

Mythical 231

Chapter 231: In the End, It's Strength That Counts!

Cao Cao had always harbored a certain wariness toward Lu Bu, which is why he was not particularly enthusiastic about Xun Yu's suggestion. After all, Cao Cao did not currently feel any sense of urgency.

Reflecting on the past when Yuan Shu was arrogantly challenging everyone across the map, Cao Cao now realized that when it came to a direct confrontation, he was actually stronger. From commanders to strategists, from generals to soldiers, it seemed that in every aspect, he surpassed Yuan Shu. After clashing with him, Cao Cao discovered that if he were to push himself, he could reduce Yuan Shu to a pulp without much difficulty!

Because of this, Cao Cao was uninterested in Xun Yu's proposal. Without a sense of crisis, Cao Cao had no desire to keep a ticking time bomb like Lu Bu close to him. As for Diao Chan, once someone else's wife, and now Lu Bu's concubine, Cao Cao, being somewhat of a romantic, suddenly found himself interested.

Before he had directly confronted Yuan Shu, the lingering influence of the Yuan clan had left Cao Cao somewhat uneasy. But after this prolonged skirmish with Yuan Shu, Cao Cao had become confident!

Cao Mengde now had the qualifications to look down on Yuan Shu. It's no exaggeration—despite Yuan Shu amassing tens of thousands of troops at Wan Cheng, Cao Cao wasn't the least bit concerned. If not for wanting to use Yuan Shu's forces as a training exercise for his own, Cao Cao felt he could easily teach that fat little brat how to behave, just like in their younger days.

With this in mind, Cao Cao's previous fear of Liu Bei had dissipated. Looking back, he realized that Liu Bei's campaign in Yuzhou wouldn't pose much of a threat to him now. Both Liu Bei and Cao Cao had control over roughly five million people each. Cao Cao, having conquered Nanyang and Yingchuan, now had sufficient grain and supplies. He had no shortage of soldiers, fierce generals, or skilled strategists. Anything Liu Xuan De had, Cao Mengde could match, so what was there to fear?

Because of this newfound confidence, Cao Cao, who had fattened up by trouncing Yuan Shu, began secretly reclaiming the lands in Yanzhou that he had previously abandoned. Xun Yu could only smile and shake his head, ultimately deciding to turn a blind eye. In fact, both he and Xun Yu shared a common thought: they needed to test Liu Xuan De's military strength. Relying solely on intelligence reports couldn't reveal the whole picture.

Just as intelligence had previously portrayed Yuan Shu as incredibly powerful, the reality of battle had proven otherwise. After engaging with Yuan Shu's forces, Xun Yu, though unwilling to belittle him, found that Yuan Shu's Yu Province soldiers were, in truth, second-rate at best. This also implied that the Jingzhou soldiers, whom Yuan Shu had defeated so handily, were likely only of second or third-rate quality as well—a tempting target, indeed. Xun Yu had often entertained the thought of seizing all of Nanyang!

But Xun Yu ultimately suppressed that notion. Taking all of Nanyang would mean directly confronting both Yuan Shu and Liu Biao!

Although, given Yuan Shu and Liu Biao's current display of military prowess, Xun Yu believed that Cao Cao could handle fighting them both simultaneously, provided there were enough supplies. But the broader implications were too significant. With Yuan Shu acting as a buffer, there was always the possibility of negotiating with Liu Biao. Thus, Xun Yu preferred to view the ongoing conflict with Yuan Shu as an opportunity to train Cao Cao's troops, secretly capturing and relocating Yuan Shu's people to bolster his own territories. Lying low and biding their time was the wisest course of action.

As for Yuan Shao in Hebei, having conquered Yingchuan and Nanyang, Cao Cao was now less concerned. Before, he had been just a minor player, overshadowed by the likes of Zhang Yang and others. But now? Who feared whom? Zhang Yang was closer to Cao Cao, and if Yuan Shao tried to command Zhang Yang to cause trouble, could that minor figure even pose a threat to him?

As a result, all the small lords around Cao Cao, who were once on par with him, began to suffer. These small lords had previously been under Yuan Shao's influence, but with Cao Cao now strong enough to challenge Yuan Shao, they had little choice but to switch allegiance. However, just as they began to lean towards Cao Cao, news arrived of Yuan Shao's victory over Gongsun Zan at Jieqiao, causing these minor lords to feel uneasy once again.

Cao Cao was aware of their shifting loyalties, but he didn't concern himself with it. Although he still had some apprehension about Yuan Shao's power, Xun Yu's analysis had reassured him. After all, Cao Mengde was no longer the small-time warlord from the days of the Battle of Hulao Pass. Even if a direct confrontation with Yuan Shao put him at a disadvantage, defeating Cao Cao would be no easy task, and Yuan Shao would pay dearly for it!

In other words, after consolidating control over Yingchuan and Nanyang and increasing his strength, Cao Cao found the strategic situation around him much more favorable. He no longer needed to tread so

carefully, deliberating over every step as he did while confined to Yanzhou. Now, if he wanted something, he could just take it—if push came to shove, he would settle it with his fists. And, as his recent experiences had shown, his fists were quite formidable!

Xun Yu and the others also noticed Cao Cao's change in demeanor. But the presence of a commanding aura was to be expected as one's status grew. If, while in Yanzhou, Cao Cao had been like a dragon hiding in the depths, biding his time to build strength, now he was soaring into the skies—only lacking formal recognition.

It wasn't like before, where seizing another's territory required cunning or surprise. Now, Cao Cao was capable of outright defeating a rival lord on the battlefield, just like Yuan Shao, who had earned the title of the most powerful warlord in the north after crushing Gongsun Zan.

Similarly, Liu Bei had claimed the title of Overlord of the Central Plains by defeating the Yellow Turbans with an army of 30,000 against a force of a million. Such head-on victories were not the kind of warfare that strategists typically preferred, but every top strategist knew one truth: when a power reaches its zenith, such a showdown becomes inevitable.

The difference between taking the noble path and resorting to underhanded tactics lies in this. No matter how much one indulges in schemes and intrigue, if they cannot stand openly and raise their banner high, they will eventually be crushed to dust by someone else. Only with sufficient strength can one rally the people. Training in low-intensity skirmishes only produces veteran soldiers, but they still fall short of the elite troops Xun Yu envisioned—far short!

These thoughts coalesced into a unified strategy among Cao Mengde's advisers: let Cao Cao proceed as he wished. Even if he sought to provoke Liu Bei, they would allow it. Understanding Liu Bei's true strength was crucial, and a hard-fought battle would be beneficial as well. The mere existence of Liu Xuan De had already placed considerable pressure on them. A clash would allow them to gauge his strength and plan accordingly.

As for what would happen if they truly provoked a large-scale conflict, when Chen Qun raised this concern, Xun Yu simply cast a cold glance eastward. Xi Zhicai then provided the answer: "There can be only one hegemon in this world. Even if war breaks out in earnest, what of it? The great conflict that was fated to occur a decade from now would simply be brought forward. The various warlords of the realm will finally compete to see who is truly favored by destiny!"

Chapter 232: Inviting the Hidden Master

Neither Liu Bei nor his advisors had any knowledge of Cao Cao's thoughts, nor did they pay much attention to his reoccupation of eastern Yanzhou.

Cao Cao had abandoned the eastern part of Yanzhou earlier, and Liu Bei didn't bother to seize it. After all, what Liu Bei lacked was not land but people. He hadn't even fully absorbed Qingzhou yet, so disrupting his own development to occupy Cao Cao's lands seemed pointless. As a result, the eastern part of Yanzhou had been left to grow wild since 192 AD.

The likes of Jia Xu and others sneered at Cao Cao's trivial actions. None of them were worried that Cao Cao might cause trouble. Did he really think that the army Yu Jin had stationed along the Tai Mountains was just for show?

If a fight broke out, who would be afraid? Although Chen Xi often complained about not having completed the foundational construction work, the wealth of Tai Mountain was enough to make everyone envious. Even though he was reluctant to slow down development, Chen Xi could easily mobilize resources and money to equip Yu Jin's army, turning it into an elite force capable of defensive counterattacks that could thoroughly exhaust Cao Cao's forces. Never underestimate an army made elite by vast amounts of resources!

"Why does Cao Mengde seem so shortsighted? Not even Yuan Benchu would act this way. Even at his most desperate, Yuan Benchu still considered long-term benefits. But what is Cao Cao doing? It's like he's just eating and regurgitating without any real purpose," Chen Xi remarked, covering his face in disbelief as he observed Cao Cao carefully reoccupying and cultivating the eastern part of Yanzhou.

In Chen Xi's mind, although Cao Cao was indeed suspicious and occasionally inhumane, his temperament, courage, and personal charm were top-notch!

Chen Xi believed that apart from benevolence, Liu Bei's personal charm was on par with Cao Cao's. In every other aspect, Liu Bei would be firmly suppressed by him. But now, what was Cao Cao doing? How could he be outdone by Yuan Shao, who, even at his most dangerous, dared to take risks? Cao Mengde seemed to be regressing!

"Shortsighted?" Liu Ye was puzzled by Chen Xi's terminology.

"It means he's only concerned with immediate gains without considering the future," Chen Xi explained, as he started to suspect that Cao Cao's current actions might not align with his typical temperament.

"Well, there's some truth in that. But since Cao Mengde came from an eunuch's family, this behavior is expected. The saying 'A person who suddenly gains fortune becomes reckless' fits him well. He might have been a hero before, but now he's just a nouveau riche who has lost his way. We can count him out as a future rival," Liu Ye commented, feeling quite pleased about Cao Cao's current state, as it meant one less threat to deal with.

"Don't underestimate Cao Mengde. If his temperament were truly like that, he wouldn't have attracted talents like Xun Yu. His current behavior might just be a temporary lapse, or perhaps he's deliberately misleading us. It's like how we can make Lord Xuande understand the situation of the world—I don't believe Xun Yu and his peers would be incapable of doing the same for Cao Cao. They're probably allowing him to act this way, just as Zichuan is letting us do things our own way," Jia Xu interjected, offering his own analysis.

Lu Su nodded in agreement with Jia Xu's assessment. While he didn't fully understand Cao Cao's erratic behavior, he refrained from making hasty judgments. Instead, he ordered Yu Jin to strengthen their defenses, adopting a wait-and-see approach. It didn't matter what Cao Cao was up to—so long as they were strong enough, there was nothing to fear.

"Yes, I understand. However, I sincerely hope that Cao Mengde's latent bourgeois mindset surfaces. It would be even better if he starts competing with Yuan Shao for supremacy, which would be a boon for us," Liu Ye said with a sly grin. "By the way, I heard that Lu Bu recently betrayed Yuan Shu, leaving Yanzhou vulnerable once again. It's such an inviting target!"

"..." Chen Xi could only stare blankly at Liu Ye. Recently, this guy seemed to have shifted his focus from administrative duties to military affairs, spending his days concocting schemes to stir up trouble among various warlords.

"Ziyang, you seem to have a lot of free time lately. Why not lend me a hand? With Guo Fengxiao off leading troops, Fazheng is struggling to manage everything alone. See if you can come up with a way to save His Majesty," Jia Xu suggested, wearing an expression of solemn devotion, almost as if the words "Loyal Minister of the Han Dynasty" were inscribed on his face.

Liu Ye glanced at Jia Xu in confusion but eventually nodded. Though he wasn't particularly concerned with saving the young Emperor in Chang'an, Liu Ye was more focused on supporting Liu Bei. However,

with Jia Xu bringing up the Han Dynasty's survival, Liu Ye couldn't very well refuse. After all, with such a grand cause on the line, and with Jia Xu presenting himself as a devoted servant of the Han, it was hard to say no.

Jia Xu grinned to himself, pleased with his ability to recruit another capable man. As for actually saving the young emperor, that would be a foolish endeavor. If the emperor were to be rescued, how would Jia Xu and Li You continue to operate? The group under Lord Xuande would all have a much harder time! So, Jia Xu was merely using the pretext of saving the emperor to weaken imperial authority. The more unfortunate the emperor's situation, the more powerful Liu Bei's banner of the Han Dynasty would become.

Chen Xi shot a glance at Jia Xu. True to form, Jia Wenhe was a cautious operator, but recruiting Liu Ye was somewhat pointless. Liu Ye had little respect for imperial authority, despite outwardly presenting himself as a loyalist of the Han Dynasty. Knowing Liu Ye's history, Chen Xi was well aware that Liu Ye had no fondness for Emperor Xian. The idea of sending him to "rescue" the emperor was laughable—he was more likely to ensure the emperor's misfortune!

Looking at the people around him, Chen Xi realized none of them were genuinely loyal to the Han Dynasty. They all paid lip service to the idea of unity under the Han, but in truth, they didn't care. If they had to choose between Liu Bei and the Han, they would all side with Liu Bei. Internal cohesion and unity were paramount!

"Gongyou, have those things I asked for been built? And Weishuo, what about the Daoist experts I asked for? My Spirit Hall is already built, so where are the people? I can't be the one presiding over the opening ceremony, can I? This hall was built to serve as a sanctuary for heroic spirits. Is the requiem ready? We'll need to perform rituals with sacrificial offerings, so if you can't get it done, Weishuo, I'll halve your budget!" Chen Xi turned to Sun Qian and Liu Yan, eager to ensure that everything was prepared.

"We're working on it, but you've asked for a lot. I can't just fake it; I need to find people with real abilities, so it's been challenging. I managed to invite Zuo Yuanfang, and he's agreed to preside over the ceremony. However, he insists on having Master Yu Ji and Master Zixu accompany him. The problem is, I have no idea where those two are! They're roaming the world, you know?" Liu Yan responded helplessly, explaining that it wasn't due to a lack of effort but a shortage of suitable candidates.

"Zuo Yuanfang?" Chen Xi's eyebrow twitched. The world was already crazy enough; what kind of chaos would Zuo Ci bring?

"Yes, he's supposedly one of the leading figures in Daoism, even rumored to be on the verge of transcending to immortality. I figured that since Mount Tai is the place where the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors performed their rituals, we should invite top-tier Daoists. So, I extended an invitation to him. He accepted but requested the presence of Yu Ji and Master Zixu as well. Unfortunately, I can't find either of them," Liu Yan explained, completely unaware of the kind of figure he had invited to preside over the ceremony.

Chapter 233: Let's Start a New Strategic Plan

Chen Xi pressed his forehead, unsure of what to say. "It's just a ritual, but do you really need to go this far? Even inviting Zuo Ci... What exactly are you planning?"

"Alright, keep up the good work. Is Zuo Yuanfang already on his way to Mount Tai? Also, since you have good connections, try to find Hua Yuanhua from Qiao County as well. He's also considered a top figure among the alchemists. If you can find him, I'll increase your activity budget. Right now, your arrangements seem a bit too modest. You need to represent us well, so make it grand and luxurious—don't be stingy. I'll give you an advance to help you set up a more impressive event. We need a large turnout for the ritual!"

Chen Xi stared at Liu Yan for a long time before deciding to assign him another task. As for the activity funds, as long as Hua Tuo could be found, the medicinal herbs could be cashed in—no, they could save lives, which in turn creates value. So, the event budget is just a minor issue!

"Hahaha, leave it to me!" Liu Yan, who now had friends all over the Han Empire, was used to living lavishly, and cutting back would be impossible for him. Back in the day, he might have been content inviting a few friends over to drink some homemade wine and snack on green beans, but now that was out of the question.

"Alright, I'll give you a note later. Take it to withdraw thirty million coins and use it to find Hua Yuanhua. As for Yu Ji and Master Zixu, if they want to show up, they will. If not, there's no point searching for them. They may not excel in everything, but they're certainly good at playing hide-and-seek," Chen Xi said as he began writing the note, casually mocking the immortals by reducing their lofty pursuits to mere games of hide-and-seek.

"Hey, Zichuan, isn't that too much? Thirty million coins? Are you serious? Can Weishuo even spend that much?" Lu Su, who initially paid no mind when Chen Xi allocated funds to Liu Yan, suddenly became alarmed when he heard the amount—thirty million coins! That was no small sum, even though Tai

Mountain had more than enough resources to support such expenditures. But thirty million coins still sounded excessive.

"That's just a drop in the bucket. If we can find Hua Yuanhua, thirty million coins would be a small price to pay. Even three billion would be worth it. This is the one person who can put you back together after being torn apart, so if we can get him to Mount Tai and have him train a group of students, we could potentially cut battlefield casualties in half—that's no exaggeration," Chen Xi quickly stamped the note and handed it to Liu Yan, leaving no room for Lu Su to intervene. He wasn't joking; in ancient times, the primary cause of soldier fatalities wasn't the initial injury but the lack of timely medical treatment.

These soldiers, having survived battles, could be considered seasoned veterans. Any recruit who had fought ten or more battles and lived to tell the tale wasn't to be taken lightly. After some training and equipping, they could easily be branded as elite troops, fully capable of holding their own in combat.

Veterans who had fought in dozens of battles and survived were often promoted to lower-ranking officers. They knew better than anyone how to kill the enemy while protecting themselves. If they could establish a scalable medical corps to preserve enough veterans, things could get really interesting. A hundred battle-hardened veterans might struggle against five fresh recruits, but ten thousand veterans would easily crush fifty thousand new soldiers...

When Chen Xi considered the cost of training five hundred new soldiers for the battlefield, compared to the loss rate and combat effectiveness, he figured it was better to maintain three hundred seasoned veterans and thirty medical officers. Fighting new recruits would be a breeze, and the loss rate would be lower, the combat effectiveness higher, and the compensation for fallen soldiers would be minimal!

"Are you sure Hua Yuanhua is worth that much?" Lu Su raised an eyebrow, not because of the amount given to Liu Yan. Thirty million coins were significant, but they weren't enough to shake him. Recently, Lu Su had found himself becoming a wealthy young man with assets worth over a hundred million coins. He had already brought his grandmother to Tai Mountain and was looking to marry a good woman to expand the Lu family.

"With him, we can ignore epidemics. That alone makes him worth every coin," Chen Xi said seriously. In preparation for next year's potential epidemics, he had stockpiled an astonishing number of medicinal herbs.

Even if the historical records noted that only a few hundred thousand people were affected, Chen Xi was prepared to handle an outbreak across all of Qingzhou. He had gathered herbs of all kinds because he

didn't know what would be needed, and he had enough ginseng to supply tens of thousands of people. As for other herbs, they were counted by the warehouse full. During the agricultural off-season, hundreds of thousands of people scouring the land had yielded an incredible bounty.

Chen Xi wasn't joking—while they might not completely eradicate disease, Hua Tuo and Zhang Zhongjing's efforts played a significant role in controlling the major epidemics and typhoid fever that emerged after 192 AD.

Although Zhang Zhongjing had lost his entire family to typhoid, his relentless research eventually helped control the epidemic that ravaged Jingzhou and Yangzhou. Meanwhile, Hua Tuo made it his mission to go wherever epidemics emerged, which is why Chen Xi couldn't find him—Hua Tuo was constantly on the move and had no fixed abode. With no major epidemics currently sweeping the land, who knew where he might be?

As for Zhang Zhongjing, Chen Xi dismissed that idea entirely. Zhang Zhongjing refused to leave Jingzhou until he found a cure for typhoid fever and completed his medical book, *Treatise on Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases*. Having lost his entire family to the disease, he had vowed not to leave until he had conquered it.

In 200 AD, Zhang Zhongjing finally found a cure for typhoid and went against the tradition of keeping medical knowledge within the family by distributing his book widely. Hua Tuo famously praised it as "a book that truly saves lives."

In short, Zhang Zhongjing was practically obsessed at this point, wholly dedicated to his mission. Unless someone could eradicate typhoid, Zhang Zhongjing wasn't leaving Jingzhou. Unfortunately, Chen Xi had no recollection of how to cure typhoid fever, a disease that Zhang Zhongjing's treatments have successfully suppressed for over a millennium.

"I see," Lu Su nodded. Although Chen Xi could be unreliable at times, whenever he spoke with certainty, there was at least a 50% chance he was right. If there was even a 50% chance that Hua Yuanhua could help them combat epidemics, Lu Su thought it was worth spending thirty million coins to find him.

Besides, Chen Xi's medical corps initiative had been in the works for a while, but only a few units had been equipped so far. Lu Su believed this plan had real potential, offering a path to making the military elite. It was a far better option than the costly soldier training programs proposed by Yu Jin, so he didn't object to Chen Xi's idea. If they could train up a hundred thousand battle-hardened veterans, Lu Su would confidently urge Liu Bei to challenge anyone.

"Alright, since this plan is set, let's move on to the next one!" Chen Xi said seriously as he pulled out a stack of planning documents. Instantly, the room's previously light-hearted atmosphere turned serious. Whenever Chen Xi brought out plans like this, it meant a major long-term initiative was about to begin. What big move was in store this time?

"We haven't even completed our previous tasks yet—don't give us more work!" This was the shared thought of all the civil officials present.

Chapter 234: Let's Implement Reforms!

"For the sake of maintaining prosperity and security, to prevent the aging of our military forces, and to avoid the tragedy of fathers and sons fighting on the battlefield together..." Lu Su opened the plan document, and the first sentence he read was this grand, idealistic statement. This was typical of Chen Xi, who liked to start with something that placed him on the highest moral ground. That way, even if he lost the battle, he would still be seen as a champion of the people.

"So, are we talking about downsizing the army?" Lu Su asked, bewildered after reading through the document. Downsizing the army at this time seemed like a bad idea.

"Downsizing?" Chen Xi shot Lu Su a disdainful look. "Which eye of yours saw me say anything about downsizing?"

"Both my left and right eyes," Lu Su responded, unfazed by Chen Xi's provocation.

"Zijing, what Zichuan means is to hide the troops among the people, to solve the worries of retired soldiers without increasing costs significantly, and to secretly expand our forces. Also, to station enough soldiers in each city for security. But Zichuan, if you do this, some elite soldiers might lose their combat effectiveness after being discharged," Jia Xu pointed out, immediately seeing through the essence of Chen Xi's plan.

"Don't worry, I'll group those over thirty-two years old, who are uninjured, and have participated in over ten battles, and station them in specific cities for patrol duty. After fighting for so long, they deserve to enjoy life. And haven't you noticed that Fenggao has become a bit chaotic with all the merchants? We need elite troops to keep things under control," Chen Xi explained with a smile, determined to reduce the service period to fifteen years.

"In that case, it won't affect combat effectiveness. And if you assign a capable commander, the unit will be more like a hidden elite force than a retirement squad," Liu Ye mused, rubbing his chin, feeling something was off about this city management and patrol unit idea.

"Let me explain the whole plan. That document was just to fool others," Chen Xi said, casually taking the plan back from Lu Su and putting it away.

"We're all ears," Lu Su said with a smile, and the others nodded in agreement. Even Man Chong, who had been busy with legal matters, paused to listen.

"First, this military service system is inhumane. We can't have fifteen-year-old kids in the army anymore. From now on, no one under eighteen. Lu Su, get me a sign that says any beggar under fifteen who is caught will be handed over to the government for education. Teach them life skills for three years until they turn sixteen. Those who haven't completed three years will be released. As for the girls, send them to Manxiang Pavilion," Chen Xi began, voicing his deep frustration.

Honestly, whenever Chen Xi saw fourteen-year-old boys in the army, he felt like shouting, "Do you have any humanity left?" He wanted to kick them out, but they insisted that only the army could feed them. At least on the battlefield, they could eat their fill, and if they died, they'd die with a full stomach. That made Chen Xi quietly resolve to gather all the young beggars in Qingzhou and Taishan for reeducation.

He planned to raise them until they turned sixteen. After that, they could do whatever they wanted. But before that, the boys would go to school, and the girls would learn life skills, from needlework to business, to music and poetry. Anything but begging. After three years of education, at sixteen, they should be able to fend for themselves.

When Chen Xi finished speaking, everyone looked at him with strange expressions. The idea of rounding up boys for government education seemed reasonable, though costly. But sending girls to Manxiang Pavilion?

"You guys are thinking too much. How many places here can teach girls life skills? Cai Wenji? Who else? Besides that place, where else can they learn?" Chen Xi shot the group a disdainful look, knowing they'd all been there before.

"This plan could work. Boys can be taught martial arts, literature, or technical skills, while girls can learn household management. The cost isn't too high if Taishan covers it. But extending this to the common people might be too expensive," Lu Su considered, eventually agreeing with Chen Xi's proposal.

"Those we catch won't have to pay, but they will have to repay the cost later. As for the common people, they can choose not to pay upfront but will still need to repay the cost eventually. Just don't let us lose money. We've captured enough scholars in Yuzhou to make this profitable," Chen Xi said offhandedly, making sure Lu Su wouldn't have to think too hard about it.

"This method is good. It gives them a chance, and when prosperity returns, we'll easily recover the costs," Liu Ye agreed.

"Service time is too long. Even sixty-year-old men are still in the army. Do they still have any combat effectiveness?" Chen Xi returned to the main topic. "Anyone over thirty-two who hasn't reached the rank of company commander, or thirty-five who hasn't become a battalion commander, should be discharged and reassigned to local units. Pay them based on their combat experience and rank!"

"That works. Keeping the lower ranks between eighteen and thirty-two when they're at their most capable makes sense," Jia Xu nodded. He believed that as long as soldiers were well-fed, even forty-year-olds could still fight well.

"Wounded soldiers, in addition to receiving pensions, should be promoted by one rank and integrated into the local militia. They won't participate in farming but will manage and train the militia, passing on their battlefield experience. In times of need, they'll be directly incorporated into the army," Chen Xi continued, determined to address the worries of the Taishan soldiers.

"Our militia is far larger than the regular army, so promoting them isn't a problem. This could work," Liu Ye calculated, realizing that the ratio of militia to regular soldiers made this feasible.

"Over time, the wounded and retired soldiers will teach at various academies. Only those with military achievements will be granted noble titles. Tell them that if they want to earn glory, they must first learn their craft. True men earn their honor on the battlefield!" Chen Xi had made up his mind to instill in the academy students the belief that defending the nation and dying on the battlefield was an honor and that the scars they bore were badges of glory.

Although the martial spirit of the Han Dynasty was already strong, Chen Xi believed it needed to be even stronger! If the world turned against them, they would destroy the world. The path of kings and tyrants was always lonely—they didn't need friends. If anyone opposed them, they would crush them. The ruler would hold the highest military power, and civil officials would have to earn their ranks through military merit. Only military achievements would earn titles!

This way, every high-ranking civil official would have firsthand experience of the battlefield and understand its harsh realities. The goal wasn't to have civil officials fight on the front lines but to ensure that those who rose to high positions had experienced the horrors of war. After a few months of sharing the hardships of battle, seeing their comrades fall one by one, and focusing solely on defeating the enemy, they would understand when to interfere and when to let the military handle things.

Chapter 235: Reform, Reform, Reform!

"Only military merit can grant nobility, and only noble titles can grant high office." If this were said during the Song Dynasty, where scholars held power, it would be met with fierce opposition. In the Ming Dynasty, where military officials were automatically considered inferior to civil officials, such a statement would be met with ridicule and disdain.

This is why later dynasties criticized this notion. It was because scholars held power, and they couldn't allow military officials to rise to prominence. The corrupt scholars always believed they were right, while military officials were always seen as inferior. This mentality led to their repeated defeats. The scholars would even say things like, "Better to die with honor as a starving corpse than to fight back like a praying mantis," showing just how low their standards had fallen.

However, in this era, civil officials hadn't yet seized total control. From the Qin Dynasty's system of awarding merit through military achievements to the Han Dynasty's slightly modified system of granting noble titles for military service, one thing was clear: pure civil officials didn't exist in this era. Almost everyone had been on the battlefield at some point. Ban Chao could put down his pen and go to war, and Li Dian could toss aside his books and become an excellent general. In this era, civil and military duties were not separate.

The Six Arts of a Gentleman—archery and charioteering—were just as important as ritual and music. If someone in the Han Dynasty got angry enough, even a random censor could turn into a general. Martial spirit was deeply ingrained in this era. There might not be many literate people, but there were plenty who could fight. After all, if you wanted to be ennobled, you had to be prepared to go to war!

Because of this long-standing tradition, people like Jia Xu had no issues with the idea that only military merit could grant nobility. When Chen Xi mentioned that scars from battle were a badge of honor, the strategists who had been on the battlefield themselves nodded in agreement. Whether or not this approach was extreme didn't really matter.

"Next, let's talk about the Jingling Temple. Every soldier who dies on the battlefield will have their name engraved on a monument in front of the temple. During the four seasons, we will conduct ceremonies with sacrifices that match those offered to princes and kings. This will serve as the final resting place for all our soldiers," Chen Xi continued, returning to the original topic. He wanted to give benefits to the living and honor to the dead so that those who lived would have no worries, and those who died would have no regrets.

"Although this might seem to overstep our bounds..." Man Chong and Liu Ye exchanged a glance and murmured, "But considering the reasoning behind it, it should be acceptable."

"Let's not worry about overstepping boundaries. Some things, even if they exceed the limits, will still be overlooked by everyone," Chen Xi waved his hand dismissively. He didn't care about overstepping boundaries. If he weren't worried about making things too grand and creating a spectacle, he would have considered using the grand rituals reserved for worshipping heaven. In this era of the Han Dynasty, where honor and loyalty were highly valued, that level of glory would attract countless people like moths to a flame.

"Zichuan, continue with your plan. This should be a complete system. You've already talked about honoring the dead, so now it should be about taking care of the living, right?" Jia Xu motioned for Chen Xi to continue. For someone like Jia Xu, overstepping boundaries wasn't a concern as long as he felt safe.

"Yes, for the families of those who died in battle, they will be exempt from agricultural taxes until their eldest son turns eighteen. The family can also send one child to the government for compulsory education. For three years, they can study anything they want for free, as long as they have the ability to complete it," Chen Xi explained casually. These were systems he had gradually built up over time, and now they were finally ready to be put into practice.

"This isn't a huge financial burden, but it's very valuable. However, what if the eldest son is already eighteen?" Lu Su asked a somewhat amusing question.

Chen Xi paused, then realized that this wasn't the modern era. It was quite possible that the eldest son could already be eighteen. Despite the retirement system, some people might still die in battle at thirty-

three or thirty-four, and in this era, it wasn't uncommon for commoners to marry at thirteen or fourteen. So having an eighteen-year-old son wasn't out of the question.

"Hmm, in that case, if the eldest son is under fifteen, in addition to the five-year pension, the family will be exempt from taxes, and they'll receive a stipend. After five years of support, plus three years of education with room and board, the child should be able to start earning a living. It's not that I don't want to give more; it's just that this compensation plan involves so many people. Once we make a promise, we have to fulfill it. If the morale of the army falters, it could be a big problem. After all, the money I have circulating isn't infinite," Chen Xi said.

"The pension is for five years? Hmm, I thought Zichuan would give ten years of pension like before, but it seems you've only provided five this time," Lu Su chuckled. When Chen Xi first mentioned pensions, Lu Su had prepared to allocate funds for ten years of payments. He hadn't expected Chen Xi to stop at five years—it seemed a bit out of character.

"Yes, the first pension payment is for five years," Chen Xi replied calmly.

"So there's a second payment?" Lu Su sighed. He knew that Chen Xi wouldn't shortchange people, and sure enough, there was more to it.

"The first pension payment goes to the widow. If she continues to fulfill her duty of raising the children, she'll receive half of her husband's annual salary every year for ten years. Additionally, when the government has suitable work for women, these widows will have priority. After ten years, if the child is still under fifteen, the payments will be extended until the child turns fifteen. At the same time, the injured veterans who have returned home will have supervisory authority to oversee the government..." Chen Xi glanced at Lu Su, then continued with a smile.

"Of course, you'll still pay the full amount," Lu Su sighed. He had expected this from Chen Xi.

"This approach is good. The benefits for injured veterans and retired soldiers are probably also distributed annually, with everything being handed out together. Using the bonds of camaraderie and hometown ties to protect these benefits," Liu Ye said, stroking his beard with satisfaction. Chen Xi seemed to have thought of everything.

"Yes, only by having these retired soldiers band together can they ensure their benefits. And those who aren't seriously injured can be given priority to become bailiffs, which will make it easier for them to protect their interests," Chen Xi nodded, showing that he had some understanding of checks and balances.

"As for the elite soldiers Jia Xu mentioned, they will be the guardians. The city management and patrol units will consist of elite troops—around thirty-five years old, having fought hundreds of battles, and uninjured. They'll be tasked with patrolling the city and guarding the Jingling Temple. I refuse to believe that with this level of protection, anyone would dare touch their money. If they do, these soldiers will cut off their hands! Bernin! I'll recommend you to take charge!" Chen Xi's eyes gleamed with cold determination. He didn't believe that under the pressure of such a purely violent force, anyone would dare to reach out.

"That's no problem," Man Chong nodded. He understood why Chen Xi was giving him such a unit. Although it was nominally under his control, the deterrent force it provided would be significant, and as a strict enforcer, he greatly appreciated this.

"Also, all retired soldiers, whether due to injury or age, will be taken to the Jingling Temple to offer incense before returning home. Likewise, newly enlisted soldiers, after being organized, will be brought to the Jingling Temple for the same ritual. My goal is for the Jingling Temple to never be without incense!" Chen Xi stood up, gazing solemnly at the sky outside. His goal was to forge a spirit—a never-ending martial spirit, one that would be etched into their souls.

Chapter 236: The Situation Must Be Stabilized!

Once the general direction was set, the details would be left to many others to handle. For example, Lu Su was now reluctantly accepting the task. After working with Chen Xi for so long, he knew one thing: Chen Xi usually just set the broad direction, and he wouldn't bother with the troublesome work of filling in the details. That responsibility mainly fell to Lu Su.

"Now we just need to wait for the completion of the Jingling Temple and the Library Pavilion," Chen Xi said as he stretched. He finally managed to finish all the tasks for the year before the end of the year. With these tasks done, it was finally time to get married.

"So, should we submit this plan now, or should we wait a few days until the meeting in ten days and then report it to the lord?" Lu Su asked, unsure whether Chen Xi wanted to implement the plan quickly or promote it gradually.

"Submit it now. The recent commercial prosperity has already caused some disorder, and we're short on personnel for city management. So it's better to report this now. Ziyang, you handle Guan Yu. Wenhe, Zhang Fei is your responsibility. Zilong, can you handle it, Zijing? I'll take care of convincing the rest of the generals," Chen Xi thought for a moment and decided it was better to act quickly.

"No problem," the three of them nodded in agreement. Having worked together before, they had no issue with Chen Xi's allocation.

As for going ahead without informing the generals, Chen Xi thought it best not to do so. Although it was possible to enforce it, creating friction between civil and military officials wouldn't be wise. Many generals in this era still believed that strength came from having a large number of troops. To them, reducing the number of soldiers could be seen as plucking a tiger's teeth.

"Stay, Gongyou. The rest of you should handle your tasks as soon as possible. I'll be opening the back door of the Library Pavilion in a bit," Chen Xi waved, signaling that they could leave, keeping only Sun Qian behind.

The others exchanged a few pleasantries before leaving. Most of them had their own administrative duties, and they didn't like staying in the government office now that the weather had turned cold.

"Do you have any instructions for me, Zichuan?" Sun Qian cautiously asked after everyone else had left. Without those familiar faces to joke around with, Chen Xi could be quite difficult to handle, especially when Sun Qian had no idea what to expect.

"Just sit down, Gongyou. There's no big issue, I just wanted to ask if you have any insights from constructing those landmark buildings. I'm planning to build roads throughout all of Qingzhou, connecting every village. If I give you this task, how many people would be needed to complete it by the end of next month? After all, the farming season is over, so manpower won't be an issue," Chen Xi reassured Sun Qian, explaining that he just wanted to understand the current state of infrastructure development.

"If we're rushing and manpower isn't limited, mobilizing all the idle farmers in Qingzhou could complete the main roads within a month. However, there are two issues: one is that we don't have enough building materials, and the difficulty of constructing roads to the villages is too high. It would require painstaking work. The other issue is that we're entering winter soon, and the snow and ice will make road construction even more difficult," Sun Qian responded, choosing not to discuss the emotional toll

of constructing those costly buildings. It was clear that the expense of those projects still weighed heavily on his mind.

"Oh, if that's the case, then complete all the main roads within a month. We'll put the village roads on hold for now, but make sure to extend the main roads to Yinping. Let Cao Mengde see the difference between us and lose any thoughts of causing trouble," Chen Xi said, frowning. However, the situation was roughly as he had expected. This would still be slow progress if not for Qingzhou's large population.

"I haven't stopped for a year. The northern roads don't need to reach Bohai, but they must reach Licheng. The southern roads should extend directly to Xuzhou City, and we can take our time with the eastern roads," Chen Xi continued sternly. Although he didn't take the other warlords lightly, he would not allow them to disrupt his plans.

Chen Xi knew that with just one more year—until 193 CE—once they completed the initial stockpiling of resources, and after the natural disasters in 194 CE, Liu Bei would be poised to vie for the world as long as he didn't make any mistakes. In this critical year, Chen Xi would not allow any disturbances to disrupt his plans.

In truth, Chen Xi realized that his control over the situation had become more precarious due to their growing strength. A slight misstep, and he wouldn't be able to hold the reins. Initially, he had planned for 192 CE to be a time of recuperation and steady development, but things hadn't gone as expected. First, they had to deal with the Yellow Turbans. Although they had finished them off quickly without much loss, they had gained some benefits. Then they were dragged into a conflict with Cao Cao against Yuan Shu, which also turned out well, earning them significant spoils.

It all seemed good on the surface, but Chen Xi knew that this was actually a sign that his previous miscalculations had destabilized the situation.

The Yellow Turbans were one thing—after all, that had been part of Chen Xi's plan. He had intended to use the Yellow Turbans to weaken the veteran soldiers of Yanzhou and elevate Cao Cao as the governor of Yanzhou, leaving him with an empty title and a mess to clean up. Meanwhile, Taishan would absorb the Yellow Turbans and grow stronger, reducing Cao Cao to a struggling governor with no troops, no supplies, chaotic territories, and restless noble families.

This was all part of an open conspiracy, and it had played out as Chen Xi had predicted. The Yellow Turbans had wiped out Liu Dai, taking out the remaining veterans of Yanzhou along the way. Zhang Miao

and Chen Gong had then elevated Cao Cao to power, handing him nothing but an empty title and a chaotic situation, with the spring planting ruined.

Chen Xi's plan had been going smoothly until Cao Cao dragged Liu Bei into the conflict. After that, things took a turn, and before Chen Xi could stabilize the situation, Cao Cao had already grown stronger—stronger than he had been in the original history. How did that even happen?

Because of this, Chen Xi had become more wary of Cao Cao. No longer confident in simply outgrowing him, Chen Xi now adopted a strategy of checking Cao Cao's power while continuing to develop.

If he needed to check the surrounding warlords without directly confronting them—since that could introduce too many variables—Chen Xi decided to make a show of force to deter them. After all, as the saying goes, a sword still in its scabbard is far more intimidating than one already drawn.

With this in mind, Chen Xi decided to give the warlords a clear demonstration of Liu Bei's military strength and the wealth of their territory. He believed that by showing strength, he could buy himself another year or so of peace.

Moreover, when he got married, the various warlords would send representatives to attend the ceremony, whether they came to spy, make alliances, or simply out of courtesy. Chen Xi was certain that every warlord would send someone. This would be the perfect opportunity for Liu Bei to showcase his power.

A prosperous territory invites envy, but a strong military force deters aggression. When both are combined, the resulting power is enough to make all the warlords think twice! If he could buy another year of time, Chen Xi was confident he could propel Liu Bei to the top!

Chapter 237: Chen Xi, I Can't Keep Up With Your Lies, Can You Be More Low-key!

After sending Sun Qian off, Chen Xi had no interest in staying at the government office. After all, there weren't many junior officials behind the scenes whom Chen Xi even recognized, and some of them were set to step down after the year-end assessments. Chen Xi had no desire to get entangled with them; after all, those were the main forces behind blackening his reputation back then. Clearly, Chen Xi wasn't the type to repay grievances with kindness.

According to his usual habit, the first thing Chen Xi did after work, whether he had things to carry or people nearby, was to head home and check in. This way, at least Chen Lan and Fan Jian wouldn't worry.

"Master, you've returned," the butler greeted him with a smile as he opened the door. The butler had now completely transitioned into the role of a doorman.

"I'm back. Everything okay at home?" Chen Xi asked casually.

"Lady Lan asked me to inform you to see her when you return," the butler said, unusually mentioning Chen Lan. In the past, he would mostly talk about how a certain maid had behaved or what Fan Jian had broken this time, or how Fan Jian had learned to cook a new dish.

"Alright, I'll go see her. It's rare for Lan'er to ask for me," Chen Xi replied curiously. Chen Lan was always so well-behaved, meticulously adhering to all the rules of being a concubine, no matter how much Chen Xi spoiled her. She had never overstepped her bounds, so Chen Xi was surprised that she specifically requested him to come over. "Old man, take it easy. You can leave the door duties to the guards."

"Sure, sure," the butler replied respectfully.

"Ah, never mind. Do as you like," Chen Xi waved his hand dismissively, realizing that the butler seemed to enjoy this small task. It didn't really matter.

With a light "click," Chen Xi pushed open the door. As expected, Chen Lan was lazily resting in her boudoir, while the two maids, upon seeing Chen Xi enter, bowed gracefully and quietly prepared to leave.

Chen Xi signaled the maids to wait outside. When it came to Chen Lan, who spent about fourteen hours a day sleeping, Chen Xi was quite speechless. During the day, if she wasn't resting, she was mostly in a half-awake state, drowsy and listless. The few hours when she was fully awake, she would lazily prop up her head with a book in hand, flipping through it absent-mindedly. How much she actually read was anyone's guess.

Thinking back to the days when Chen Lan was sharp and capable when Chen Xi was gravely ill, and comparing it to the current Chen Lan, who had none of that previous spirit, Chen Xi couldn't help but

think that people truly changed with circumstances. Without the pressure of life, her true nature had come out. But then again, a twenty-year-old girl, spending her days lazily doing what she loves, wasn't a bad thing, after all!

Sitting by the bedside, Chen Xi pinched Chen Lan's cheek. He knew very well that with her current sleep schedule, a little nudge would wake her up.

After a few pinches on her cheek, Chen Lan weakly stretched out an arm from under the covers, lazily waving it. Her pink gauze sleeves slid from her wrist to her elbow, but she didn't hit the small insect she was reaching for. Her arm then fell limply back down, her eyelids fluttered twice, and she once again fell still.

"..." Chen Xi was speechless, watching Chen Lan. How could someone be this lazy? He reached under the covers and pinched her a couple of times, instantly waking Chen Lan up. Seeing it was Chen Xi, she relaxed, then placed the blanket down again, rubbing her eyes as she sleepily greeted, "Greetings, husband." She then knelt on the bed, bowing to Chen Xi.

However, from how her head was practically resting on the bed, it was clear she still wanted to sleep. When she got up, it was as if she was being pressed down by gravity, her movements slow, as if she had been hit by a slow-motion spell. Chen Xi, sitting right next to her, could see everything as her thin gauze pajamas fell away.

"Yawn~" Chen Xi stretched as well. Drowsiness really was contagious. Every time he saw Chen Lan in her lazy state, Chen Xi felt sleepy himself. Still, he remembered why he had woken her up. "Lan'er, why did you ask me to come?"

Chen Lan was slow to respond. After a long pause, she finally reacted, and her thoughts began to work. "My wedding dress is finished!" Her cheeks flushed as she looked at Chen Xi, her eyes sparkling.

"..." Chen Xi was stunned. "I remember you sleep most of the day. When did you manage to embroider it?"

"Look!" Chen Lan pulled a box from under the bed and took out the entire wedding dress. She bit her lower lip, hesitated for a moment, then blushing, bowed her head and said, "I finished it."

As Chen Xi felt the fine stitches on the dress, he was amazed. Seeing Chen Lan's nervous, shy expression, he understood what she was waiting for. He pulled her into his arms. "Don't worry. I'll give you everything I promised. When the time comes, wear this wedding dress and wait for me to marry you."

"Mm," Chen Lan murmured softly, her voice like a whisper in his ear. Finally, she had made it in time.

Chen Lan was very obedient. After a bit of comforting from Chen Xi, as they talked, she grew drowsy and fell back asleep. It seemed that with no mental burdens or strong desires, Chen Lan was best suited to this leisurely and lazy life, passing her days without worries, leaving everything to her husband while she simply did what she loved.

Meanwhile, in Liu Bei's old residence in the city, Liu Bei was holding his heart as he and Li You examined the courtyard that Chen Xi had claimed was "just a renovation." Staring at the gleaming walls, the translucent windows, and the nearly reflective floors, Liu Bei felt like his heart was breaking. Could this really have cost only a million coins?

"Lord Xuande?" Li You's face remained calm as he looked at Liu Bei. In reality, his heart was also in turmoil. The pile of dusty materials they had seen before and the current dazzling sight were worlds apart. These golden, eye-catching objects and the gray, dull materials from before couldn't be more different.

"Tell me, Wenru, did this mansion, including the courtyard, really only cost a million coins?" Liu Bei asked, pressing his hand against his heart. He finally understood why Chen Xi had asked Sun Qian to keep everything covered until it was finished. If it hadn't been covered, this would have been stopped long ago!

"Maybe it really did cost just a million coins," Li You replied with a calm face, though even he didn't believe his own words. If this mansion didn't sell for at least five billion coins, Li You would consider jumping into a river. Chen Xi had gone too far, and he couldn't cover for him anymore. Even a fool could see the value of this place. Damn it, under the sunlight, it gleamed with golden brilliance like it was glowing on its own!

"Let's go look at the Library Pavilion and the Jingling Temple. If they're not up to the standard of my mansion, no matter what you say, I'll tear them down!" Liu Bei said darkly. He liked luxurious clothes, enjoyed hunting, racing horses, and indulging in music and drinks. He did have a slight tendency towards extravagance, but this—this went way beyond that. Chen Xi's behavior had genuinely frightened Liu Bei.

Chapter 238: A Bunch of Bumpkins Who've Never Seen the World

Li You knew there was no way to cover up this lie any longer—it was too obvious. Looking back now at what Chen Xi had told him, that all of this was made of dirt and sand, Li You wiped the sweat from his brow. How could he have been so foolish to believe it at the time?

The materials and the final product were two entirely different things. The skill of the craftsmen was the key. A shoddy craftsman could ruin even divine materials, while a master craftsman could turn even the most ordinary materials into something extraordinary. The craftsmen who built Liu Bei's ancestral home were selected from millions of people and were truly top-tier. Even the helpers were considered outstanding anywhere else.

So, the end result was that these craftsmen showcased the materials Chen Xi provided to their fullest potential. Sun Qian was the first to feel dizzy upon seeing it, and next, Liu Bei, who came to inspect the finished work, felt a sharp pain in his chest. As for Li You, he gave up entirely on trying to cover up the lie—there was just no way to explain this away!

Though it was impossible to lie about it, Li You was still very satisfied with the building itself. He believed in the saying, "Your dwelling nurtures your spirit." If he could have built something like this for Dong Zhuo back in the day, Li You was certain that even in the imperial palace, Dong Zhuo would have been able to look down on everyone else with disdain. This was the kind of vision and confidence that such a building could instill.

Liu Bei looked at the high-end, grand, and upscale glass and swallowed hard. In fact, everyone who came to see the front of the library was doing the same. Even though they couldn't go inside, the luxurious glass door alone was enough to blind everyone who looked at it. It didn't matter whether the glass was perfectly smooth or had impurities—just the sheer size of it was enough to dazzle these country bumpkins who had never seen anything like it before.

And then there was the entire library. The exterior wasn't covered in tiles like Liu Bei's mansion, but the roof was adorned with nearly identical fake red glazed tiles that shimmered in the sunlight. Seeing this, Li You felt relieved. Whatever Chen Xi spent was his business—as long as it lived up to what was promised to Liu Bei, that was enough.

"How much did this cost?" Liu Bei's eyes were about to pop out of his head. He knew that when this was being built, Chen Xi hadn't yet sold any land. How did he come up with the money? This didn't make any sense! And as for embezzling from the treasury, that was a joke. Did people really think Liu Bei didn't

know anything? The treasury was practically empty at the time, and Chen Xi had been operating with zero capital!

"I want to go inside!" Liu Bei pulled out his official seal and waved it at the thousand-man commander patrolling outside the library's walls. The commander quickly summoned Hua Xiong. Recently, with nothing to do, Chen Xi had reassigned Hua Xiong and Zhang Fei to stabilize the security in Fenggao, especially since such expensive buildings attracted attention.

"Greetings, my lord!" Hua Xiong saluted, and his subordinates followed suit.

"Open the door. I want to see what kind of library Chen Xi has built," Liu Bei said, trying to remain calm. He was genuinely shocked by Chen Xi's extravagance.

"Alright." Hua Xiong smiled wryly, then pulled out a key and unlocked the outer gate. When he received this patrol and guard assignment this morning, even he had been stunned by the sheer cost of it all.

"My lord, perhaps you could invite a few scholars to join you as representatives. That would also fulfill Chen Xi's original promise," Li You suggested when he saw Liu Bei about to enter.

Liu Bei nodded slightly and stopped at the entrance of the library. Turning to the scholars who had gathered in excitement, he announced, "I am General of the East, Marquis of Fanyang, Liu Xuande. I am here to inspect the completion of the library. You may select ten representatives to accompany me inside!"

"If Liu Xuande does not object, I would be honored to enter," a scholar in a blue robe calmly stepped forward with a smile.

Liu Bei was taken aback—this was the most composed self-recommendation he had ever seen. He smiled and nodded. "Very well! Does anyone have any objections?"

"Liu Xuande said ten could enter but did not specify how they should be chosen. I, Chen Gongxi, believe I have the qualifications to be one of the ten. Since the number isn't full, why shouldn't I be allowed?" Chen Gongxi exuded confidence, his face calm as he spoke.

"Indeed, you are qualified," Liu Bei nodded in agreement. His sharp eyes told him that although it was their first meeting, this was no ordinary person.

"Since Liu Xuande has allowed ten people to enter, does that include me, a humble woman?" A soft voice tinged with sorrow rang out, instantly silencing the crowd. Looking over, they saw Cai Yan had stepped out of her carriage, holding the Jiao Wei Qin, standing quietly by her side.

"Cai Da——" Li You signaled to Liu Bei with a glance, and Liu Bei nodded slightly. Li You then walked over and instructed the guards to clear a path for Cai Yan.

"Greetings, Liu Xuande, Uncle Li, General Hua." Cai Yan saluted the group after entering, then quietly followed behind Li You.

"Brother, help me out here. I'm interested in this too." As Hua Xiong approached the crowd, a hand suddenly reached out, grabbing him by the arm and nearly dragging him over to the person who had grabbed him. It was no small feat—Hua Xiong was an internal energy master, and even when off guard, it was rare for anyone to shift his balance like this. Whoever had grabbed him had strength equal to that of a peak-stage Qi Refining master.

In the next moment, Hua Xiong felt a surge of colorless internal energy rise from the person's hand. Although not fully stable, it was the energy of a top-tier internal energy master.

Hua Xiong laughed heartily and threw his arm around the person's neck, pulling him close with his own bright red internal energy, revealing Chen Dao, whose face was as black as the bottom of a pot. As a newly arrived hothead, his friend had been forced into Fenggao, and without thinking, he had come to rescue him. The result was this situation.

"Liu Xuande, this is my old friend, whom I haven't seen in years. Could you grant him a spot?" Hua Xiong, though straightforward, wasn't stupid. Naturally, he didn't mention the embarrassing fact that he had just been held captive. After all, they had nearly crushed each other's bones, and neither was easy to deal with.

"If Zi Jian recommends him, how could I refuse?" Liu Bei smiled.

"I'm warning you, if you try anything here today, I'll show you what death looks like!" Hua Xiong whispered threateningly to Chen Dao, ensuring that Liu Bei couldn't hear.

"Do you think I'm as brainless as you? I've seen enough to know that Liu Xuande is righteous. Why would I do anything to harm him?" Chen Dao shot back in a low voice. "On the count of three, we let go. And if we get the chance, we should spar."

"Agreed!" Hua Xiong responded. He could hear the reverence for Liu Bei in Chen Dao's words, so he decided to trust him. Besides, standing this close, both Xu Chu and he were ready—if Chen Dao tried anything, they were confident they could stop him.

Chapter 239: I Will Fight Again!

"Chen Shuzhi from Yuzhou greets Lord Xuande," Hua Xiong released Chen Dao, and Chen Dao respectfully saluted Liu Bei.

"What a robust man," Liu Bei said with a smile.

Soon, ten people had gathered. Liu Bei led the group inside. Pushing open the two large glass doors, Liu Bei looked at the interior, which was no less luxurious than his own home, with rows of bookshelves already filled with paper books. He sighed, "Wenru, regardless of how much Zichuan spent, at least he wasn't joking around."

Saying this, Liu Bei pulled a book from one of the shelves. It was a straightforward guide on farming, detailing how to increase the yield of a single acre of land—no flowery language, just practical advice. However, it was still a book, meaning those who could read it likely didn't need to farm themselves.

At the end of the book, the authorship was revealed: Zhao Yun collected the material, and Qu Qi compiled it. There was even a mischievous note stating "to be continued," implying that more could be added later.

Walking a few more steps, Liu Bei noticed a book on governance and pulled it out. It was filled with instructions on how to handle various administrative matters. Liu Bei didn't need to check the author—it had to be Liu Ye's work. It was a very practical book, and Liu Bei was sure it also ended with a "to be continued" note, as Liu Ye had been working on it for a long time and still hadn't finished.

In the miscellaneous section, Liu Bei pulled out a few volumes. “Confucianism, Daoism, metaphysical theories, various compiled myths, geographical wonders—this miscellaneous section aims to cover everything?”

On the other side, Cai Yan was taken aback when she saw a collection of music classics. She pulled out a thin volume and quickly skimmed through it. The content was familiar—it was her father Cai Yong’s attempt to restore the ancient music classics. She silently returned the book to the shelf. Her father had never completed this work or managed to circulate it widely. Yet, Taishan had done what her father always wanted to do.

Chen Zhi, another visitor, picked up a volume of the Strategies of the Warring States. Compared to the cumbersome rolls of bamboo slips he had seen before, this book contained the entire text. Slowly, he put down the volume and, gazing at the shelf full of commentaries on the Strategies of the Warring States, silently stroked the bookshelf. Coming to Taishan was indeed a good thing—this bookshelf alone represented the wisdom of countless scholars!

If Chen Xi were here, he would surely tell Chen Zhi that he traded for all these works with Zheng Xuan and others. They provided the original texts, manpower, and even money, while Chen Xi printed the books. When selling them nationwide, he would still make a profit. What good people they were!

In fact, Chen Xi also printed a lot of Pang Degong’s military strategies, Huang Chengyan’s formations, and Sima Hui’s political treatises. However, those materials were only obtained after Jian Yong negotiated long and hard with those three men. Most importantly, they weren’t even complete versions.

Even so, what Chen Xi had obtained was vast and profound. After making several copies of the works from these three great family collections, Chen Xi sent free paper versions back to them. But the printing molds remained in Taishan. When those families received the paper copies from their sons and nephews, they felt a twinge of regret—had they known, they would have given more texts to get hundreds of sets printed for their own collections. Now, they were left with incomplete works.

These three belonged to the more open-minded faction. After all, when they exchanged their family collections, they also gained new knowledge from Chen Xi, such as Chen Xi’s forgery of practical tools and ingenious devices...

What these three valued more were the exchanges between wise minds and the sparks of inspiration that arose from such exchanges. These were far more important than merely hoarding family collections. Though family archives were precious, they paled in comparison to the importance of continual innovation and surpassing previous generations.

As Liu Bei was about to leave, he noticed two lines of text engraved on the walls flanking the entrance of the library: “The sea embraces all rivers, accepting the vast and diverse. A towering wall stands unyielding, firm through its self-restraint.”

“Zichuan, oh Zichuan, you really are something...” Liu Bei sighed. Setting aside the cost of these buildings, Liu Bei understood one thing: these books were invaluable treasures. Who knew how much effort Chen Xi had spent to gather these texts? The thousands of volumes from the Cai family couldn’t compare to even a fraction of what was here. How on earth did Chen Xi manage to collect all these?

“Lord Xuande, this place can be described as a treasure trove of knowledge. Since Zichuan has built it, he must have had his reasons. With a place like this, the scholars under your rule will surely flock to Taishan, allowing Zichuan to begin the second step of his plan. After countless ages, what the pre-Qin scholars aspired to—enlightening the people—has finally been initiated by Chen Zichuan,” Li You said, a warm smile spreading across his face.

At that moment, Li You seemed to bathe in radiant light, transforming from his usual indifferent self into someone filled with warmth and righteousness. The cold and subtle demeanor he once carried now radiated grandeur and integrity. In this moment, he glimpsed the goal he had pursued for forty years.

“It’s just a shame about the cost,” Liu Bei said with a hearty laugh. “Come on, let’s go see the Temple of Spirits. Zichuan won’t disappoint me there either.”

“Lord Xuande, from now on, if great families and wealthy clans are willing to submit, then allow them to do so. If they are not, deal with them as you see fit. There’s no need to be concerned any longer. The era of powerful families controlling knowledge for a thousand years is gradually coming to an end. Zichuan has paved the way for their eventual downfall. Perhaps we won’t see the results for another hundred years, but the outcome is already determined,” Li You said respectfully.

Chen Xi had done what Li You had always wanted to do. Although it would take centuries for the results to fully manifest, the fate of powerful families returning to dust was already sealed. As long as knowledge no longer belonged exclusively to the great families, they would eventually wither away. And even the new emerging families could never enjoy the millennia-long prosperity of the old aristocracy.

For the first time, a glimmer of hope appeared for the common people, no matter how small—no longer would they be trapped in complete darkness.

“I understand,” Liu Bei nodded. “Zichuan told me long ago not to worry about them. They will fall into the dust along with their own glory, and new brilliance will rise from the ashes!”

Liu Bei didn’t fully understand the long-term plans Chen Xi had in mind, but that didn’t hinder his trust in him. He believed that everything Chen Xi did was for his benefit, even if some of Chen Xi’s methods occasionally frightened him. Looking back, it seemed that every time, it was simply his own weak heart that couldn’t handle the shock—Chen Xi never acted with ill intent.

“Fall into dust...” Li You murmured, repeating the phrase. When had he started to submit to the overwhelming shadow of the great families? Once, he had been full of ambition, determined to drag all the aristocrats into the depths of hell. Once, he had sworn to the heavens that he would carve out a path for scholars like him, from humble origins, to rise. When had he begun to yield to that immense shadow?

Slowly, Li You straightened his back. Yes, it was true—he had indeed allowed his heart to become clouded. He had lost the boldness to fight against the great families and the courage to make a last stand for the common scholars he represented. But what did it matter if he had failed once? This time, he had comrades who shared his ideals. He was no longer fighting alone. He was willing to climb back into the battle chariot and fight once more for the ideals he had once held dear!

Chapter 240: Sharing the Glory

Li You had never considered himself a good person, nor did he think that Chen Xi and Jia Xu were saints. However, today, he suddenly felt that he could actually find common ground with Chen Xi and Jia Xu!

Li You knew that, compared to Jia Xu and others, he was lacking in fundamental intelligence. If it hadn't been for his encounter with Zi Xu in his youth, Li You was well aware that his abilities wouldn't have taken him this far.

Originally, with his capabilities, reaching the level of a mid-tier strategist or civil official would have been his limit. But now, his abilities were no less than any top-tier individual, thanks to his well-rounded skills.

When he was younger, he left his hometown and witnessed the helplessness of scholars from humble backgrounds. Boldly, he vowed to carve out a path for them. A middle-aged man mocked him, saying, "How can one person save the world?"

"If I don't try, how will I know? If I don't try, how can I live without regret?" Li You still remembered his words from back then.

The middle-aged man stared at him for a long time before speaking, "If you die and your path fails, the world will curse your name. Will you still have no regrets?"

"Success or failure can only be judged by those who have tried!" Li You had replied solemnly, and the man had been stunned by his conviction.

"You will never succeed if you continue on this path. Your talent is not enough to dominate others. If you want to achieve your goals, you need to improve your knowledge. As a mere strategist, what can you change?" the man had said.

"Please, sir, teach me," Li You had asked, as if guided by fate. From that moment on, he began his journey to becoming one of the most learned men in the world.

For the next ten years, Li You filled the gaps in his political and military knowledge, becoming a well-rounded scholar. And then, his spiritual talent awakened.

If one were to quantify it, Chen Xi's abilities in internal affairs would score a perfect hundred. Jia Xu's strategies would rank around ninety-seven or ninety-eight, his military prowess around ninety-four or ninety-five, and his political insight at ninety-one or ninety-two. In contrast, Li You's abilities were only around eighty-seven in each category.

However, Li You's awakened spiritual talent was balance. When multiple attributes reached a certain height, each would increase by 10%. So while Li You's base level might be eighty-seven, his effective abilities were all around ninety-five or ninety-six—enough to be considered top-tier. His passive, comprehensive thinking talent made Li You incredibly formidable, despite his otherwise average abilities.

A jack-of-all-trades reaching this level was already impressive. But with each skill at a top-tier level, even Jia Xu found Li You challenging to deal with, as he had no weaknesses to exploit. Every plank of Li You's metaphorical barrel was of equal length.

This was why Jia Xu had never heard Li You mention his spiritual talent—it had been active since the moment it awakened, constantly sustaining his strength.

Li You silently reflected on his past. He had grown complacent for a while, but now, he needed to revisit his ambitions. How could he abandon his vows so easily?

"Wenru, what are you thinking? Let's go!" Liu Bei called out after taking a few steps, noticing that Li You was no longer beside him. Liu Bei wasn't used to it and turned around to find Li You, who had been perpetually somber, now wearing a faint smile. For some reason, Liu Bei felt a warm sense of relief and smiled as he asked.

"Coming," Li You replied, quickening his pace to follow Liu Bei. As he stepped out from the shadow of the library, the late autumn sunlight bathed him in warmth.

"It feels like Wenru has changed a lot," Liu Bei murmured as they walked towards another building.

"I've just come to some realizations," Li You replied with a smile. The lifelessness that had once hung over him was gone, replaced by a newfound vigor that seemed to affect those around him. "I plan to live to see that day come!"

"Hahaha! Let me share with you a saying I learned from Chen Xi," Liu Bei laughed heartily, pleased with Li You's change in attitude. After spending so much time together, Liu Bei had grown to greatly appreciate Li You's talents. Whether it was military strategy, governance, mathematics, or even the esoteric arts, Li You had knowledge in all areas Liu Bei could inquire about.

"Please, Lord Xuande, enlighten me!" Li You said with a smile.

"For tomorrow!" Liu Bei stopped in his tracks, turned to Li You, and solemnly said in a deep voice.

“For tomorrow?” Li You repeated, his face lighting up with a sense of pride. He then nodded. “Indeed, it’s for tomorrow—not just our tomorrow, but also for...”

“The people, the Han dynasty, the world!” Liu Bei declared, his spirit reaching its peak as he looked at Li You.

“On the path Lord Xuande walks, Li Wenru will fill in the gaps and support you!” Li You vowed solemnly, his expression unwavering.

“Good! If I, Liu Xuande, succeed one day, I will never forget this moment!” Liu Bei extended his right hand, and Li You slowly placed his hand on top. Unlike Chen Xi’s fleeting gestures that disrupted the mood, Li You’s expression reflected a shared sense of honor and pride.

While Liu Bei and Li You shared a moment of mutual respect and determination, Chen Xi was tucking Chen Lan in, making sure she was comfortable. He instructed the maids to wake her for meals, ensuring she wouldn’t sleep through them. After that, he left her courtyard to check on Fan Jian. After all, he had to make an appearance so as not to seem biased.

“Husband...” Chen Xi found Fan Jian lounging lazily on the bed, reading a book, clearly infected by Chen Lan’s lethargy.

“Go back to sleep. Have you finished embroidering your wedding dress?” Chen Xi playfully tapped Fan Jian’s forehead, causing her to fall back onto the bed, and curiously asked.

“No, my mother said she prepared one for me. Why?” Fan Jian replied, puzzled. Embroidering a wedding dress was a cumbersome task. Since her mother had taken care of it, Fan Jian hadn’t wanted to spend too much time on it. After all, it was tiring to make it look nice, and it would take her at least six months to complete it herself.

“Oh, nothing. Who’s preparing my clothes?” Chen Xi suddenly remembered a potential problem. It seemed no one was making his wedding outfit. His mother had passed away when he was young, and after falling out with his family, there was no elder to arrange these things. What was he going to wear on the big day?

“...” Fan Jian was stunned. She asked in disbelief, “Husband, haven’t you prepared your attire? Black robes with gold embroidery, matching the rank of a marquis...”

Chen Xi was dumbfounded. He had assumed someone would take care of it, but now it seemed he had nothing ready. He had received word from Chang’an about his situation: Liu Biao, Li Jue, Guo Si, and others were planning to grant him titles as a way to ally with Liu Bei. By the time of his wedding, they would be bestowing marriage honors, promoting him to Marquis of Ying, and elevating his wedding ceremony by one rank. He would need to wear clothing befitting a marquis...

With this realization, Chen Xi stopped worrying. He felt no pressure. After all, when they bestowed marriage honors and titles, they would also provide the appropriate attire for the occasion.

“Husband, perhaps you should contact the Chen family. After all, Old Lord Chen was a marquis himself, so they should be able to provide the necessary attire,” Fan Jian suggested. Given that there wasn’t enough time to prepare everything now, and the Han court had only granted him a seal and ribbon, not the full robes, it might be wise to reach out to his family for help with the ceremonial clothing.