

Mythical 211

Chapter 211: The Painful Rise of Prime Land Prices

Seven days ago, the commercial taxes had already completely overshadowed the previous taxation methods. As expected, the battle at Wancheng had utterly destroyed the original commercial hub centered on Wancheng and radiating out to Nanyang, which indirectly benefited Fenggao greatly.

Fenggao, as a commercial center, wasn't an ideal location—after all, it was too remote. However, the current situation was different. Fenggao, despite lacking geographical advantages, had seized the opportunities of the times and benefited from favorable circumstances.

With the commercial hub of Wancheng engulfed in flames and merchants across the land struggling to sell their goods, Fenggao became the new hub. The two major merchant guilds led by the Zhen family from the north and the Mi family from Xuzhou had established their base in Fenggao. Simultaneously, drastic changes in Qingzhou's tax rates attracted the attention of merchants from all over the world.

Chen Xi watched this unfold with a calm expression. The change in tax rates was now a foregone conclusion. The overwhelming difference in tax benefits wasn't something that could be easily overturned with a few words. As for concerns about fewer merchants during times of chaos, Chen Xi merely chuckled at the notion. Chaotic times were precisely when merchants thrived the most. It had never been heard that merchants decreased in number during such periods. In fact, only in peaceful times could merchants be controlled; in chaos, they became even more active, exploiting the numerous loopholes in the tax system.

"There's still one more thing left to do," Chen Xi said, lifting his wine cup with a smile toward Guo Jia before downing it in one go.

"The library, right?" Guo Jia casually picked at the food on the table.

"Yes. I imagine that Wenru and his team have nearly completed the household registrations for the scholars. In this era, scholars can serve as role models for the common people, and the qualifications they possess are what the populace desires. It's a unique top-down approach," Chen Xi nodded. "Fenggao may not be the best location—it's too remote. If we were in the Central Plains, our tax revenue could be 20% higher."

Chen Xi's calm demeanor made Guo Jia feel a bit awkward. After all, not long ago, everyone, including himself, had been trying to block Chen Xi's commercial reforms. But in just over twenty days, the transformation of Fenggao had been shockingly swift.

"Zichuan, the issue before was indeed our fault. I hope you can forgive us," Guo Jia said, uncharacteristically serious.

"No need for that. We all had our reasons," Chen Xi waved his hand dismissively. "Neither of us was wrong—the only one at fault was Xuande." A sly smile appeared on Chen Xi's face.

"You can't just stay cooped up at home forever!" Guo Jia could only chuckle helplessly at Chen Xi's shamelessness. Only Chen Xi would be so carefree about such matters.

"My house was desolate ten days ago, but now it's bustling with visitors. If I go out now, how many merchants do you think will be waiting for me?" Chen Xi said with a smile, holding his wine cup. "I have the final say on commercial laws. At this point, even showing a small favor would make many people rich overnight. Do you know what my steward has been up to lately?"

"That still doesn't excuse you from not going to the government office," Guo Jia replied, exasperated.

"I don't want to," Chen Xi said nonchalantly. "Until I've finished dealing with this matter, don't come looking for me unless it's something major. Tell Zijing and Ziyang to handle their tasks well. I don't care about what happened before."

Guo Jia sighed and drank his wine in one gulp. Who would have thought Chen Xi would succeed so quickly? He hadn't wanted to play the peacemaker, but among the people in Taishan, he got along best with Chen Xi. Neither of them was too concerned with formalities or personal gain.

"Drink your wine. I won't be able to join you at the brothel for the next couple of days. By the way, have you been to the newly opened Manxiang Brothel? I hear it's quite good," Chen Xi changed the topic to something they both enjoyed.

"I've been there. It's really great, and best of all, it's free! They even gave me this so I don't have to spend money in the future. Do you want one?" Guo Jia grinned mischievously, pulling out a solid gold

card from his sleeve. With this card, Guo Jia could enjoy all the services at Manxiang Brothel without paying.

"I have one too," Chen Xi said, pulling out a similar card and waving it in front of Guo Jia. "But unlike you, I don't use it so excessively. By the way, that place is on the main street! South First Street, no less! The land there was dirt cheap."

Chen Xi's words made Guo Jia feel a pang of regret. Who could have predicted that land prices would skyrocket like this? Originally, merchants thought they were just making a quick profit, but when they realized Chen Xi was serious, those with money started setting up shop here. Streets Two, Three, Four, and Five quickly filled up, and as soon as any land became available, it was snatched up. The wealthy merchants backing the powerful clans had deep pockets.

Land sales brought in millions of coins, and after selling the land, Lu Su felt a deep sense of loss. The land prices on the front two streets had skyrocketed to the point where Lu Su couldn't help but twitch with frustration. As for the prime location on First Street, only three businesses had set up shop: Mi's restaurant, Zhen's fur shop, and Manxiang Brothel—all established before Chen Xi implemented his commercial reforms.

Merchants weren't fools. They knew that South First Street was the best location, but Chen Xi had only designated four streets. Now that all the land had been sold, what more could they do? Challenge Chen Xi's rule that merchants could only trade in the designated northern area? That would be suicidal. They could try buying land in the residential areas of North Sixth Street and renovating it, but as for the two shops on North First Street and the brothel on South First Street, they could only drool over them. It was obvious that these three establishments had powerful backing.

No one dared touch the Zhen and Mi families, and as for that eye-catching brothel on South First Street, if it didn't have strong backing, it would have been relocated long ago. Besides, it was the only one on South First Street, right in the middle. Merchants who couldn't find the brothel's backers could only envy its prime location.

"Ha, that madam must be having a hard time. She can't reveal her backers, no matter how much pressure she's under," Guo Jia laughed. He had been frequenting Manxiang Brothel lately and had seen the madam's predicament firsthand. But with each cup of flower tea costing a hundred coins, and business booming, the madam was sure to hold out despite the pressure.

"Is there any trouble?" Chen Xi asked with a smile. The brothel's location on the main street was indeed conspicuous, but it was an accident. Although Lu Su's heart ached over the missed opportunity of prime real estate, he couldn't very well ask to reclaim the land.

"Do you think anyone would dare cause trouble?" Guo Jia replied with a mocking smile. "Only those clueless upstarts would be foolish enough to stir up trouble there. But with so many wealthy merchants frequenting the place, any troublemakers would be crushed with a flick of their fingers. No one dares make a scene."

"But it is quite an eyesore," Chen Xi said helplessly. A brothel on the main street was too conspicuous. "Forget it. I'll send someone to find that madam and ask her to make Manxiang Brothel more refined. Maybe add some music, dancing, or theater performances. If this keeps up, Zijing might come to talk to me, and that would be troublesome."

Chapter 212: I'm So Clever, It's Scary

Chen Xi wasn't just talking nonsense. Given how much pain Lu Su was already feeling, it wouldn't be long before he set his sights on Manxiang Brothel. If the brothel continued to stand out so much by then, there wouldn't be much Chen Xi could say in its defense. After all, while these establishments existed everywhere, few dared to open so openly on a main street.

Such places usually had their own designated areas, often tucked away in alleyways. But now, being so brazen as to operate on a main street was rather wild. This sort of outlier must already be a thorn in the side of other brothels, taking too much of their business.

The last time Manxiang Brothel was targeted, it was partly because of Chen Xi and Guan Ping. Though he had compensated them by helping them relocate, Lu Su, in a moment of confusion, assigned them this prime location without much thought. Now, Chen Xi couldn't just ignore the situation. While they hadn't done anything wrong, their location was simply too conspicuous. So, Chen Xi planned to give them a chance to adjust. Whether they took his advice was up to them—he would just do his part.

"Zichuan, I'll be heading out now. The situation in Xiliang has gotten a bit strange. It's a bit too far, and many of the reports are becoming unclear. Han Wen Yao and Ma Shou Cheng have been stirring things up non-stop," Guo Jia said, unsteadily rising from the stone table, feeling a bit tipsy.

Guo Jia's casual description of a hundred-thousand-strong war in Xiliang as mere "stirring things up" would probably leave Ma Teng and Han Sui speechless if they ever heard it.

“What about Chang’an?” Chen Xi asked curiously. What was going on with these two? Weren’t they supposed to be fighting under the banner of loyalty to the emperor, battling Li Jue and Guo Si, and then retreating back to Xiliang after getting beaten up?

“Same as before, but Guo Si and Li Jue are now at odds over military power. If His Majesty seizes the opportunity, he could manipulate the situation and have them destroy each other,” Guo Jia said, a gleam of insight flashing in his eyes before dimming just as quickly.

Chen Xi rolled his eyes. Indeed, this was a perfect opportunity for the emperor to regain control, using cunning to have his enemies eliminate each other. But Liu Xie wasn’t the kind of person capable of that. If he were, the world wouldn’t be in such chaos.

The brief flash of disdain on Chen Xi’s face didn’t escape Guo Jia’s notice. He realized how ridiculous his own words sounded. Some things seemed simple, but without the courage to act, they were impossible to accomplish.

“Alright, enough about that. I need to deal with the situation in Xiliang and Chang’an. As for Cao Mengde and Yuan Gonglu, I’ve left them to Fa Xiaozhi. He’s been improving a lot lately—within three years, I might not be able to hold him back. Have you arranged a good position for him?” Guo Jia said, feeling a bit sentimental about Fa Zheng, whom he had mentored.

“Don’t worry, he won’t be left out,” Chen Xi replied with a smile. “Oh, by the way, could you help me notify two people?”

“I’ll be sure to notify Zizhong and Lady Zhen,” Guo Jia nodded. He understood that the new commercial rules in Fenggao were taking shape, and missing out on this opportunity would be a significant loss.

“I think they’ve already prepared the rules. Once I review them, it should be good to go. It’s about time to open up First Street as well,” Chen Xi said with a smile. Mi Zhu probably hadn’t even considered this when the tax revenue hadn’t yet recovered, and even after it did, he was likely still in shock. However, Lady Zhen had surely prepared well in advance.

“First Street?” Guo Jia’s eyes widened, and his steps, which had been moving toward the door, halted. Now, many merchants wanted to set up shop in Fenggao. Among the five major merchants, all but the

Wu family's main figure were already here. If Chen Xi was planning to develop First Street, the value of that land alone could surpass the agricultural tax revenue for the first half of the year.

"Interested?" Chen Xi asked, a playful grin on his face.

"If I said no, would you believe me? The land prices on Second Street have risen so much that, overall, they're nearly catching up to the agricultural taxes for the first half of the year. Zijing keeps complaining about selling too early—First Street... Tsk tsk!" Guo Jia didn't mind Chen Xi's teasing; land was far more lucrative than taxes.

After speaking, Guo Jia frowned as if something had just occurred to him. "But speaking of which, Ziyang found out while reviewing the records that the land on First Street had already been sold long ago, even before Fenggao was built. Was that your doing? At that time, no one else had the foresight to pull off something like that."

As he said this, Guo Jia stared intently at Chen Xi. Although he had already guessed that Chen Xi was the mastermind, the fact that Chen Xi had pulled this off more than a year ago, when the future was still uncertain, was truly mind-boggling.

"I showed mercy—I didn't purchase the land on South First Street, did I? I paid for the land on North First Street," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly.

"You paid over a thousand coins, right?" Guo Jia said, rubbing his temples as if he had a headache. He muttered, "We, on behalf of the state, are willing to buy it back for ten thousand coins. We could even offer more."

Chen Xi looked at Guo Jia with disdain, making Guo Jia feel a bit embarrassed. If North First Street were worth just ten thousand coins now, that would be a steal—a price for blackened cabbage, not even fresh.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Chen Xi said, finishing his drink and smiling at the embarrassed Guo Jia. "I didn't actually spend any money on that land. Back when Fenggao was being built, those places were where I set up my bun shops and voucher exchange points. Once Fenggao was completed, I used the vouchers to secure those spots."

Guo Jia nearly spat out blood. So, Chen Xi had pulled this off without spending a single coin, essentially securing the land for free. Considering the scale of Fenggao's construction with tens of thousands of workers, Chen Xi's bun shops must have been quite profitable. And since they were large establishments to accommodate the workers, the land must have been dirt cheap back then. When Fenggao was completed, the vouchers probably just matched the amount spent on the land.

"I'm pretty clever, huh?" Chen Xi said with a grin.

"Clever!" Guo Jia replied helplessly. "Once you sell First Street, you'll surpass the five great merchants in wealth, and it'll all be in cash. I wouldn't be surprised if Zijing ends up strangling you." Guo Jia muttered.

"Don't worry, don't worry. I won't be that ruthless. I'm just giving you a heads-up—think about long-term benefits. Look at it this way: land that cost just over a thousand coins back then is now worth over a million coins. Isn't that great?" Chen Xi smiled warmly at Guo Jia.

Guo Jia fell silent. He understood the deeper meaning behind Chen Xi's words. He also realized why Chen Xi wanted everyone to know that he had secured ownership of First Street a year and a half ago. It was a warning: without an extremely long-term vision, don't even think about challenging Chen Xi or opposing the policies he implemented. They simply didn't have the foresight.

When Guo Jia left Chen's residence, he felt noticeably downcast. Chen Xi's calm demeanor this time had put enormous pressure on him—it was all planned too far ahead.

Chapter 213: Where Did North First Street Go?

After Guo Jia left, Chen Xi laughed heartily to himself. He knew that this time, he had thoroughly shocked everyone. From now on, whenever a situation arose where it was Chen Xi against everyone else, they would think twice before opposing him. Chen Xi's recent actions had been so extraordinary that each seemingly idle move had far-reaching implications.

"Jian'er, where are you?" Chen Xi called out to the inner courtyard. It was time to get Liu Bei involved in all of this—there was a lot of money at stake, and Chen Xi had no intention of keeping it all to himself.

"What is it, husband?" Fan Jian eventually responded, lazily making her way over.

"Bring me that box from under the bed," Chen Xi instructed. Fan Jian had become quite well-behaved over time, especially when Chen Xi was home. However, she had also become more clingy, a sign of Chen Xi's indulgence.

"Alright~" Fan Jian cheerfully ran off to retrieve the box. Chen Xi didn't bother to restrain her. She could paint, read, sew—what more could he ask for? Sure, she had become a bit too lively lately, but he wasn't going to be too strict.

Soon enough, Fan Jian returned with a small wooden box, placing it in front of Chen Xi before sitting down beside him, her eyes filled with anticipation.

"Do you want to see what's inside?" Chen Xi teased with a smile. Fan Jian nodded eagerly. Indeed, as long as Chen Xi didn't set too many rules, she quickly abandoned any semblance of a proper lady. Perhaps this was her true nature.

"You can't!" Chen Xi said playfully, though he opened the box before Fan Jian could pout. "Fine, I'll let you see. These are land deeds. Once you write your name on one, it'll belong to us. Go call Lan'er over and let her choose one."

"Does that mean the rest are mine?" Fan Jian's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Are you kidding? You can only choose one," Chen Xi said, tapping her on the head. Fan Jian, like a cat, shrank away before running off in a huff.

The stack of deeds in the box was for properties on North First Street, including the spots currently occupied by the Mi and Zhen families. Technically, their presence there was illegal—Chen Xi still held the deeds. He could teach them a lesson if he wanted, but he had no interest in doing so.

Soon, Fan Jian returned, dragging along Chen Lan, who was dressed in a simple white nightgown. Chen Xi sighed—his household had become overwhelmingly female. Besides him, there was hardly any male presence.

"Lan'er, were you sleeping again?" Chen Xi asked, exasperated. Ever since he had elevated Chen Lan's status from a slave to a member of the Chen family, she seemed to do nothing but sleep. She was always drowsy during the day, only becoming lively at night—the complete opposite of Fan Jian.

"Yawn~ Greetings, husband," Chen Lan muttered through a yawn, her eyes still half-closed.

"Enough with the formalities. Just pick one. You see that blank space? Once you've picked, just write your name there," Chen Xi said, handing over the stack of deeds.

Both Fan Jian and Chen Lan, being homebodies with no interest in business, had no idea what these deeds meant. Fan Jian carefully chose hers, while Chen Lan, still half-asleep, scribbled Chen Xi's name on a deed and handed it back to him.

"...Really?" Chen Xi sighed as he looked at the deed Chen Lan had handed him. Thankfully, Fan Jian had written her own name. If she had followed Chen Lan's lead, Liu Bei would be down another property worth around ten thousand coins. Reluctantly, Chen Xi took the pen from Chen Lan, glanced through the stack, and signed her name on a moderately valuable property.

After finishing the paperwork, Chen Xi, now infected by Chen Lan's drowsiness, yawned as he handed the deeds back to the two women. "These are gifts for you. If you ever run out of money, just go to that shop—they'll always have some for you."

With that, he sent Chen Lan back to bed—wandering around in a nightgown was a sure way to catch a cold.

"Jian'er, you need to keep the maids and singers in line. They've all become lazy because of Lan'er. Even though I don't expect much from them, we should at least have someone to pour tea, right? How come there's no one around to do even that?" Chen Xi said as he packed up the remaining deeds, tapping Fan Jian on the head.

Chen Xi found it hard to believe that none of the household maids were interested in him, considering he was now one of the most eligible bachelors in the land—young, capable, good-looking, and in a position of real power. If Chen Xi announced that he was taking concubines, the line of candidates would stretch from one end of Fenggao to the other. Yet, there wasn't a single maid pouring tea at home. If this wasn't Fan Jian's doing, then what was?

Chen Xi didn't have any strong opinions about concubines, but having maids around to serve tea was just a different feeling from sitting alone with a cup of tea. Despite the lack of men in the household, there was certainly no shortage of maids, ranging in age from twelve to twenty-two.

"Oh~" Fan Jian responded half-heartedly.

"I'm heading out. Stay at home and behave, don't wander off," Chen Xi said before leaving. He still tended to treat Fan Jian like a child, never quite adjusting to his role as her husband.

After Chen Xi left, Fan Jian pouted and looked down at her chest, frustrated. She glanced towards the back courtyard. "Could it be that sleeping helps you grow?"

Chen Xi didn't think much about Fan Jian's peculiar logic. He was focused on finding Liu Bei, as there were matters he needed to discuss with him.

"The Lord is in the study!" Xu Chu shouted loudly.

Chen Xi rubbed his ears and glared at Xu Chu. "Do I need to wait here for a few minutes? Why shout so loudly? Don't think I don't know Lady Zhen is here—really, now."

Xu Chu looked embarrassed as he stepped aside to continue standing guard.

Not long after Chen Xi spoke, Liu Bei opened the study door. "Zichuan, what brings you here? Does it concern the commercial activities in Qingzhou?"

"It's somewhat related, but not directly," Chen Xi replied, carrying the box into the room. Sure enough, Lady Zhen was seated by the tea table, dressed in an elegant green embroidered gown, her hair styled in a cloud-like bun. She was pouring tea and nibbling on some snacks.

"Oh, Lady Zhen is here too," Chen Xi said with feigned surprise, though he couldn't hide the amusement in his eyes.

"Zichuan, there's no need for such dramatics," Lady Zhen replied calmly, casting a glance at Chen Xi without any hint of fluster. "Congratulations are in order, Zichuan. The new policies are indeed remarkable. Just the buying and selling of shopfronts alone must have brought in more revenue for Fenggao than half a year's worth of taxes from an entire province."

"Zichuan, have a seat. No need for formalities," Liu Bei said with a smile, offering Chen Xi a cup of tea. "I was just discussing you with Lady Zhen."

"Let me guess—Lady Zhen is interested in North First Street, or rather, all the top merchants want to know where North First Street has gone," Chen Xi said with a smile after taking a sip of tea, then looking up to meet Lady Zhen's gaze.

Chapter 214: Just a Transaction, Everything Changes!

Lady Zhen nodded in acknowledgment of Chen Xi's words. While other merchants were still debating whether Liu Bei's side was trying to drive up the price, Lady Zhen had already obtained a startling piece of intelligence from Fenggao's strategists: North First Street was not in the hands of the government.

The moment Lady Zhen heard that, her first thought was of Chen Xi. Unlike others who needed to think things through, she trusted her instincts more. Ever since she had witnessed Chen Xi's almost supernatural ability, she couldn't help but attribute any unsolvable mystery to him.

"It's all right here," Chen Xi said with a smile, pointing to the wooden box. "The properties on North First Street were acquired back when Fenggao was first being built. Lord Xuande, do you remember what you said back then?"

It was highly unlikely that Liu Bei would remember something he had said offhandedly. He chuckled awkwardly, glancing at Chen Xi. How could he possibly recall something he said a year and a half ago when Fenggao hadn't even been constructed? He signaled to Chen Xi to handle it however he saw fit—Liu Bei trusted that Chen Xi wouldn't mislead him.

Lady Zhen's eyes sparkled as she realized the value of the box of deeds before her. The box was practically worth an entire Zhen family fortune. As expected, it was in Chen Xi's hands. "Since you've brought it out, Zichuan, it seems you plan to sell these properties. In that case, could you let our Zhen

family pick one or two first? You know, we're currently occupying a spot without the deed. If someone else claims it later, it could be problematic."

Chen Xi rolled his eyes. Women often have their advantages in situations like this. If this were Mi Zhu, there's no way he'd ask to pick first—it just wouldn't be proper. But with Lady Zhen, there was no helping it. Women naturally have certain privileges—being unreasonable and bending the rules is practically in their nature.

"Madam, please wait a moment. After all, these deeds are still ownerless. I prepared them a long time ago, just waiting for this day. Lord Xuande, please," Chen Xi said with a smile as he pushed the box towards Liu Bei. These deeds were something he had carefully set aside while building Fenggao, all under the guise of promoting Liu Bei's benevolence while secretly acquiring the properties. Even though they were unsigned, they were effectively spoken for.

Liu Bei smiled as he opened the box. Inside were sheets of slightly yellowed, rough-textured paper, the earliest of Chen Xi's creations. The technique had improved significantly since then.

As Liu Bei looked through the deeds, he realized they were indeed for the areas where property values had skyrocketed recently. Even though Chen Xi had hinted at what was inside, seeing it in person was still quite shocking. Chen Xi had planned all this so far in advance.

Holding one of the deeds, Liu Bei sighed inwardly.

Seeing the blank space where the owner's name should be, Liu Bei set the deed down. He knew that once Chen Xi brought these out, they were meant to stay with him. These were clearly prepared for Liu Bei's use.

"Zichuan, I'll keep these. However, I'll need you to handle the follow-up. When it comes to commerce, there's no one more capable than you. Or rather, there's no one better at managing state affairs than you," Liu Bei said, placing the deeds back in the box and speaking earnestly.

"Even though it feels a bit much, I'm happy to accept," Chen Xi replied with a broad smile, shedding his earlier cold demeanor. Sometimes he felt that a hands-off leader like Liu Bei was truly a good person.

Lady Zhen silently turned away, having seen enough. The deeds in Liu Bei's hands were blank, which meant Chen Xi had long planned to use them as rewards for Liu Bei's ministers and generals—a thoughtful end-of-year bonus, so to speak.

It's better to share joy with others than to keep it to oneself. If Chen Xi were to keep North First Street all to himself, he would surely be resented. Even if Liu Bei were to keep it, it wouldn't look much better, as such behavior could be seen as greedy.

However, with Chen Xi keeping just what he needed as a personal reward and handing over the rest as a planned reward from Liu Bei, everyone would be pleased.

No matter how Liu Bei chooses to distribute it—as a bonus, a reward, or something else—it's a substantial reward that would instantly strengthen the bond between Liu Bei and his people.

This money didn't come from the state but directly from Liu Bei's personal coffers, showing sincerity. How the money was earned isn't as important as the fact that it was legitimate and used with a clear conscience. In Liu Bei's hands, it became a powerful tool for winning loyalty.

Lady Zhen understood this well, so she didn't press further. She knew Liu Bei needed to play his part in this transaction. Chen Xi and Liu Bei had shown her this as a sign that she wasn't considered an outsider. Once the deeds were handed out as rewards to ministers and generals, they would likely return to Chen Xi's hands, as it would be the logical thing for them to do. Essentially, everything would end up back in Chen Xi's control, but everyone involved would be content.

When it comes to dividing the money, Lady Zhen was certain that Chen Xi wouldn't mind. He had plenty of means at his disposal and didn't need to worry about it. As for Liu Bei, the money was like a windfall, and winning loyalty was far more important than wealth. So for both of them, this was no big deal.

"Zichuan, you're truly unmatched in planning ahead. Lord Xuande doesn't need to worry about these matters at all," Lady Zhen sighed. In this relationship of mutual understanding between ruler and minister, there was no point in others trying to curry favor with Liu Bei; he simply wasn't interested.

"Hahaha, having Zichuan by my side is a blessing from heaven, proof that the Han dynasty isn't destined to fall," Liu Bei said proudly. He was genuinely proud of having picked up such a top-tier strategist along the way. Back then, who could have imagined that the man trailing behind various warlords would

possess such great abilities? Only Liu Bei, with his discerning eye, had seen Chen Xi's potential and brought him into the fold.

Chen Xi, uncomfortable with the praise, turned away. He always felt that Liu Bei got overly excited whenever he mentioned Chen Xi in front of others. Sometimes, when there was no one else around, Liu Bei would reminisce about the time he caught Chen Xi spying on the military camp and, instead of punishing him, decided to bring him along—like it was a predestined moment.

Chapter 215: Crash Course Education and Buying Popularity

Liu Bei was exceedingly generous in handing out the property deeds, giving one to each of his long-time followers. Each deed was worth at least 30,000 to 50,000 coins, instantly motivating everyone to work even harder. As for the newcomers, Liu Bei subtly hinted that once his finances were in better shape, he wouldn't hesitate to provide money, grain, and even beauties.

After distributing the deeds and resources, Liu Bei found that managing his personal wealth felt quite satisfying. Previously, even if all these billions of coins had been earned by Liu Bei himself, spending so lavishly would have drawn criticism from his subordinates, even if they benefited from it.

But now? "I'm spending my own money, so what do you all have to say about it? I can aid whomever I want. If the government won't fund it, then I'll use my own. You critics want to challenge me? Come on, let's go at it. Who's afraid?"

Liu Bei was spending the windfall of money with great joy. As for the criticisms of the officials? What was there to worry about? Now that the treasury and personal funds were separate, and Liu Bei hadn't taken a single copper from the public coffers, even building his house with his own money, what was there to criticize? Let them speak; Liu Bei would just sit back and listen.

With money in hand and newfound confidence, Liu Bei felt great. Over the past few days, he'd been spending freely. In the past, he would've had to consider whether his actions might impact the government's finances. But now? If there were any problems with government finances, it was the officials who'd be to blame, not him. The nation's wealth was separate from his personal funds, and if he spent all his money, he could always earn more. After tossing out billions of coins, Liu Bei started to feel that money wasn't such a big deal after all.

Watching Liu Bei, who initially felt a bit of heartache upon learning the value of each deed but soon became indifferent after giving out ten or so, Chen Xi realized that his education had been effective.

After all, even if these billions of coins had come easily, it was still Liu Bei's property now. The feeling of ownership was strong, and seeing 2 or 3 billion coins vanish all at once, thrown away by his own hand, it's no wonder Liu Bei's old views on money were shaken to their core.

"Zichuan, is it really okay for the lord to be spending money like this?" Li You casually handed his own deed, worth about 120,000 coins, to Chen Xi while expressing concern about Liu Bei's recent behavior. Chen Xi's method was akin to a crash course—it was effective but came at a high cost.

"Are you worried about the saying 'it's easy to go from frugality to extravagance but difficult to go back'?" Chen Xi asked, turning to Li You. "Don't worry. At most, this will make him a bit more lavish. But the advantage is that I don't believe anything in this world can still dazzle Lord Xuande. Honestly, as long as Lord Xuande doesn't become like Dong Zhuo, mesmerized by luxury and losing himself, his foundation will only grow stronger. My biggest fear is that he'll lose his true self."

Li You fell silent, reflecting on his past experiences. A small mistake, one oversight, had ultimately led to the downfall of Dong Zhuo's massive power structure. If he could turn back time, Li You would have insisted on teaching Dong Zhuo's children with no expense spared—at least to prevent them from being so enamored with the luxuries of Luoyang and its beauties, leading to their ultimate downfall. Indeed, a lord must be carefully nurtured to avoid going astray.

"It's just that lately, Lord Xuande has been spending too freely," Li You sighed, acknowledging that he had accepted Chen Xi's crash course method. At least this way, Liu Bei's desire for gold and jewels would be significantly reduced.

"No need to worry. Lord Xuande still has his scales to weigh things. Look at this," Chen Xi said, pulling out his own year-end bonus from Liu Bei, alongside the hard-earned reward for Li You. "One is valued at 250,000 coins, the other at 120,000 coins. See? He's not confused yet. Let him spend; it's not a big deal. In a few days, when I convert these deeds into cash, even if Lord Xuande wants to be generous, he won't be able to keep up this pace. Let nature take its course—it's no big deal."

Li You glanced at the deed in Chen Xi's hand, gauging the situation, and nodded without further comment. As for converting everything into cash, Chen Xi didn't think that was the right choice.

In chaotic times, copper coins might not be the most reliable currency. With this year's harvest still decent, Chen Xi planned to stock up on tens of billions of coins worth of grain for Liu Bei. After all, they

were in a seller's market. "We sell the land, and you buy it with whatever we dictate. If you don't want it, don't waste our time; there are plenty of others waiting."

Speaking of next spring, if there were no droughts, floods, or other natural disasters, there might still be an outbreak of plague. Although Hua Tuo supposedly quelled it before it spread, it still claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Just thinking about it made Chen Xi realize how dire the situation could be, which is why he was constantly issuing official seals and collecting medicinal herbs. The amount of herbs needed for a population of a million was beyond his estimation, so he kept collecting.

In these times, offering rewards for herb collection during the agricultural offseason was like a welfare program. As for doctors, Chen Xi was searching high and low for Hua Tuo, though with little success so far—who knew where the man might be?

As for the money, Chen Xi wasn't worried at all. Misappropriating Liu Bei's personal funds had become a habit for him. After all, Chen Xi was always earning money for Liu Bei, though how he did it or what he earned, Liu Bei had no idea. Diverting 90% of the profits from Zhen's shop to buy up medicinal herbs all over the place, purchasing ginseng for ten coins per pound regardless of quality—you can imagine how much Chen Xi had accumulated.

As for the remaining 10%, Chen Xi genuinely used it to manage Liu Bei's finances. "Jian'er, what do you want to buy? Oh, this? Sure. Lan'er, do you want anything?" That's how it really was.

But given Liu Bei's trust in Chen Xi, his often incomprehensible methods, and his tendency to play the long game, Liu Bei never even considered the possibility of embezzlement. In time, Liu Bei would forget about it entirely, leaving everyone happy.

Because of this, Chen Xi had no qualms about spending Liu Bei's money lately. After all, Liu Bei would probably forget about it soon, and in another year or so, Chen Xi figured there'd be another good business opportunity—like capturing Hu people for infrastructure projects. It wouldn't make a fortune, but it would certainly boost popularity and reputation.

Speaking of popularity and reputation, Chen Xi suddenly had an idea. It seemed like a rare opportunity to boost Liu Bei's reputation and buy some public favor—something that couldn't be missed.

With that thought, Chen Xi realized he could justify all the money he'd spent. After all, wasn't one of Feng Yuan's best moves to win over the people by buying their favor? Wealth can buy public support, and for a ruler, that's invaluable.

Chapter 216: Idle Moves, Casually Made

Chen Xi looked at the stack of property deeds in his hand. As expected, after making a full circle, they ended up back in his hands to deal with. What could he say? These people had thick skin and a good sense of self-awareness. They all knew that whoever handled this matter would bring them the most profit.

"Zizhong, let's go check out the scene!" Chen Xi waved the stack of deeds in his hand, the rustling sound making Mi Zhu worry that these fragile papers might tear—each one represented a lot of money!

When it came to admitting mistakes after the tax revenue soared, Mi Zhu was the first to come forward without hesitation. Although he was visibly shaken at the time, he didn't waste a moment before admitting his error, completely unconcerned about saving face.

Was this due to Mi Zhu's admirable loyalty, or was it just the nature of merchants to instinctively pursue profit? Chen Xi's new tax system was undoubtedly beneficial for Mi Zhu. Not only did it strengthen Liu Bei, but it also made Mi Zhu wealthier, solidified his future in government, and further secured his position as the leader of the merchant guild. Even though Mi Zhu rarely made appearances, fewer and fewer people dared to challenge his authority after this.

As Chen Xi stepped out of the door, those waiting for information had already prepared themselves. Never underestimate the power of these wealthy merchants. Since Chen Xi hadn't intentionally blocked the news, they all knew that North First Street was about to be sold.

As for where, when, and how the sale would happen, Chen Xi hadn't sent out a single invitation, so these merchants in Fenggao were taking it very seriously. By now, everyone had come to accept that Chen Xi didn't follow conventional rules.

"Zizhong, what do you think would happen if I just set up a stall here and sold the deeds on the street?" Chen Xi asked with a grin, watching the quick-moving spies.

Mi Zhu remained silent. He had learned not to express any opinions to Chen Xi. Since Chen Xi never followed the rules, there was no telling what he might do—he could very well step down from the carriage and set up a stall.

"Alright, enough jokes. Head to Manxiang Lou," Chen Xi said, instructing the driver to change course, and the carriage turned toward Manxiang Lou.

"Zichuan, isn't this inappropriate? If we sell the deeds at Manxiang Lou, what will Lady Zhang and Lady Gan think?" Mi Zhu finally spoke up. If he didn't, Chen Xi might really bring the carriage there.

"Don't worry. Manxiang Lou has been cleaned up. The woman there is quite sensible," Chen Xi said with a smile. After he gave them a notice two days ago, they had completely overhauled the place within a day. The speed at which they acted made even Chen Xi feel a bit embarrassed.

"But it used to be a brothel!" Mi Zhu said with a wry smile. Chen Xi truly never played by the rules.

"So what? North First Street used to be a wasteland. Really, let's go. You don't say anything, I don't say anything, and which merchant would dare bring it up? Do you think Lady Zhang cares that it was a brothel? And does Lady Gan even know?" Chen Xi shrugged indifferently. Whoever dared to bring it up would be out of the game.

Mi Zhu sighed. He was sure that the tea house Manxiang Lou had become was definitely part of Chen Xi's scheme. He finally understood that Chen Xi's favorite pastime was placing idle pieces on the board. When these pieces would be used? Only Chen Xi knew! It wasn't something a normal person would do.

"Fine, I'll tell you the truth. The brothel madam there turned out to be quite savvy. Remember I mentioned I wanted to add a cultural atmosphere to Fenggao by bringing in scholars from Yuzhou? She was so cooperative that I didn't mind giving her a chance," Chen Xi explained with a chuckle. Should he admit that the woman acted so quickly and obediently that he felt bad about driving her away? With just a subtle hint, she had replaced everyone overnight.

"This..." Mi Zhu was at a loss for words but could only nod silently. Whether he fully understood or not was another matter.

The brothel madam at Manxiang Lou had acted so sensibly that Chen Xi didn't know what else to say. She was too sensible, too decisive, without any hesitation. Because of that, Chen Xi decided to protect her business. He might have disrupted her livelihood, but he couldn't just leave her without a way to make a living. By letting her operate in that prime location, all the merchants in Fenggao would have to show her some respect.

As for what she would do next, Chen Xi already had ideas. With the lack of entertainment in their society, whether she organized storytelling or plays, it would have great potential. Honestly, Chen Xi leaned towards plays, given that Manxiang Lou had plenty of women—putting together a few theater troupes shouldn't be hard.

Perhaps one or two famous actresses might even emerge from it, which would be far better than their previous line of work. Plus, it would contribute to the cultural atmosphere. And if someone hit it off and took things further, well, that was their business. Maybe Manxiang Lou needed a few branches after all...

As for anyone trying to force something, Chen Xi figured that, in any era, such things happened. But if they did, they'd better think twice—no one in Fenggao would dare cause trouble there. Chen Xi felt that even if Cao Mengde showed up to make trouble, he could handle it.

The news of Chen Xi entering Manxiang Lou quickly spread to the desks of various merchants, just as a report reached Zhang's residence.

"Sister, why don't we go together?" Zhang said, handing a paper invitation to Lady Gan. As someone with special privileges, she had already secured an invitation, even though the location was still blank—Chen Xi probably hadn't decided yet.

Lady Gan had grown more confident lately and no longer felt as intimidated by Zhang as she once did. She accepted the invitation with a smile, then refilled Zhang's tea. "Sister, do remember to call me when it's time. Without my husband's approval, it wouldn't be proper for me to leave the house."

Zhang smiled at this. Lady Gan's background still showed in her manners, despite her growing confidence. The fact that she had an invitation meant that Liu Bei had already approved. Simply asking for his permission would yield the answer she wanted. However, asking Zhang to take her out would be seen as improper in the eyes of a noble household!

Zhang observed Lady Gan, who was cautiously sipping tea.

Zhang was curious why Chen Xi would take special care of a woman who was practically a decorative figure. Was he simply bored? Zhang was the first not to believe that. Chen Xi, in her eyes, had already become a near-demonic figure. No matter how idle he might be, he wouldn't forget to strategize. There was no way he'd do something unnecessary without a reason.

Chapter 217: The Urgency in Youzhou

Regardless of what Manxiang Lou used to be, now that Chen Xi had decided to conduct business there, everyone had to comply, whether they liked it or not!

"Tsk tsk, this design is really well done," Chen Xi remarked as he placed a bundle of invitation cards on the table and pulled one out to examine it.

Mi Zhu chuckled softly. His sister was indeed talented in calligraphy and painting, and these invitations certainly looked beautiful.

"Zizhong, I'll leave these to you. Distribute them as you see fit. Just make sure that by the time this stack of property deeds is dealt with, everything is in order," Chen Xi said with a yawn. Recently, no one had been bothering him, which made him even more relaxed and carefree.

Mi Zhu knew very well that Chen Xi had no idea which merchants belonged to which faction or who should receive the invitations. Delegating tasks to professionals had always been one of Chen Xi's strengths.

Mi Zhu moved quickly, and by noon, all the invitations had been delivered to the eligible parties without missing anyone. The only thing left was to wait at Manxiang Lou for those people to arrive. If anyone neglected to check their invitation and missed the event, well, that was their loss. Chen Xi wasn't going to send a second invitation—ignoring it would be seen as disrespectful.

From Chen Xi's perspective, it was unlikely that any merchant would forget to check their invitation. Even if it was a daily habit, any merchant who didn't specifically instruct their staff to bring invitations to them probably wasn't worth paying much attention to.

Chen Xi prepared the property deeds for the afternoon sale, getting everything ready in advance to earn some extra money.

Just as Chen Xi was arranging things, a guard rushed in. "Strategist, Mr. Jia has requested your presence at the administrative office for a meeting."

Chen Xi, who had been sorting through the property deeds, paused and looked up at the guard. It was Ruan Yuliang, one of Guo Jia's trusted bodyguards.

"Is something wrong?" Chen Xi asked calmly as he set down the stack of deeds. If Jia Xu had sent someone to summon him, it must mean that the new intelligence brought serious news.

Chen Xi furrowed his brow in thought. Whatever the case, if Jia Xu had sent for him, he would have to put aside his current tasks. After all, Mi Zhu could handle the property sales without him.

"Zizhong, it seems I won't be able to stay here to oversee things personally. The rest is up to you. Remember, Lord Xuande's properties can only be rented, not sold. And only those with the proper status can buy the properties allocated to you all," Chen Xi instructed, handing the stack of deeds to Mi Zhu. He gave a few more reminders before preparing to leave. After all, he had already set the general direction; Mi Zhu handling the details would only affect the financial outcome.

Just as Chen Xi was about to depart, he remembered a few more things that needed attention.

"Zizhong, make sure the money is collected in full. If they're paying with grain, livestock, or other materials, accept them at 90% of their value. Medicines should be valued at 95%, and raw materials like cloth, silk, and hemp should be the same. You can adjust accordingly, but don't reveal too much. Store the goods in the west warehouse, and send the money to each family's accounts," Chen Xi hurriedly added. These matters were crucial for his plans for the coming year.

"Understood!" Mi Zhu replied, though he didn't quite understand why Chen Xi wouldn't just discount the prices on the spot, or why he valued raw materials more. However, he didn't question it further.

Chen Xi could guess why Mi Zhu was puzzled, but he didn't bother explaining. After all, Mi Zhu hadn't yet considered the need for strategic reserves. If they could barter, many merchants would feel more at ease and spend more freely. Not every family had twenty billion in strategic funds like the Zhen family.

More importantly, in Chen Xi's view, tangible goods were more valuable than currency. Instead of converting assets later, it was better to build up reserves now, while there were plenty of merchants around.

"Alright, the rest is up to you. If you mess it up and fail to bring in the money, I'm sure Zijing and the others won't mind having a word with you," Chen Xi teased, seeing Mi Zhu's embarrassed expression. "I'm off. The rules and the merchant guild matters are in your hands now."

News of Chen Xi leaving Manxiang Lou for the administrative office soon reached the desks of all the major merchants. They were all closely watching his movements, but unfortunately for them, by the time the scheduled event arrived, Chen Xi hadn't left the administrative office. It seemed he wasn't the one handling this matter after all.

"That's the situation," Jia Xu concluded after reading out the latest intelligence report on Youzhou and Jizhou. Chen Xi didn't even have the energy to tease Lu Su and the others anymore.

"Although we knew early on that Gongsun Bogui would lose, did he have to lose so completely?" Chen Xi covered his face with his hands, a wry smile on his face. This defeat was too decisive—there wasn't even a chance to mount a rescue.

"Yuan Benchu won too easily. Unless Gongsun Bogui can retreat to Youzhou, regroup, and fight again, there's no way for him to recover. And even returning is uncertain!" Liu Ye said with a bitter smile.

Everyone in Qingzhou knew Gongsun Zan would lose, but did he have to lose so swiftly? Ten thousand White Horse Cavalry, blocked by the Great Spear Guards at the front, their center cut down by Yan Liang and Wen Chou's heavy cavalry, and their rear trapped by Gongsun Zan's own infantry—finally, Qu Yi's elite soldiers annihilated them.

Chen Xi looked at the intelligence report on the Battle of Jieqiao and didn't know what to say. Although Gongsun Zan's infantry didn't suffer heavy losses, his elite White Horse Cavalry was nearly wiped out.

That night, despite being gravely wounded, Qu Yi led a daring charge into Gongsun Zan's camp, scattering his remaining troops and preventing any chance of regrouping.

Seeing this, Chen Xi could only say, "Qu Yi, are you trying to become a god? You lost half of your three thousand men, but you wiped out the White Horse Cavalry and crippled Gongsun Zan. What did you eat for breakfast?"

It wasn't just Chen Xi who felt this way—even Yuan Shao himself thought it was a dream. As for generals like Ma Yan, Jiao Chu, Zhou Ang, and Zhu Ling, they were utterly stunned. The man they had mocked earlier turned out to be a monster. They immediately prepared gifts to apologize.

Before Gongsun Zan could reach the location Xun Chen had calculated, he had already been defeated. Tian Feng and Xun Chen immediately revised their plans and launched an attack from Bingzhou's Lufan region, striking directly at Youzhou. Meanwhile, Ju Shou in Bohai also mobilized troops to pressure Zhuo County and Guangyang, putting Youzhou in a dire situation.

Chapter 218: The Heavenly Mandate Still Favors Us!

After reading through the intelligence reports and listening to Jia Xu's analysis, Chen Xi completely gave up hope on Gongsun Zan. It was impossible for him to break out of this situation. Tian Feng and Xun Chen had directly sealed off his escape route, Yuan Shao was personally leading the pursuit, Qu Yi was risking his life, and Yan Liang and Wen Chou were fighting fiercely. This wasn't just a battle; it was a plan to completely annihilate Gongsun Zan.

The situation now was entirely different from the historical Battle of Jieqiao. In history, even after Gongsun Zan's defeat, he still had some strength left. At least 2,000 of his White Horse Cavalry survived, and his infantry remained intact, retaining the ability to fight again. On Yuan Shao's side, Qu Yi's Great Spear Guards were almost wiped out, and the elite vanguard forces lost about 80% of their strength. Despite this, it was still a glorious victory for Yuan Shao.

But this time? During the daytime battle, the White Horse Cavalry was utterly annihilated, with their banner cut down. The Great Spear Guards, who blocked the frontal assault, survived with half of their forces, and the elite vanguard suffered only one-third casualties. That night, despite being wounded, Qu Yi led a night raid on Gongsun Zan, smashing his camp and pursuing him for nearly a hundred miles. Only a handful of soldiers managed to escape with Gongsun Zan.

If the historical Battle of Jieqiao was a brilliant victory for Yuan Shao, then this battle was almost equivalent to the complete transfer of power in the northern territories!

Of course, Chen Xi had prepared for Gongsun Zan's defeat. Although the outcome was a bit more catastrophic than expected, he could still accept it. What Chen Xi couldn't accept was Qu Yi's current situation!

It seemed that Qu Yi had won Yuan Shao's trust. Seeing this in the report made Chen Xi frown. Unlike others who hadn't proven themselves in battle, Qu Yi had already demonstrated his capabilities. Historically, he was the one who played a crucial role in defeating Gongsun Zan. However, Qu Yi was proud and difficult to control. After his victory over Gongsun Zan, Yuan Shao dealt with him, and his elite troops were divided between Zhang He and Chunyu Qiong, which eventually led to their decline.

But now, the intelligence showed that Qu Yi had gained Yuan Shao's trust. For someone as proud as Qu Yi to risk his life like this, it meant that he saw Yuan Shao as his king, just like Yan Liang and Wen Chou, who cared little for their own lives but wouldn't tolerate anyone standing in Yuan Shao's way. Only with this mentality could a proud man like Qu Yi disregard his own safety.

If Qu Yi were to fall and his elite troops were handed over to someone else, they would no longer be the formidable force that had crushed the White Horse Cavalry. Whether due to terrain advantages or not, the fact that these two elite units could defeat the White Horse Cavalry proved their incredible combat strength.

"We should discuss how to handle this situation," Chen Xi said, placing the intelligence reports down and looking at Guo Jia.

"We absolutely cannot send our troops right now. We've been fighting non-stop for a year, and if we continue, our soldiers will lose their morale. Besides, this isn't a war with any significant gains. I suggest we provide resources and let others rescue Gongsun Zan," Guo Jia immediately rejected the idea of sending their own troops. Even with consecutive victories, continuous warfare could not be sustained for a year without repercussions.

"The Black Mountain Army, White Wave Yellow Turbans, and the Southern Xiongnu!" Jia Xu suggested a few factions and then closed his eyes to rest. If Yuan Shao defeated Gongsun Zan and stabilized the north, these factions would all fall under his control.

"I heard Han Fu recently died in a latrine," Liu Ye sneered. "Offering his territory as a gift only to be treated so poorly by Yuan Benchu—how disgraceful!"

Chen Xi glanced casually at Liu Ye. This guy was no saint either. Although Han Fu's death was unusual, anyone with common sense knew Yuan Shao wouldn't have killed him. Liu Ye was just trying to stir up trouble in Jizhou's rear, and if some ambitious faction fell for it, it had little to do with him.

"I've heard that Lu Bu's situation is becoming precarious lately, and he's been having issues with Yuan Shu. Given Lu Bu's reputation in Bingzhou, why don't we support his return there?" Lu Su suggested, thinking that if Lu Bu went to Bingzhou, he'd surely clash with Yuan Shao.

"Exclude the Southern Xiongnu, but we should consider the Black Mountain Army and the White Wave faction. Spread some rumors and let Ziyang handle that matter. As for Lu Bu, sending him to Bingzhou is worth a try—Zijing, you can give it a shot," Chen Xi agreed with most of the ideas but acknowledged that they were distant solutions for an immediate crisis.

"Is Xingba still stationed near the mouth of the Yellow River?" With no other choice, Chen Xi decided to use Gan Ning. Knowing Gan Ning's character, there was a 90% chance he was still there. Perhaps only the navy could reach Gongsun Zan in time.

As Chen Xi inquired about Gan Ning's whereabouts, a messenger rushed in. "Report! We've received the latest intelligence from Jizhou!"

Jia Xu calmly took the report and quickly read through it. "No need to search for Xingba; he's already in Handan."

"Handan?" Chen Xi was surprised but quickly realized what that meant. Gan Ning had cut off Yuan Shao's rear?

"Yes, he's already disrupted Yuan Shao's rear. No one expected Xingba to appear there. With just three hundred men, he burned the grain stores in Handan. I believe he is now heading along the Zhang River to rescue Gongsun Zan. If all goes well, Gongsun Zan should survive," Jia Xu reported, somewhat amazed by Gan Ning's audacity.

"It seems the heavenly mandate is still on our side. The southern part of Youzhou was already stripped of supplies by Gongsun Zan, so even if Yuan Benchu wanted to live off the land, Youzhou has nothing to offer. Now that Xingba has burned the supplies in Handan, Yuan Benchu can't hold out for long. This is excellent news! Xingba did well!" Chen Xi laughed heartily. The timing was perfect, almost too perfect.

As for Gan Ning's audacious actions, Chen Xi had no worries. Even if news came that Gan Ning had stormed Yuan Shao's camp, Chen Xi wouldn't be surprised. After all, in terms of courage, Gan Ning was truly unmatched.

"In that case, we should continue with our own plans. Since Ziyi traveled to Youzhou with Xingba, he likely knows the best way to withdraw. Yuan Benchu probably hasn't even received word of Xingba's actions yet, and Xingba may already be on his way to bring Gongsun Zan back to Youzhou by water," Lu Su said with relief. If Yuan Shao had annihilated Gongsun Zan, Qingzhou would have had no choice but to intervene.

"I suggest we send General Guan to Licheng and make a show of preparing to attack Jizhou's heartland," Liu Ye proposed, emphasizing the need to put on a convincing display.

"This time, I'll go to Licheng! Jushou is surely prepared, and I can't fully trust Generals Guan and Zang with this. Zichuan, recommend some new military officers for me to take and train!" Guo Jia's eyes gleamed with interest, and Chen Xi couldn't shake the feeling that Guo Jia had a keen interest in Yuan Shao's territory.

Chapter 219: The Fierce Army Forged in Battle

The scene rewinds to the moment Qu Yi was prepared to sacrifice himself. Covered in blood, Qu Yi swung his saber and cut down a centurion of the White Horse Cavalry. Charging forward, he met another oncoming saber head-on. The pain brought clarity to Qu Yi, and with a reverse strike, he beheaded his opponent.

"Thud!" This time, Qu Yi couldn't avoid the incoming strike, and a saber pierced through his abdomen. But by this point, Qu Yi no longer cared about preserving his life. With the White Horse Cavalry's banner falling, their defeat was inevitable. Laughing as he decapitated another enemy, Qu Yi knew that Yuan Shao's victory was now irreversible. The White Horse Cavalry was doomed.

"Out of my way!" Just as Qu Yi was about to be overwhelmed by the enemy, Yan Liang charged in, releasing a crimson energy blade. Although the blade shrank significantly after traveling just a short distance, it was enough to save Qu Yi's life.

"Pant... pant..." Yan Liang gasped for breath. Using his inner energy in such a situation was immensely taxing. Normally, he could unleash a massive energy blade tens of meters long, but within the confines of the battlefield, it was reduced to just a fraction of its power.

"Get up here!" Yan Liang rushed forward, grabbing Qu Yi by the collar and fending off the surrounding enemies with his spear. He then turned his horse in another direction, knowing that even he couldn't last long in the enemy's midst without his personal guards.

To be honest, Yan Liang had never liked Qu Yi's boastful nature before, but after witnessing Qu Yi's actions on the battlefield, he had to admit that he respected him. Whether it was Qu Yi's skill or his loyalty, Yan Liang was impressed. That's why he risked his life to rescue him from the center of the enemy formation.

"Brother, I'm coming too!" Wen Chou shouted, leading their personal guards into the fray. Soon, the two groups converged.

"Zhengli, from now on, I acknowledge you as my brother! Even though I didn't like you before!" Yan Liang placed Qu Yi on his horse, laughing heartily as he treated his wounds. "You did a great job!"

Qu Yi groaned in response but said nothing. His earlier actions were driven by adrenaline and the realization that he was alone. Now that he had been rescued, who would willingly choose death?

"Well done!" Wen Chou laughed alongside them. "We've been oppressed by the White Horse Cavalry for too long. This time, let's turn them into dead horses!"

"The White Horse Cavalry is finished! As long as my heavy shielded infantry can withstand their first charge, and you cut off their retreat, my death squads will show them that without their speed, cavalry are nothing but toys!" Qu Yi laughed arrogantly. Perhaps such words would have been met with scorn before, but now he had proven his capabilities on the battlefield.

In fact, the moment the White Horse Cavalry's banner fell, chaos spread through their ranks. At the rear, Gongsun Zan, as if struck by lightning, collapsed from his horse in shock. The undefeated elite that had dominated the northern frontier had been utterly defeated with the fall of their banner.

Meanwhile, Qu Yi's death squads were burning with determination. He had fulfilled his promise, leading a squad of 300 men with no hope of survival into the heart of the White Horse Cavalry and cutting down their banner. Now it was up to his death squads to finish the job.

When the commander is unafraid of death, how can the soldiers hesitate? Before the battle, Qu Yi had arranged for the posthumous affairs of every soldier, including his own. Now that he had fulfilled his promise, it was time for the death squads to do their part.

"Kill!" With a fierce roar, the death squads fought with reckless abandon, ignoring all injuries as they slaughtered the White Horse Cavalry. Their sole objective was to kill every last one of them.

A sword cleaved through an enemy's head, and with bloodshot eyes, the death squad members relentlessly hacked at their next target. Ferocious, maddened, and fearless in the face of death, the death squads seemed possessed by spirits, their blood-red aura overwhelming the once-pristine white of the enemy's formation.

Yuan Shao watched in awe as the death squads, even after the battle, stood firm, gripping their blood-stained swords as they reassembled. In that moment, Yuan Shao understood what it meant to have an elite force. The fierce gaze and murderous aura of the death squads were enough to make any other troops instinctively step aside. This was Qu Yi's elite force, the "First Assault," the strongest offensive unit.

Standing before the First Assault were the remnants of the heavy shielded infantry, who struggled to stand upright. Their armor was battered and bloodstained, their shields dented, but their imposing figures and determined expressions marked them as Qu Yi's elite "Great Spear Guards," the ultimate defensive unit.

In that moment, Yuan Shao finally understood why Qu Yi always seemed to regard his own troops as superior. Because even when exhausted, Qu Yi's soldiers commanded such respect that other units would instinctively avoid their path. This was the aura of true elite troops, forged on the whetstone of the White Horse Cavalry!

"Zhengli, you've worked hard," Yuan Shao said, bowing to Qu Yi, who was covered in blood and riddled with wounds.

"Glad I didn't disappoint you!" Qu Yi replied solemnly, casting a glance at the generals behind Yuan Shao. His intimidating presence made them all lower their heads in submission.

"Hahaha, Zhengli, come! Yuan Tu and the others have surely prepared a victory feast!" Yuan Shao laughed, completely unconcerned by Qu Yi's arrogance. He could feel Qu Yi's unwavering loyalty, and as long as Qu Yi was loyal, his arrogance didn't matter. After all, Qu Yi had the skills to back it up. The White Horse Cavalry had fallen—what more proof was needed?

Yuan Shao led Qu Yi at the forefront, followed by Yan Liang, Wen Chou, Shen Pei, and the rest of the officials. In that moment, no one harbored any jealousy toward Qu Yi, for he had single-handedly removed the greatest obstacle looming over Jizhou—the White Horse Cavalry! His pure, overwhelming strength commanded the respect of all the military generals.

Returning victorious, the entire army was rewarded. After witnessing the might of the First Assault and Great Spear Guards, Yuan Shao fully understood the deterrent power of an elite army. Even a half-strength First Assault led by Qu Yi was enough to make ordinary soldiers instinctively step aside. Now, Yuan Shao eagerly anticipated what a fully formed First Assault could achieve!

At the victory feast, Qu Yi was the main focus, with even Yuan Shao taking a backseat. As the wine flowed, Qu Yi knelt before Yuan Shao. "My lord, I request the honor of battling Gongsun Zan once more. This time, I will eliminate your worries for good!"

Yuan Shao laughed heartily, perhaps a bit drunk, and without thinking, he responded, "I fully trust in your abilities! Finish this cup, and then go do whatever you need to do! I, Yuan Benchu, will support you with everything I've got!"

Chapter 220: How Did I, Gongsun Zan, End Up Like This?

Yuan Shao may have been muddle-headed, but the others were not so drunk that they didn't know what was happening. They quickly advised him against proceeding with Qu Yi's plan, arguing that although they had dealt a heavy blow to Gongsun Zan, their forces were also exhausted, and Qu Yi was severely injured. There was no need to rush. If they pressed on too hastily, things could go wrong. It would be better to stabilize their current position and gradually weaken Gongsun Zan. Victory was inevitable, so why take unnecessary risks?

Qu Yi said nothing, remaining half-kneeling before Yuan Shao. Meanwhile, Yuan Shao, sobered up by the others' advice, stood in silence for a long time. Finally, he filled his cup and handed it to Qu Yi, saying, "Drink this cup! You will lead the charge, and I will follow behind you!"

Qu Yi drank the cup in one gulp and solemnly replied, "Yes!" He then gripped his sword and walked out. Sometimes, war is fought on momentum, and Qu Yi was determined to ride this wave. He swore not to return until Gongsun Zan was defeated.

After Qu Yi left, everyone, including Shen Pei and the other civil officials, tried to dissuade Yuan Shao. They knew Qu Yi's plan wasn't wise—Gongsun Zan would undoubtedly be prepared for an attack that night.

"My general is fighting on the front lines; how can I not keep my promise? Where are Yan Liang and Wen Chou?" Yuan Shao put down his wine cup, stood up proudly, and shouted.

"Yan Liang and Wen Chou are here!" Unlike the others who hesitated, these two never questioned Yuan Shao's orders and immediately stepped forward.

"Prepare the troops for a night battle! Even if Gongsun Zan is prepared, I trust that Qu Yi will show him the difference in strength!" Yuan Shao roared. If a surprise attack was impossible, they would continue the battle from the morning and push through to total victory.

Yuan Shao's determination made the others give up trying to persuade him. Instead of offering futile advice, they focused on ensuring victory.

Qu Yi, wrapped in bandages and clad in armor, led 1,500 remaining death soldiers and selected 3,000 reserves from the rear guard. Without any concealment, they charged straight toward Gongsun Zan's main camp. Qu Yi knew that every corner of Gongsun Zan's camp would be heavily guarded, but that only meant that each defensive position would be weak.

As long as they were strong enough, Gongsun Zan's defenses wouldn't matter. Qu Yi believed that if he was fast and fierce enough to break through the guards before Gongsun Zan could react, the entire army would collapse.

There wouldn't be another opportunity like this, so Qu Yi was willing to gamble. He didn't want Gongsun Zan to retreat and leave a hidden threat for Yuan Shao. Therefore, he was willing to fight, even while wounded, because he knew that only he and his death soldiers could decisively break Gongsun Zan.

Qu Yi's troops charged out of Yuan Shao's camp without hiding their movements. The blood-red aura surrounding the death soldiers was almost palpable, a scent of blood in the air.

Qu Yi's speed was incredible. Before Gongsun Zan's army could react, they were already within 150 paces of the camp. At full speed, the death soldiers' aura transformed, like blood-coated blades attached to every soldier's weapon. Abandoning defense, the strongest offensive unit under Qu Yi's command became a bloodthirsty wolf, slamming into Gongsun Zan's camp.

The centurion guarding the gate had no time to react before being felled by a rain of arrows. Seizing the moment, Qu Yi led his men into the camp, descending like a fierce tiger among sheep, slaughtering the gate guards with relentless ferocity.

Gongsun Zan, who had fallen from his horse when the White Horse Cavalry's banner fell, had only recently regained consciousness. He was a shadow of his former self, the once-proud general who had declared that with the White Horse Cavalry in hand, he could conquer the world. In the moment he woke up, he seemed to age rapidly.

"What is happening?" Gongsun Zan asked as he struggled to stand, only to be hit by a wave of dizziness that almost sent him back to the ground.

"Yuan Shao's forces are attacking the camp!" Guan Jing answered in a panic.

"Where is the White Horse Cavalry? Follow me to repel the enemy!" Gongsun Zan roared, but then froze as he remembered—the White Horse Cavalry was no more. A wave of pain gripped his heart, and with fury in his eyes, he looked outside the tent. "Follow me to kill the enemy!"

When Gongsun Zan arrived at the battlefield, Qu Yi had nearly broken through the reinforcements and was about to penetrate the central camp. Seeing the carnage, Gongsun Zan's eyes blazed with anger. When had he ever been pushed to such a desperate situation?

"Fire the arrows!" Gongsun Zan commanded in a fit of rage.

"Lord!" Guan Jing was stunned, quickly grabbing Gongsun Zan's arm to stop him. "Lord, our soldiers are also in the front lines. How can we fire?"

Gongsun Zan coldly glanced at Guan Jing, his voice devoid of emotion. "Why not fire? If I don't, do you think they can repel Qu Yi?"

He shook off Guan Jing and ordered the archers to fire. The soldiers behind him, seeing the order given, had no choice but to comply. A volley of arrows rained down, indiscriminately striking both friend and foe.

Qu Yi's eyes flashed with anger. This was not the Gongsun Zan he once knew.

But beneath the rain of arrows and the cries of the wounded, Qu Yi found clarity. Originally, his assault might have failed if Gongsun Zan hadn't arrived. He would have been forced to retreat. But now, things had taken an unexpected turn.

Noticing the hesitation in his opponent, Zou Dan, Qu Yi realized he still had a chance. He roared, "Yan Liang! Wen Chou! Come to my aid!"

Waiting 200 paces outside the camp, Yan Liang and Wen Chou immediately mounted their horses and charged toward Gongsun Zan's camp. This was the signal, the moment Qu Yi had been waiting for—the battle had reached its turning point!

Qu Yi led his death soldiers in a frenzied assault, ignoring their own casualties. Victory was within reach. If they could endure this wave of arrows, they would turn the tide of the battle. Gongsun Zan's front lines, already on the brink of collapse, disintegrated under the onslaught of friendly fire.

There was no need to set fires or wreak havoc everywhere. Gongsun Zan's previous actions had already handed Qu Yi a golden opportunity. Simply driving the routed troops into the rear would secure victory. Who would follow a leader so cold-hearted?

Yan Liang and Wen Chou stormed into the camp, but by then, Qu Yi had already shattered Gongsun Zan's front lines. Without the chaotic rain of arrows, Qu Yi couldn't have forced the front camp to collapse. But with the front soldiers now colliding with the archers, the once proud and disciplined archers broke and fled.

For Gongsun Zan, who witnessed this, it was too much. His throat tightened, and his vision darkened. How had it come to this? How had he, Gongsun Zan, fallen so low?