Fa Zheng but said nothing. It wasn’t surprising to him—Lu Bu’s cavalry was famously powerful, possibly thirty percent stronger under his command. However, Fa Zheng’s observation that individual soldiers became stronger under Lu Bu’s leadership was more intriguing.

“When Lu Bu leads cavalry, each soldier’s strength increases by about ten percent. This means that in a large-scale battle, Lu Bu’s forces could match an entire encirclement strategy,” Fa Zheng explained, his eyes gleaming.

Everyone stared at Fa Zheng in shock. The idea that a general’s presence could enhance the physical capabilities of an entire army was staggering.

“Considering our current abilities, I suspect that any warrior capable of achieving inner qi manifestation may have their own unique talents,” Fa Zheng continued. His mental abilities had been gradually awakening, allowing him to analyze and understand these phenomena better.

“Any other examples?” Chen Xi asked, comparing this information with what Zhao Yun had told him. He was becoming increasingly convinced that all warriors with inner qi manifestation might have special abilities, making intelligence gathering on this matter crucial.

“Yes. Xiahou Yuan, under Cao Cao’s command, marched his troops to Wan City in three days without losing any combat effectiveness. Their marching speed was about twenty percent faster than ours during forced marches. If they weren’t exhausted after three days, their normal march might be fifty percent faster than ours,” Fa Zheng reported, sharing a remarkable piece of information.

“When Zilong commands troops, they become immune to ambushes, remain eerily calm in danger, and maintain their courage even when surrounded,” Chen Xi added, seeing Jia Xu’s probing gaze.

“If it happens once, it can be seen as a coincidence. But if it happens repeatedly, it suggests a pattern,” Chen Xi said calmly.

“We need to understand the conditions that trigger these abilities. By the way, Filial Piety, is your mental ability related to human analysis?” Jia Xu asked.

“I’m not sure,” Fa Zheng replied, shaking his head. He had only recently begun to awaken his mental ability and hadn’t fully understood it yet. “What about yours, Jia Xu?”

“Mine is related to analyzing situations,” Jia Xu replied with a neutral expression. He wasn’t lying—his ability indeed involved analyzing situations and logically deducing outcomes, though he didn’t reveal everything.

Fa Zheng turned to the others. After a moment’s hesitation, Lu Su spoke up.

“My ability is related to cold, or more accurately, it’s about ignoring the weakening effects of cloud qi. I can use it without relying on any external factors and weaken others based on their strength. I’ve tested it and found it can affect up to ten thousand soldiers.”

Old Su was as transparent as ever—either he kept things to himself or he shared everything openly, without any deception.

“That’s terrifying. What about you?” Fa Zheng asked Liu Ye.

“Mental immersion...” Liu Ye said with a pained expression. “And it’s out of my control...”

“What kind of ability is that?” Fa Zheng asked, puzzled. Mental abilities could be straightforward, but Liu Ye’s was unique and hard to categorize.

“It means that whenever I start thinking about something, I get fully immersed in that perspective or role, and I can’t stop. It’s like I’m stuck,” Liu Ye said sadly. It wasn’t that he wanted to overthink things, but once he started, he couldn’t stop—it was beyond his control.

“In that case, I get it. Zichuan, what’s your ability?” Fa Zheng asked, curious to hear about Chen Xi’s ability now that everyone else had shared theirs.

“This is hard to explain. I haven’t figured out what my ability is yet. It’s definitely there, and it’s definitely passive, but I’m not sure what it is,” Chen Xi said with a shrug.

“Tell us about it. Maybe we can help you figure it out,” Fa Zheng suggested eagerly. He had tried to trick Guo Jia into revealing his ability but failed, so he didn’t want to miss this chance.

“Last year and this year have had remarkably good weather. It’s been perfect—no disasters in Lord Xuande’s territory, while nearby Yanzhou has suffered from both droughts and floods. It’s strange, isn’t it?” Chen Xi said, seemingly out of nowhere. His comment made everyone think deeply, and they began to realize that the weather really had been unusually favorable in their region.

Chapter 200: The Enemy Is Strong Too

Lu Su and the others looked at Chen Xi with strange expressions. If this really was Chen Xi’s mental ability, then he would be incredibly valuable.

“It’s quite possible...” Fa Zheng said with difficulty. If they thought about it, before Chen Xi took over Qingzhou, the area had been plagued by drought. Otherwise, the Yellow Turbans wouldn’t have needed to leave Qingzhou to find food. But once Chen Xi defeated the Yellow Turbans and took over the territory, Qingzhou suddenly became blessed with favorable weather. And if they thought about other similar occurrences, it wasn’t impossible that this was Chen Xi’s ability—in fact, it seemed very likely!

"So, I'm also trying to confirm it. If this year turns out to be a bountiful year, then one of my mental abilities could be adjusting the weather in the regions governed by Lord Xuande. As for other possibilities, it's hard to say," Chen Xi said with a shrug.

Chen Xi had also been trying to figure out how his mental ability actually worked, and he concluded that it might be related to the regions under his control. By observing the way military formations gathered cloud energy, he speculated that everyone might also be unconsciously releasing mental energy. His mental ability might be harnessing this otherwise useless mental energy to alter the climate. Perhaps the energy released by just a few people wasn't enough, but with a large enough population, small changes could accumulate, leading to significant climate changes. This was the only explanation Chen Xi could think of for why the weather in Lord Xuande's territories was always better than the historical average.

"Zichuan, I have high hopes for you. From now on, you should stay in the safest place and avoid going to the frontlines!" Lu Su said solemnly, placing a hand on Chen Xi's shoulder. If this ability turned out to be real, Chen Xi could potentially save countless lives, so it would be best for him to stay far away from war.

Chen Xi tilted his head and glanced sideways at Lu Su. It was clear that Lu Su had taken him seriously. But then again, if his ability truly involved manipulating the unconscious mental energy of everyone within the ruler's domain to regulate the climate, it would indeed be a strategic-level ability. The longer it lasted, the more powerful it would become. After all, this was a world where people could unleash extraordinary power just by eating well!

But who knew for sure? Chen Xi hadn't confirmed if there were any negative side effects yet. What if it also amplified natural disasters? What if he was just imagining things? Who could say for certain?

Meanwhile, Guo Jia was lying half-asleep on a couch, holding a report from Jingzhou. In his groggy state, he muttered, "Haha, this Wang Wei is quite interesting. He's cautious, and his arrangement isn't bad."

After taking a few more gulps of wine, Guo Jia drowsily looked at the report. "Wen Pin won't die, but this Wang Wei... seems like his chances of survival are fifty-fifty. Oh well, as an enemy, you might as well die..."

As Guo Jia finished speaking, his mental energy surged, and he drifted off to sleep while hugging his wine jug. After all, he didn't need to maintain any pretense of formality, especially since no one was around.

At that very moment, Wang Wei, who was leading thirty thousand troops towards Jiangxia, had no idea that his fate had already been sealed in this battle. Guo Jia's unique mental ability allowed him to influence the outcome of events based on his judgments. Although this ability had many restrictions, once activated, it would tilt the scales in favor of Guo Jia's chosen outcome.

Even Guo Jia himself couldn't fully understand his ability—he merely had a vague sense of making declarations. As for the true nature of his mental ability, Guo Jia was unsure.

Of course, if Chen Xi were aware of how Guo Jia's judgments altered reality and the results that followed, he would likely figure out what Guo Jia's mental ability was. Historically, Guo Jia had once predicted that Sun Ce would die at the hands of an assassin, even though Sun Ce was in perfect health at the time. And yet, the formidable warrior known as the "Little Conqueror" of Jiangdong did indeed die at the hands of an assassin. How unlucky could one be?

Or perhaps, this wasn't just bad luck...

In Nanyang, at Wan City, Shi Zhi, looking pale and gaunt, stood on the city walls, gazing out at the vast army of Yuan Shu. The saying that an army of ten thousand seems boundless wasn't an exaggeration!

Ever since Yuan Shu learned that Cao Cao, instead of consolidating his control over Yuzhou, had come to seize most of Nanyang, he had been furious. Throughout his life, Yuan Shu had always been the one bullying others—when had he ever been on the receiving end?

Without a second thought, Yuan Shu led thirty thousand troops, along with over ten thousand soldiers from Lu Bu, intending to give Cao Cao a brutal beating to vent his frustration and drive him back to his homeland.

While Yuan Shu was enraged by Cao Cao's actions, he didn't intend to annihilate him completely. Yuan Shu was an odd figure—he held onto old sentiments. After all, he had grown up playing alongside Cao Cao and Yuan Shao, and although their relationships were strained, they were still some of the few people he had shared his childhood with.

For this reason, Yuan Shu simply wanted to defeat Cao Cao and send him running. Of course, if Cao Cao were willing to acknowledge Yuan Shu as his superior, that would be even better. After all, why had Cao Cao and Xu You both chosen to follow Yuan Shao instead of him?

This was, in fact, the real reason Yuan Shu resented Yuan Shao so much. All their childhood friends had chosen to align themselves with Yuan Shao, leaving Yuan Shu feeling betrayed.

As for internal family conflicts, rivalries between legitimate and illegitimate sons, and the like—they were all just surface-level issues. Family conflicts were never openly displayed in public, and as for the legitimate and illegitimate sons, well, when did illegitimate sons ever have the right to compete with the legitimate heirs? Everything in the Yuan family was meant for Yuan Shu to inherit, and that was the harsh reality.

This was also why Yuan Shao had chosen not to return to Yuzhou and instead ventured to Jizhou to carve out his own territory. Even if he had returned, he wouldn't have gained anything. The legitimate heir of the Yuan family was Yuan Shu, and that was that.

As for whether he might lose to Cao Cao, Yuan Shu hadn't even considered the possibility. Having just severely beaten Liu Biao in Jingzhou, Yuan Shu was riding high. As far as he was concerned, the troubles in Yuzhou were no longer an issue after Liu Bei's withdrawal. With elite troops, ample supplies, and powerful generals, Yuan Shu felt invincible.

"Military Advisor Shi, are you feeling alright?" Xiahou Yuan asked with concern as he looked at Shi Zhi's pale face.

"You don't need to worry, Miao Cai," Shi Zhi replied without turning his head. He continued scanning Yuan Shu's forces, and after a while, he turned back with a bitter smile. "I overestimated Yuan Shu's forces. There isn't a single person among them with a mental ability. I wanted to borrow an ability to play with, but it's just not possible. What a pity."

"No mental abilities?" Xiahou Yuan was momentarily stunned, then he broke into a wide grin. This meant that the enemy had no terrifying strategists on their side!

"Indeed, they don't have any capable advisors," Shi Zhi said, unsure of how to feel about this. "Never mind, I'll use my usual abilities. I was hoping to use a similar ability to mess with them, but it seems there's no opportunity for that..."

"I'll just use Wenruo's mental ability. It's incredibly useful. Ah, what a pity about Chen Changwen's ability—it doesn't have any special features," Shi Zhi muttered as his mental energy surged. His demeanor gradually began to resemble that of Xun Yu.

"Wenruo's mental ability is truly invaluable. It clarifies the big picture, optimizes resource allocation, and can push a team to perform beyond their limits when needed. It really is the perfect ability for a central command strategist!" Shi Zhi marveled at Xun Yu's ability every time he used it, though he couldn't help but complain about his own mental ability.

In truth, Shi Zhi's mental ability was far from lacking. It was actually quite exceptional. However, due to its unique nature, he was always left wanting more.

Shi Zhi's mental ability allowed him to copy and use others' mental abilities. He could store three different abilities, but he could only use one at a time, and switching between them required a ten-day cooldown.

Because his three allies all had excellent abilities, Shi Zhi often felt frustrated. If he used Xun Yu's ability, Xun You's would be sidelined, and if he switched to Xun You's, Cheng Yu's would be left out. No matter which one he chose, Shi Zhi was never completely satisfied.

Whether it was Xun Yu's strategic foresight, Xun You's deception, or Cheng Yu's resilience, all of them were top-tier abilities. Of course, these abilities didn't originally have names—Shi Zhi had come up with them out of boredom.

Xun You's ability was particularly interesting. Once activated, it made the enemy perceive Xun You's forces as weak and harmless, giving the impression that they could be easily defeated. Naturally, underestimating Xun You often led to disastrous consequences for the enemy!

For this reason, Shi Zhi avoided working too closely with Xun You. Although Xun You appeared dull and unassuming, Shi Zhi knew he was a classic "wolf in sheep's clothing," full of cunning.

Cheng Yu's mental ability, on the other hand, was somewhat similar to that of a warrior. But unlike warrior abilities, Cheng Yu's was passive. As long as he served as the strategist for an army, his ability would enhance the entire force, making them more resilient. This meant that Cheng Yu's troops were tougher and could maintain higher combat effectiveness in adverse conditions—whether facing a flood, fire, or other disasters, his troops would have a better chance of surviving.

As a result, Shi Zhi always wished he could use all three abilities at once. Unfortunately, he could only use one at a time, and switching between them required a ten-day cooldown. When Chen Qun had joined their ranks, Shi Zhi had immediately copied his ability as well.

However, after testing it, Shi Zhi decided to erase Xun Yu's ability to make room for Chen Qun's. But after using it once, he had gone back to Xun Yu and copied his ability again. The reason was simple—Chen Qun's ability was too similar to Xun Yu's. While it was just as effective for maintaining stability, it lacked Xun Yu's explosive power.