

Mythical 251

Chapter 251: Zhang Fei, You're Selling Out Your Teammates!

Chen Xi glanced at Fa Zheng, who was now seated beside Jia Xu, and didn't say much. In terms of ability, Fa Zheng was indeed qualified to sit in that position, even if his thinking was a bit unconventional. With some experience, he would improve. Since neither Jia Xu nor Man Chong objected to Fa Zheng being there, Chen Xi pretended not to notice. However, with such status came corresponding responsibilities.

On the other side, the military officers were quite noisy. After all, this was Liu Bei's first official gathering of everyone, and the seating arrangement spoke volumes about one's status.

The head seat was empty, which was expected. Guan Yu, as the oldest and most senior, had the highest position, with Zhang Fei seated second—no one contested that. Zhao Yun was in the third seat, and behind him sat Hua Xiong, followed by Sun Guan. Among the generals, only the head seat remained vacant. Gan Ning, Taishi Ci, Yu Jin, and Zang Ba were absent; otherwise, Gan Ning's stellar performance would likely have pushed Hua Xiong out of his position.

By the time Liu Bei arrived, everyone had already found their seats. Liu Bei took a quick glance but didn't dwell on these matters.

"Everyone, I've gathered you here today because I have important matters to discuss, and Zichuan also has some decisions to implement," Liu Bei said directly, wasting no time with pleasantries.

He recounted everything he had seen and heard earlier that day. The military officers were all fervently listening to Liu Bei, as the idea of bringing peace and prosperity to the world was incredibly inspiring to them.

As for the civil officials, most of them were staring at Chen Xi. It was obvious to them what had happened—Liu Bei had been influenced by Chen Xi again. No matter how passionate the words, if they came from Chen Xi, they were met with skepticism.

"Yes, that's the goal. First, we'll ensure our people have food and clothing, and then we'll work towards enriching the nation. Ultimately, our aim is to ensure that the young are educated and the elderly are cared for," Chen Xi said, coughing slightly to ease the tension from being the focus of the civil officials' scrutiny, and then speaking with a dignified tone.

"Just as Zichuan said," Liu Bei affirmed, his demeanor almost saintly. He was fully immersed in his mission, having been convinced by Chen Xi. "Zichuan, explain your plan in detail."

With no other choice, Chen Xi stood up again and began explaining the educational expansion and household registration plan, not forgetting to mention the need for donations.

"In essence, that's the plan. Following this sequence, we should have many academies officially enrolling students by the end of this month. By next spring, most areas in Qingzhou and Taishan should be covered. Of course, some remote areas might be harder to reach, so we'll offer additional benefits and double the salary for scholars willing to go to those places. Zijing, any other benefits to add?" Chen Xi asked, as he wasn't great with details—he was more of a big-picture person.

"I've already categorized and adjusted the scholars' benefits. Salaries will vary based on the region's prosperity and cost of living, but I can assure you that scholars will have no worries about food and clothing," Lu Su replied without specifying numbers, but his reputation as a reliable person made his assurance credible.

"Zijing, can the Taishan treasury support this?" Liu Bei asked.

"With the summer grain already collected in October and commercial taxes providing support, as long as we maintain the current stable situation, Zichuan estimates that in three years, we'll see the first boom in prosperity, leading to increased tax revenue. Supporting the education of the youth shouldn't be too difficult," Lu Su replied, indicating that as long as stability was maintained, Taishan could bear the burden.

"What if we enter a state of war?" Liu Bei asked, furrowing his brow.

Chen Xi glanced at Lu Su, then stood up. "Even if we go to war, this expenditure cannot be cut. It concerns our future."

As soon as Chen Xi said this, the military officers began whispering among themselves, clearly uneasy. Chen Xi's approach seemed to suggest a subtle restriction on the military.

"As for finances, you can all rest assured. As long as I'm here, the treasury won't run dry," Chen Xi said calmly as he glanced around, silencing any objections from the military officers.

Chen Xi wasn't about to reveal that his mindset was simply "we'll cross that bridge when we get to it." Education had to be prioritized, and if war came, they'd find other solutions. For now, they needed to get through this stage.

With Chen Xi's assurance, the military officers had nothing more to say. Everyone acknowledged Chen Xi's knack for making money, and with no reduction in troop numbers, they were happy to support him.

In this harmonious atmosphere, the plans for household registration and education passed without any objections. The only thing left was for the officials to contribute funds to buy land for academies, or for some wealthy individuals to make donations.

"Next, we'll discuss improving soldier welfare. Given that some armies include both teenagers barely thirteen or fourteen years old and white-haired men in their forties, I plan to enforce mandatory discharges for those who don't meet the standards," Chen Xi said coldly, casting a sharp glance at the generals.

Instantly, all the military officers became alert. Even Zhao Yun, who spent most of his time acting as a civil official, was particularly concerned about his command.

"First, all soldiers under eighteen will be discharged—those boys can hardly be considered effective in battle," Chen Xi declared, glaring at the generals. "Soldiers who haven't achieved the rank of squad leader by thirty-two will be discharged, and those who haven't become company commanders by thirty-five will also be discharged. By forty, lower-ranking officers will be transferred to logistics."

"Zichuan, this isn't right. Many of our soldiers are in their thirties, and many are veteran soldiers who have been with us for a long time. If we discharge them, how will they survive without their pay?" The generals all turned to Zhao Yun, who had a reputation for eloquence and had once even managed to argue Chen Xi to a draw.

"Zijing, read the benefits!" Chen Xi gave Lu Su a glance.

Lu Su stood up, picked up the plan, and began reading with a smile. Unlike the half-finished education plan, this soldier welfare plan was something Lu Su had carefully crafted. It provided ample benefits and honor for retired soldiers, while minimizing the financial burden—a point of pride for Lu Su.

When Zhao Yun finished listening, he was stunned. The benefits were exceptionally generous, addressing all the concerns about soldiers' livelihoods after retirement.

"Big Brother, if we start discharging soldiers now, we'll have no troops left!" Zhang Fei wasn't stupid. He realized that trying to argue that retired soldiers would have no means of survival wouldn't work, as Chen Xi had already prepared for that. So he turned to Liu Bei directly.

"General Zhang, don't be hasty," Chen Xi said with a smile. "I'm only discharging those who don't meet the standards—I'm not saying you can't recruit new soldiers. You can still enlist troops from the eligible Tuntian units."

"But that won't guarantee the same combat effectiveness!" Zhao Yun seemed ready to compromise, knowing that the other side had come prepared and that this had become inevitable.

Unfortunately, all the military officers were looking at Zhao Yun. Left with no choice, Zhao Yun stood up to continue the argument. But being no fool, Zhao Yun cleverly offered Chen Xi a way out while subtly negotiating.

"Exactly! If we discharge these soldiers, our army's combat strength will plummet. Newly recruited troops can't compare to veteran soldiers," Zhang Fei chimed in. "I think we should discharge them in batches, one group at a time."

Zhang Fei's plan was to stall. If they discharged soldiers in batches, the process would likely get bogged down, especially once Guan Yu returned to lead the generals.

At that moment, Zhao Yun felt like giving Zhang Fei a hug. He was the perfect sixth man! If it weren't clear that Zhang Fei hadn't colluded with Chen Xi, Zhao Yun might have thought he'd been bought off by the civil officials...

Chapter 252: Retirement, Expansion, and Military Restructuring

Zhao Yun gave Chen Xi a way out, and Zhang Fei unintentionally set himself up. It was already October, and although the lunar calendar still had two months of November, winter was approaching.

“So, General Zhang, you agree to the retirement plan, as long as it’s done in phases and doesn’t impact combat effectiveness or invite trouble from other lords?” Chen Xi rephrased Zhang Fei’s earlier suggestion of retiring soldiers in batches.

Zhang Fei paused for a moment, then realized that’s exactly what he meant. Nodding foolishly, he said, “Yes, that’s what I meant. Zilong, what’s wrong?” Zhang Fei noticed Zhao Yun rubbing his forehead and sitting down, looking confused.

“General Zhang, you really...” Zhao Yun forced a bitter smile as he handed over the burden to Zhang Fei. “You’ll handle this, right?”

“What’s going on? What did I do?” Zhang Fei still didn’t understand.

“Military Advisor, please ensure that a basic defensive force is retained, even during the winter rest period,” Zhao Yun added, conceding defeat. It was clear they wouldn’t win this argument. As long as they could keep some forces intact, that would suffice.

Zhang Fei, reminded by Zhao Yun, realized that winter was coming—a time when wars rarely occurred, with most lords focusing on assessing the year's outcomes and preparing for winter.

Reflecting on what he had said earlier, Zhang Fei realized that his suggestion at this time was essentially throwing his comrades under the bus. Who would consider the timing when discussing troop reductions? This wasn’t fair!

“Hey, Zichuan, I misspoke just now. Don’t take it seriously,” Zhang Fei quickly backtracked, playing the sympathy card instead of sticking to the original argument. “My corps only has four thousand soldiers. If we follow the requirements, half of them might be cut. What will I do without soldiers? My elite infantry and cavalry can take on ten men each. Discharging them would be a waste. Why not cut the Tuntian troops instead?”

The civil officials all covered their faces in embarrassment. Zhang Fei's shamelessness was astounding—suggesting they cut the farming soldiers instead.

"Zichuan, please have mercy on your third brother. His soldiers have been with him for years, some from as far back as Zhuo County, for five or six years now. If they all leave, how will I explain it to the villagers?" Zhang Fei continued pleading, leaning on his thick skin, knowing that his fellow generals would back him up.

Chen Xi's eyelids twitched uncontrollably. Zhang Fei was clearly playing dirty. The Zhuo County recruits were enlisted in the spring of 188, so they'd only been around for five years at most. Most of them had probably died during the Yellow Turban Rebellion. Even if they had all survived, they'd only be in their twenties. Moreover, the welfare benefits Lu Su had prepared for these discharged soldiers were more than generous. Even if they didn't join the city management and patrol forces, they could still retire comfortably in their hometowns.

"Third Brother, you must understand my difficulties. Once enlisted, there's no end to their service. We also need to consider the soldiers' well-being. Giving them a way out might actually increase their chances of survival," Chen Xi countered with emotional appeals, playing along with Zhang Fei's tactics. After all, they were all familiar with each other, so why not?

Zhang Fei was about to speak, but Chen Xi cut him off. "Besides, I'm not limiting your troop numbers. I'm only discharging those who don't meet the standards. You can recruit and train new soldiers. If you discharge three hundred veterans and feel your combat strength has decreased by three hundred and thirty, then recruit three hundred and thirty more. As for where you'll get the equipment for those extra thirty, that's not my concern," Chen Xi said with a mischievous grin.

Liu Bei paused, then remembered why Chen Xi had set the military unit size at 4,000 to 5,000 soldiers but only provided funding for 4,000.

Zhang Fei hesitated, glancing at Liu Bei. This was something Liu Bei needed to approve. After all, this meant an additional 10% of troops out of thin air. If they took it seriously and conducted a large-scale restructuring, a unit could easily gain an extra 500 regular soldiers!

As for funding and equipment, they could scrape it together somehow. The key was having the structure in place. Once that was secured, raising a force would be easy, whether through confiscation or purchase.

In this chaotic era, every army was overstaffed. Zhang Fei might cry about only having 4,000 soldiers, but in reality, any count would likely reveal 4,500. Everyone—from Liu Bei to Lu Su, who managed finances, and Liu Ye, who handled statistics—turned a blind eye as long as the overstaffing wasn't excessive.

Moreover, Liu Bei remembered that Chen Xi's original full-strength unit size was 6,000 soldiers, with 5,000 being the standard. But when Chen Xi issued the orders, the units were capped at 4,000, which reminded Liu Bei that as long as a unit didn't exceed 5,000, they could look the other way. Heading toward 6,000 would warrant a warning, and exceeding 6,000 would land them on a blacklist, barring special circumstances.

"Zichuan thinks some of the older and weaker soldiers no longer meet the requirements. Eight companies per unit seem a bit thin, so we're adding one more company's worth of troops. The condition is that each unit must discharge those who don't meet the standards," Liu Bei decided to fill in the extra 10% Chen Xi had begrudgingly allowed, bolstering the ranks with another company of infantry. The generals couldn't have been happier.

In this era, a general's worth was often measured by the number of troops they commanded and their victories in battle. The more men under their command, the greater their prestige.

With Liu Bei's approval, Zhang Fei relaxed, confidently pledging to discharge any unfit soldiers and replenish his ranks. He planned to train his troops well over the winter and emerge in the spring with a crack unit. Gone was the earlier gloom.

Likewise, all the generals promised to purge their ranks of unfit soldiers, creating a harmonious scene between civil and military officials. In reality, the generals had gained the upper hand while pretending to comply.

If their command had genuinely been reduced, these generals would have caused an uproar and never forgotten to give Chen Xi trouble in the future. But now, it was a win-win situation. Little did they know that Chen Xi's original plan had set the full-strength unit size at 6,000, and he had intentionally reduced it by 30% to use as bait for the future.

After all, as long as they were generals, they'd always be receptive to talk of retaining command. As long as it wasn't a matter of principle, they'd accept. But this time, it seemed like Chen Xi had conceded a bit

too much. Next time, he'd need to coordinate with Liu Bei before making such a move. Although Liu Bei understood, he'd just lost a quarter of their bargaining power for future negotiations with the military.

Chen Xi sighed helplessly as he glanced at Liu Bei, unsure of what to say.

Chapter 253: Let the Work Begin, Everyone!

Liu Bei was puzzled by the look Chen Xi gave him. In his view, everything was going smoothly, so why did Chen Xi suddenly appear so resentful?

Fortunately, Chen Xi understood that this wasn't the right time to discuss the matter. The military structure was something Chen Xi had devised, and only Liu Bei was aware of the details; the others had not been informed. Therefore, he couldn't say much and decided to explain it to Liu Bei in private later. What an unlucky situation.

"Since everyone agrees with the retirement system, please ensure that the retired soldiers are sent to Fenggao by the end of the first November, before the Jingling Temple ceremony," Chen Xi's resentment quickly vanished as he resumed his composed demeanor in front of Liu Bei, ensuring no one noticed his brief lapse.

"Understood!" The generals stood up and responded. This decision was ultimately beneficial for them. Although they would lose some veteran soldiers in the short term, in the long run, it would expand their strength.

"Bo Ning, the retired soldiers will be handed over to you for reorganization. Additionally, you'll be responsible for selecting the city's management and patrol teams," Liu Bei instructed Man Chong, knowing that Chen Xi had already briefed him on these matters. Otherwise, Liu Bei would have likely overlooked many details.

"Understood!" Man Chong stood up and responded.

"Gong You, the road construction in the Qingzhou and Taishan areas will be your responsibility. You must complete the roads leading to Fenggao by mid-November, before Zichuan's wedding. Additionally, the patrol teams composed mainly of retired soldiers need to be operational by then," Liu Bei said sternly to Sun Qian.

"Understood!" Sun Qian rose and respectfully bowed.

"Zijing, start recruiting students in our territories immediately to establish the education system. Ensure that the academies in the main counties are set up before Zichuan's wedding. As for the curriculum, Zichuan has already prepared it. Also, handle the relocation of any unreasonable areas in Fenggao," Liu Bei continued, turning his attention to Lu Su.

"I won't disappoint," Lu Su replied calmly.

"Wenru, the household registration matters will be entirely your responsibility. The classification of craftsmen and the grading of household registrations are also up to you. Although it doesn't have to be fully implemented before Zichuan's wedding, at least have a plan ready by then," Liu Bei ordered Li You.

Chen Xi slightly shook his head. Liu Bei still didn't fully understand the people under his command. Before Liu Bei even gave these orders, they had already planned everything and were merely waiting for the go-ahead.

"Rest assured, Lord Liu. I will have a plan ready before Zichuan's wedding," Li You replied with a seemingly determined expression. In reality, those who knew him were aware that he had started working on this nearly two months ago. By now, it was more than a mere plan, but Li You wanted everything to be flawless before it was finalized.

"Wenhe, keep an eye on the wars on all fronts. Ensure no other warlords take advantage of us during our military restructuring," Liu Bei instructed Jia Xu, adding, "With Fengxiao absent, you'll need to shoulder more responsibility."

"Understood!" Jia Xu stood up and saluted. This time, the intelligence network was officially under Jia Xu's control, without Guo Jia's subtle influence or Fazheng's playful disruptions. The entire intelligence organization of Taishan was now in Jia Xu's hands.

"Zizhong, the commercial regulations must be submitted to me in the form of contracts before Zichuan's wedding. Otherwise, I won't hesitate to make Zichuan write them out on the spot," Liu Bei said, turning to Mi Zhu. "Remember your position. You have the authority to regulate every merchant operating in Fenggao!"

"I will not fail you, my lord!" Mi Zhu replied respectfully.

"Ziyang, handle all government affairs templates and conduct year-end evaluations of the Qingzhou and Taishan officials. Submit the results to me. Zilong will assist you in assessing the officials, and I trust he'll handle the agricultural matters as well," Liu Bei originally planned to give Liu Ye full authority over the official assessments but recalled Chen Xi's advice that rewards and punishments should be centralized under his own authority.

"Understood!" Zhao Yun and Liu Ye responded in unison. Over the past two years, Zhao Yun hadn't been on the battlefield much but had focused extensively on agriculture and gathering public sentiment. His influence in the region was substantial.

"Yide, Zijian, you two will temporarily assist Zilong in recruiting soldiers and training them during the winter. Do not fail in this task," Liu Bei assigned Zhang Fei and Hua Xiong to manage military recruitment and training, knowing Zhao Yun had too many responsibilities to handle everything alone.

"Understood!" Hua Xiong and Zhang Fei exchanged glances and stood up together.

"Zhongkang, help Zilong with the soldier recruitment," Liu Bei added, still concerned about Zhang Fei and Hua Xiong. He turned to the silent pillar in the room, Xu Chu, and assigned him the task.

"Understood!" Xu Chu responded without hesitation.

"Xianhe, Weishuo, formally invite the various lords to the wedding. Since they're bound to come anyway, let's give them an invitation so everyone can save face. It would be rude for them to come uninvited," Liu Bei addressed Jian Yong and Liu Yan, publicly announcing Chen Xi's wedding plans. It was better to invite the lords than let them show up uninvited, as Chen Xi had suggested.

"Understood." Jian Yong and Liu Yan stood up and replied. Jian Yong excelled in diplomacy, and Liu Yan was known for his flattery, making them a fitting pair.

Liu Bei surveyed the room, his gaze landing on Fazheng before quickly moving on without assigning him any tasks.

"May I ask, my lord, why everyone else has been given duties while I have not? Is it because I am too young?" Fazheng had noticed Liu Bei's glance but was perplexed by the lack of assignments. As a young man eager to prove himself, he couldn't hold back and directly asked the question.

"There is a matter that should be handled by Zichuan, but with his upcoming wedding and other responsibilities, I wasn't sure if you had enough experience to manage it," Liu Bei hesitated before explaining. He didn't mind Fazheng's eagerness, understanding that the young man was still in a state of excitement and couldn't contain his ambition.

"I am willing to try. Since I have been seated here among everyone, it means my abilities have been recognized. I hope you will give me the opportunity to prove myself. Otherwise, I will feel uneasy sitting in this position!" Fazheng replied confidently. He understood that with great power came great responsibility, and he believed he was ready to handle whatever task Liu Bei assigned.

Liu Bei glanced at Chen Xi, still unsure about Fazheng. One concern was that Fazheng held grudges, and Liu Bei wasn't entirely convinced that Chen Xi's recommendation would work out well. He feared Fazheng might clash with others.

Chen Xi, however, gave a firm nod, signaling that he had other matters to attend to.

"Since you are so confident, then I will assign you the education and welfare duties, as well as managing the pensions and stipends for the retired soldiers. If you have any doubts, consult Zichuan," Liu Bei sighed, ultimately entrusting Fazheng with the responsibilities while reminding him to seek guidance if needed.

Chapter 254: Intimidating the Four Corners and Ending This Year's War

Fazheng was overjoyed upon hearing this. While the task was indeed challenging, successfully accomplishing it would be the best recognition of his abilities. Without hesitation, he accepted the responsibility on the spot.

"Zichuan, you'll need to take on more as usual," Liu Bei didn't assign any specific administrative duties to Chen Xi, but he left this sentence, implying that Chen Xi still had the authority to oversee all civil officials.

"Understood," Chen Xi nodded and replied.

With everything settled, Liu Bei didn't say much more and, as usual, hosted a banquet to entertain everyone. Fazheng once again indulged in boiled mutton. The earlier blow to his spirits was entirely gone.

As Fazheng ate the mutton, he renewed his determination. In his eyes, this was such a grand and lofty ideal; why didn't those worldly people understand?

By the time the banquet ended, the sky had already darkened. With the approach of the winter solstice, the days were getting shorter, leaving less daylight to work. Increasingly, time was spent sipping tea, eating snacks, and planning, and the day would quickly pass.

After everyone had left, Chen Xi, feeling somewhat tipsy, sat drowsily in the living room. He knew Liu Bei would likely come over soon.

"Zichuan, you seem a bit overwhelmed by the alcohol," Liu Bei remarked as he entered, bringing a maid to prepare a bowl of sobering soup for Chen Xi.

"I drank too much; I'm feeling a bit groggy," Chen Xi gulped down the sobering soup in one go and shook his head to clear his mind.

"Zichuan, are you sure Fazheng can handle that task? If he doesn't manage it well, he'll end up offending a lot of people. This task involves so many people, and as you mentioned, it's a matter of great importance for the next hundred years. Entrusting it to Fazheng makes me uneasy. If Fengxiao were here, it would be best to leave it to him," Liu Bei expressed his concern. To him, Fazheng still seemed too young and impulsive, with a temperament that needed further refinement.

"There's no need to worry too much. You should have confidence in Fazheng, Lord Liu," Chen Xi said with a smile. "He may stumble at first, but he'll quickly adapt."

"I hope so," Liu Bei replied with a sigh. He still had his reservations, feeling that Fazheng was perhaps too young for such a significant responsibility.

"Let's not dwell on Fazheng anymore. With you overseeing things, it won't get too out of hand. Let's talk about something else. I don't quite understand why you want to remove soldiers over the age of thirty-two. With our current conditions, the veterans who meet your criteria should already have internal energy, and they're battle-hardened. Even at forty, they still possess considerable combat strength," Liu Bei shifted the conversation to a topic that had piqued his curiosity.

"We need a visible, elite force to serve as a deterrent. In reality, if we maintain the current conditions for another two years, about 30% of our troops should have internal energy. If we keep these conditions going, in three generations, we might achieve universal internal energy among the populace," Chen Xi explained, shaking his head slightly to clear his thoughts.

"That's true. As our grain production increases and the people in our territories get enough to eat, perhaps the older generation won't be able to cultivate internal energy due to past hardships, but the younger generation should have no such issues," Liu Bei nodded in agreement. In this era of abundant energy, as long as people could eat their fill and weren't physically depleted, it shouldn't be too difficult for them to cultivate at least a basic level of internal energy.

"In other words, the quality of our soldiers will only improve over time!" Chen Xi affirmed. "So the prosperity of our territories is crucial."

"Indeed, an army composed entirely of soldiers with internal energy versus one without, even with equal military skills, would easily annihilate the latter. A small advantage for each soldier adds up to a crushing force for the army," Liu Bei said, his expression becoming more serious as he considered this scenario.

In the four hundred years of the Han Dynasty, perhaps only during the later years of Emperor Jing and the early years of Emperor Wu did the empire achieve universal internal energy. It was a brief moment of unparalleled prosperity, but strong enough to terrify all enemies. Now, he, Liu Bei, might have the chance to recreate such an era.

"Yes, but with prosperity comes disorder. As you've seen in Fenggao, many places are already in chaos. I don't have the time to manage every little detail, so I plan to enforce strict control and establish a highly capable military unit for public display," Chen Xi shared his plans.

"Strict control and deterrence?" Liu Bei, though not experienced in politics, could easily relate this to military strategy. It was clear that Chen Xi was aiming to intimidate potential threats.

"Yes. The veterans assigned to city management could easily continue fighting for several more years, and they're all seasoned warriors. This unit will serve as a deterrent to any warlords who might come to Fenggao in the near future. When they assess our true strength, they'll have to factor in this elite, organized force," Chen Xi explained. Though this unit would primarily handle internal security, its presence would influence how others perceived Fenggao's military capabilities.

"It'll certainly be a turbulent time. You have your work cut out for you," Liu Bei acknowledged the necessity of such a unit, considering the challenges that lay ahead.

"It's not too troublesome," Chen Xi shrugged. "I've also arranged for these soldiers to be re-equipped. Starting a year and a half ago, I began gathering craftsmen, and now we finally have the armor and weapons ready. With the blacksmiths we brought back from Yuzhou, we should be able to finish the production."

"Next year is when you plan to standardize the army's uniforms and equipment, right? When all the lower-ranked soldiers will have uniform weapons?" Liu Bei recalled an earlier conversation with Chen Xi about the craftsmen.

"Yes, by next year, we should have enough apprentices to handle it. Plate armor consumes too much iron, so it'll only be issued to elite units. The rest of the troops will have to wait. I've also standardized weights and measures, so that after battles, equipment can be recycled and reused," Chen Xi said with a sigh, lamenting the many shortages of the era.

"Sigh, I'll leave all this to you, Zichuan. I can't wrap my head around it. Just give me the final numbers when it's all done," Liu Bei waved his hand dismissively. He was already satisfied with the improvements in iron production. With plate armor now being issued to army units, what more could he ask for? In the past, only commanders had the privilege of such equipment.

"All that remains is to end the wars and renegotiate the alliances," Chen Xi exhaled in relief. With Liu Bei's military might as a deterrent, they should have enough time to prepare for the challenges of the coming year.

Chapter 255: Scholars Storm the Library Pavilion

Chen Xi knew all too well about alliances; they were essentially meant to be broken. However, having such a thing in place meant that as long as neither side experienced a significant shift in power, no one would want to initiate a war in the short term.

Chen Xi just needed that brief buffer period. With that time, he would be able to fully incorporate Qingzhou into Liu Bei's territory.

For a while, Chen Xi's life didn't change much, maintaining a leisurely pace as usual.

"Report!" A messenger appeared at the hall, half-kneeling as he spoke.

"What is it?" Chen Xi asked helplessly, realizing that his tea break would once again be interrupted. There was no avoiding sudden incidents like this.

"Scholars are storming the Library Pavilion," the messenger reported.

"Well, isn't that just..." Chen Xi sighed as he finished his tea. These scholars were truly idle to the point of being troublesome.

"What is Zijiang doing?" Lu Su immediately raised his head and glared at the messenger before Chen Xi could respond. "There are nearly a hundred thousand books in that place, and Hua Xiong is stationed there precisely to guard it. And now you're telling me they're storming it?"

"Hua Xiong is doing his best to suppress them, but the number of scholars is increasing," the messenger calmly responded. He was clearly one of Hua Xiong's personal guards, unshaken by Lu Su's reaction. Otherwise, someone with less experience would have been frightened by now.

"This is really embarrassing," Lu Su muttered, unsure whether to be ashamed for Yuzhou or Taishan. "Zichuan, if you have time to drink tea, you'd better go deal with this. After all, this was your promise to them."

"Let's go together. We need to split these troublemakers up," Chen Xi said bluntly. These disruptive scholars were asking for trouble.

"Alright, I've pretty much finished drafting the plan for the education system. You can fetch Fazheng for me. As for the scholars, let them continue their ruckus for now," Lu Su said as he flipped through his notes, confirming that he had nearly completed the education plan. He then instructed the messenger to bring Fazheng along, knowing that discussing welfare later would be easier with him present.

"Understood." The messenger wasn't too worried about the scholars breaking into the Library Pavilion. Did they really think Hua Xiong was just daydreaming? What a joke! If the scholars tried to take on the regular army, they'd quickly learn what war truly meant.

"Your 'Thousand-Character Classic' is quite good. I didn't know you had such a resource," Lu Su casually remarked, shifting the conversation.

"Why mention it? It's just a literacy textbook I prepared. Although, I must admit, it's a rather extraordinary one," Chen Xi responded indifferently. This book had stood the test of time, surviving countless generations. Even in the 21st century, people still used it to learn to read. He had memorized it when he was a child.

Although Hua Xiong reported a large number of scholars storming the Library Pavilion, in reality, it was only a few hundred, maybe a thousand, facing off against Hua Xiong, hoping to borrow books. The account Chen Zhi had given of the interior of the Library Pavilion had sparked their imaginations.

Of course, this scene also made merchants from all over the country chuckle. Nearby taverns were filled with merchants eager to watch the spectacle. However, as more scholars gathered, these merchants started to realize something else: there were far too many literate people here!

"Big brother, Taishan is indeed impressive, far more prosperous than our Henei or even Chang'an and Luoyang. Chen Zichuan... tsk tsk! The Chen family really missed out," a young man sneered as he leaned against the window, looking down at the bustling crowd.

"In terms of prosperity, only Nanyang can compare to this place in the current world. Unfortunately, Nanyang has declined with the war between Yuan Shao and Cao Cao, while this place is like a rising sun," the young man's older brother smiled as he observed his sibling disdainfully watching the crowd below from the balcony.

"This place is filled with all kinds of spiritual talents. The most terrifying thing is the spiritual power circulating above. I can't even negate it, which is quite surprising," the young man remarked, a glint of curiosity in his eyes as he gazed up at the sky, before turning his attention toward the government office. After a moment, he averted his gaze.

"Oh, my dear brother, could you please stop using your spiritual abilities? Your big brother is already mentally exhausted because of you. Don't you know that your fully awakened spiritual power is nothing but trouble? Do you think it's easy for me to travel around with you without causing problems? If you keep messing around, my spiritual abilities will be negated by yours, and we'll be sleeping on the streets tonight," the older brother said with a bitter smile, resting his head in his hands. If he had a choice, he would never have brought this troublesome sibling along. How could his brother have awakened his spiritual abilities on the road? And at just thirteen years old! Who awakens their spiritual abilities at thirteen? This was too much!

"What's there to be afraid of? With a wave of your hand, big brother, countless lords would be eager to extend their invitations," the young man replied with a grin. However, he heeded his brother's advice and stopped using his spiritual powers to probe the spiritual energy floating above the city.

"Zichuan, what's the matter?" Lu Su asked, noticing something off about Chen Xi.

"I don't know why, but I just felt a strange sensation," Chen Xi replied sheepishly. Could he really say that it felt like someone was tickling him?

"Oh, I see," Lu Su nodded, not pressing further.

After a while, the messenger returned, bringing a disheveled Fazheng in a loose scholar's robe, yawning as he walked over.

"Zichuan, Zijing, what do you need from me? I still have a lot of work to do," Fazheng said, his slightly bloodshot eyes scanning Chen Xi and Lu Su.

"How's the welfare plan for the scholars coming along? We already have a preliminary template for the soldiers' welfare, so you just need to add to it later," Chen Xi said as he poured Fazheng a cup of tea.

"I've finished a version," Fazheng replied, scratching his messy hair. He downed the entire cup of tea without worrying about how hot it was, chewed the tea leaves, and then handed his notebook to Chen Xi. "Here it is. Take a look and see if there's anything wrong. I think it's pretty good!"

Chen Xi handed half of the notes to Lu Su and kept the other half for himself. After a quick read-through, he concluded that Fazheng was indeed a miser. The entire welfare plan didn't mention money once; it was all about social benefits, honors, and special privileges.

Chen Xi gave Fazheng a curious look, wondering how he had come up with such ideas.

"How about it? I did a good job, right?" Fazheng said proudly, looking at Chen Xi.

"Not bad at all. You've really nailed the mindset of scholars. But I have a feeling that for the soldiers' welfare, you probably focused more on money with honors as a secondary concern, didn't you?" Chen Xi nodded in approval.

Chapter 256: Young Man, You Don't Understand Human Nature!

"Of course," Fazheng said proudly. "During this period, I secretly used Wenhe's intelligence network to investigate around seven or eight hundred scholars from various levels, and then my talent consolidated the information. It was too easy. Those who can become scholars don't lack money; they lack honor, status, and special privileges, so I gave them all of that!"

Fazheng's spiritual talent for analyzing people made handling such matters easy. Although it was a bit troublesome to study seven or eight hundred people to find common traits, it ensured that the results were accurate.

"Let's go with that, but add a clause that allows equivalent benefits to be converted into money," Chen Xi suggested after considering the matter. "Also, well done, Fazheng! The levels of benefits are very detailed!"

There were over a hundred different evaluation criteria, each representing different benefits. The ultimate perk was unrestricted access to the archives, the ability to request book publications every ten years, direct appointment to official positions, and even having a renowned scholar write a biography of you.

These benefits were exceptional, but after reading through the requirements, Chen Xi realized that Fazheng was essentially joking. Anyone who met these criteria in Taishan would likely be personally invited by Liu Bei to take office, and Chen Xi would naturally publish their books. As for the unrestricted access to the archives, well, Fazheng shamelessly treated the Pavilion's collections as his personal library. Writing biographies? If you meet those conditions, someone will definitely write one for you!

"That works. Some people may indeed be short on funds, so converting benefits to money is fine," Fazheng casually agreed, indicating that Chen Xi could do as he liked. "Actually, these benefits are mostly just symbolic, but why do so many people chase after a title like this?"

"Throughout history, no one escapes the pursuit of 'fame and fortune.' You're still young, you don't lack money, your official rank is good, and a title is within reach. Fame will come naturally, so of course, you feel content. But for most people, it's a lifelong pursuit!" Chen Xi patted Fazheng on the shoulder. "That's also why we seem to have no thoughts of corruption. After all, we're too young. To be honest, if it weren't for the current chaos, none of us would be in these positions."

"That's true. The Inspector of Qingzhou, a Marquis within the Passes, and you're not even twenty yet—a position with a salary of two thousand shi," Lu Su added. "In other times, someone like Zichuan might have spent a lifetime without making it this far. The same goes for us. As it stands now, we've already achieved success at a young age."

"That's why, young man, you don't understand human nature," Chen Xi said, patting Fazheng's shoulder again. Although Fazheng could analyze what others wanted and what motivated them, he still didn't fully grasp the intricacies of human nature.

The current Fazheng wasn't the same person who had suffered from the chaos in Fufeng, who had been held back for twenty years as a county magistrate in Shu, becoming a twisted middle-aged man.

This Fazheng was still the son of a Confucian scholar, who at fifteen had been appointed to office. Unhappy with his superiors, he had arrogantly resigned and traveled across half of the Han dynasty, finally arriving in Taishan. Now, at just seventeen, he held the position of Chancellor of Qi, already considered accomplished. Though a bit vengeful, he mostly exhibited the arrogance of youth. Recently, he had even dared to write home and report on his current situation.

In other words, this Fazheng was enjoying smooth sailing in life, with no disasters or difficulties. It was only natural that he would look down on the thoughts and desires of those Yuzhou scholars. The gap in perspective! If this were the Fazheng who had been suppressed for twenty years, who had been frustrated and had failed to achieve success, he would have understood.

"I don't understand human nature?" Fazheng scoffed at Chen Xi's assessment. His spiritual talent was for analyzing people, and now Chen Xi was telling him he didn't understand human nature? It had to be a joke!

"You two, stop messing around. Zijiang is probably getting annoyed by now," Lu Su interjected, seeing that Fazheng was on the verge of challenging Chen Xi. He stepped in to calm the situation. Ever since Fazheng had been given an official position, he had no fear of Chen Xi and had grown accustomed to talking back. It was a classic case of youthful arrogance.

"Human nature is complex. For example, Fengxiao bullies you every day, and yet you're still eager to compete with him when he returns, even though you know you probably won't win. Why seek that defeat?" Chen Xi laughed as he pushed his chair back and walked out.

"Who says I can't beat him!" Fazheng bristled like a cat whose tail had been stepped on. His biggest frustration right now was indeed with Guo Jia.

"See?" Chen Xi spread his hands, a look of helplessness on his face as he walked away. Lu Su sighed, drained the tea Chen Xi had poured for him, and followed, leaving Fazheng fuming at the tea cup as if it bore Guo Jia's mocking grin.

"Guo Fengxiao, let's duel when you get back!" Fazheng shouted at the chair Guo Jia used to occupy. After venting his frustration, he smugly tossed his hair and strutted out.

In a military camp north of Licheng, Guo Jia sneezed. Guan Yu looked at him curiously and asked, "Military Advisor Guo, did you catch a chill? Ping, go make some ginger tea and stew a large rooster."

"Understood," came Guan Ping's voice from outside the tent.

"Hmph, rather than a cold, I feel like it's Fazheng challenging me from afar. Who knows what that guy is up to now," Guo Jia muttered, his tone mysterious.

"Just drink the chicken soup. Once Ping is done cooking, it'll be good for you," Guan Yu said, glancing at Guo Jia. He didn't hesitate to use this as an opportunity to give his son some extra nourishment. Guan Yu only had one son, and Guan Ping was just like him—skilled in martial arts and very much to Guan Yu's liking. However, Guan Yu was careful not to show his affection too openly.

"Fine, I caught a cold," Guo Jia conceded. "Let's go test Zhang He and Gao Lan. Although our mission is to keep them from moving north, we should earn some military merits."

"Shall Ping be the vanguard?" Guan Yu suggested, eager to test his son in battle. At sixteen, it was time for him to get some real combat experience.

Indeed, Guan Yu saw Zhang He and Gao Lan as stepping stones for his son. After all, he had heard that both of them were only at the peak of the Refining Qi stage. Since that was the case, Guan Yu wasn't worried about his son. He was confident that Guan Ping, though of the same level, was more exceptional and wouldn't disgrace him.

"That could work, but we should at least challenge them a bit. I've heard that Zhang Junyi is skilled in tactical maneuvers and adept at using terrain. Wouldn't it be a waste not to see him in action?" Guo Jia replied with a sly smile.

Guan Yu didn't fully understand Guo Jia's strategy, but he respected the capabilities of Chen Xi's group. He had witnessed Liu Xie's countless schemes firsthand, and they had earned his admiration. None of them were to be underestimated.

Chapter 257: Guan Yu, Wei Yan, Guan Ping...

"Skilled in using soldiers, adept at formations, and good at utilizing terrain—sounds like a strategist," Guan Yu said as he stroked his most prized beard and slightly opened his eyes. After being influenced by Chen Xi for over a year, he had finally learned how to speak in a more refined manner.

"Of the Four Pillars of Hebei, these two are well placed by Yuan Benchu here. Moreover, placing Ju Gongyu in Bohai is quite appropriate. However, with Ju Gongyu's focus now shifted north, it gives us an opportunity to exploit," Guo Jia said with a smile.

"Good, then," Guan Yu replied, nodding as he continued stroking his beard.

The next day, Guan Yu sent Wei Yan and Guan Ping as vanguard to feign an attack on Le Ling.

Since escorting Jian Yong and Liu Yan back from Jingzhou, Wei Yan had been living quite comfortably. He had always wanted to make a name for himself when he was training in Jingzhou, but as a young man in his teens, even with martial skills and knowledge of leading troops, few people were willing to give him a chance. The rank of a captain was the highest position he could achieve.

Moreover, Wei Yan's proud personality made it difficult for him to get along with most people from Jingzhou. Although it was said that he needed to be tempered, anyone with common sense knew that without a decade or so, it would be impossible for him to rise under the command of those Jingzhou noble families.

Realizing this, Wei Yan felt deeply disappointed. At the same time, he saw Liu Bei's recruitment notice posted in Jingzhou, which gave him the idea of heading to Qingzhou to try his luck.

However, due to various distractions and trying to persuade his comrades to join him, he delayed for over half a year before finally making his way to Qingzhou with Jian Yong and Liu Yan after Xiangyang was captured by Lu Bu.

During the journey, Jian Yong, a man known for his humor and mediocre abilities, quickly noticed Wei Yan's potential. Though Wei Yan had talent, his arrogant nature made it hard for him to fit in, and his reddish face didn't help either...

In fact, Jian Yong couldn't help but think that Wei Yan resembled Guan Yu—so much so that he joked that if he didn't know better, he'd suspect Wei Yan was Guan Yu's illegitimate son! The resemblance was uncanny, with Wei Yan being almost a spiritual twin of Guan Yu. So without hesitation, Jian Yong wrote a recommendation letter and sent Wei Yan to Guan Yu.

It was a stroke of luck that Wei Yan, carrying Jian Yong's letter, found himself under Guan Yu's command. Not only did Guan Yu and Jian Yong get along well, but when Guan Yu met Wei Yan, it was like fate had aligned. Guan Yu took an immediate liking to Wei Yan. In some ways, their personalities

meshed perfectly. For Wei Yan, seeing the mighty Guan Yu made him transfer all his admiration from Huang Zhong to his new superior, who shared his disposition.

Although Guan Yu admired Wei Yan, he didn't promote him outright. Instead, he placed Wei Yan alongside his son, Guan Ping, for training—one day saving the people of Qingzhou, the next catching bandits. Within a month, Guan Yu had become more satisfied with Wei Yan than with his own son.

Guan Yu had never imagined he would find a young man so similar to himself. If he weren't certain he had never been to Jingzhou and that Wei Yan's background was clean, Guan Yu might have wondered if this young man was the result of some past indiscretion. Wei Yan was just too much like him—a spitting image in both demeanor and skill.

Though Guan Yu knew Wei Yan wasn't his son, their compatibility made him favor Wei Yan greatly. It was almost like a veteran player taking a novice under his wing to power-level them.

"Wei General, are we really going to challenge them like this? The general left it up to us to decide," Guan Ping asked Wei Yan as they marched.

"We'll challenge them first, of course. Scatter our troops a bit, and set up camp in a way that looks sloppy. That way, when I lure the enemy in, you can ambush them outside the camp. How about that?" Wei Yan suggested, glancing at Guan Ping with a look that resembled one brother looking at another.

"I'll handle the camp setup, and you can take charge outside, Wen Chang," Guan Ping replied, realizing Wei Yan was trying to hand him the credit.

"No need. They might not even take the bait, and then you'll have wasted a night in the cold for nothing. So you take the outside," Wei Yan insisted, waving his hand.

Guan Ping sighed. He knew his comrade well enough to recognize that while Wei Yan meant well, his words often came off poorly, making even good intentions sound irritating.

"Alright then, I'll take the outer position," Guan Ping conceded. Wei Yan was a good person, but his lack of tact often made it hard for others to appreciate his efforts.

Inside Le Ling, Zhang He and Gao Lan were discussing how to deal with Guan Yu's advancing forces. They didn't know much about Guan Yu himself, apart from rumors of his prowess and his status as Liu Bei's second brother. They were uncertain about his capabilities as a commander, especially since Guan Yu's achievements had often been overshadowed by Chen Xi.

"Report!" A messenger burst into the room, shouting.

"What news?" Zhang He asked, turning to the messenger.

"Enemy vanguard led by Guan Yu has arrived thirty li from Le Ling, with around five thousand troops. Guan Yu's main force is still a hundred li behind, advancing this way. The vanguard is led by Guan Yu's eldest son, Guan Ping, and Yi Yang's Wei Yan," the messenger reported in detail.

"You may withdraw," Zhang He instructed the messenger.

"Junyi, should we crush Guan Yu's vanguard?" Gao Lan asked, his eyes fixed on Zhang He. Ever since their capture by Guan Yu last time, both had been eager for revenge.

"Guan Yu doesn't have many troops, but Taishi Ci and Zang Ba have plenty in Licheng, along with a significant number of Zhao Zilong's former garrison troops. If we engage, I fear Guan Yu might bring his full force against Le Ling," Zhang He said, neither agreeing nor refusing, but instead weighing the situation.

"Destroying Guan Yu's vanguard would boost morale. Even if Guan Yu presses his forces against us, we should be able to hold Le Ling. The defenses in Bohai have weakened, and we can't afford to let our rear be exposed any further," Gao Lan argued forcefully. Ju Shou's movements had left Bohai under-defended, making Le Ling's defense all the more crucial.

"In that case, let's probe the enemy first. No, I'll lead the probing force myself. You stay behind to defend Le Ling. It's hard to trust scouts entirely; I need to see things with my own eyes before deciding," Zhang He agreed with Gao Lan's suggestion, adding a cautious approach.

War was about morale. If Le Ling's defenders were confident and Guan Yu's forces demoralized, it would make defense easier. With winter approaching, dragging the conflict out until the first snow would force Guan Yu to retreat—a far more attainable goal than outright defeating him.

"Alright, Junyi, you take the lead. I'll hold Le Ling," Gao Lan agreed.

Chapter 258: The Bait

Following Wei Yan's instructions, Guan Ping set up camp, and soon a camp that appeared riddled with flaws was constructed under his hands.

"How does this look, Wen Chang?" Guan Ping asked enthusiastically after finishing. For the young Guan Ping, his father was a figure of immense admiration, and he found his battle companion, who bore such a strong resemblance to his father, to be very trustworthy.

"Tan Zhi, even when laying bait, there needs to be a limit," Wei Yan said helplessly, as if he were advising a younger brother. "Look at how you've set up this camp. As long as the enemy has a functioning brain, they'll know something's wrong. We can make some mistakes, sure, but we can't make them all, right?"

Guan Ping scratched his head and let out an awkward laugh before heading back to rework the camp setup. This time, he took a bit longer, and while the flaws weren't immediately obvious to Wei Yan, after closely observing the camp for a while, he did find some. It looked more like the work of a rookie who wasn't too familiar with setting up camp, with some areas even redundantly reinforced.

"How about now?" Guan Ping asked again after making the adjustments.

"It's better, but I'm worried the enemy won't notice the flaws. I had to really look to find them. If they don't spot them, then it's all for nothing," Wei Yan said with concern. He feared the enemy might not be sharp enough to catch on. It was like using an empty fortress strategy on Lu Bu; someone like him would just charge in without a second thought.

"Huh? Should I change it again?" Guan Ping asked with a wry smile, knowing that growing up in difficult conditions had taught him to be cautious.

"No need!" Wei Yan waved his hand. "If they can't spot the flaws and don't come for a night raid, then they're just trash anyway."

Guan Ping nodded repeatedly. If the enemy couldn't spot the intentional weaknesses, then they were indeed trash. However, he didn't realize the implication in Wei Yan's words—that even if the enemy spotted the flaws and came for a night raid, Wei Yan would still consider them trash. He was that confident and proud.

"Report! General, enemy General Zhang He is leading two thousand infantry and cavalry for a challenge," a messenger reported as the two were preparing to eat and inspect the camp before heading out for their own challenge.

"Hmph, this guy isn't lacking in courage," Wei Yan remarked, dismissing the messenger with a wave of his hand.

"I suppose he's just here to test us," Guan Ping said as he wiped his large blade with a cloth. "How about I go and take him down?"

"Alright, I'll cover you!" Wei Yan thought for a moment. Although Guan Ping wasn't as strong as himself, his skills were solid. Zhang He, he'd heard, was only at the peak of the Qi Refining level, so even if Guan Ping lost, Wei Yan could ensure his safety.

Zhang He sat atop his horse, surveying the camp that Guan Ping had set up. Honestly, Zhang He thought it was a decent effort. Apart from a few over-reinforced areas and some weak points, he hadn't noticed any glaring flaws at first glance. If it weren't for his own extensive battlefield experience, he might have overlooked those mistakes due to inexperience.

As he silently assessed the camp, he thought to himself, Not bad, but still too green.

"How dare you spy on our camp, enemy general!" Guan Ping roared as he charged out on his green steed.

"Hmph!" Zhang He smirked, pleased by Guan Ping's apparent rashness, which reassured him.

Clang! Blade and spear clashed as Zhang He deftly parried, quickly assessing Guan Ping's strength before maneuvering his horse to face him directly.

"Zhang Junyi! Remember that it's Guan Tan Zhi, son of Guan Yu, who will kill you!" Guan Ping shouted as he turned his horse and charged.

Zhang He sneered. If Guan Yu had said those words, he would have turned and left without hesitation, but coming from Guan Ping? Hmph.

Zhang He skillfully wielded his spear, engaging in battle with Guan Ping. Although Guan Ping initially fought bravely, Zhang He's fierce and powerful strikes soon began to overpower him.

"Central Plains sure is full of strong warriors!" Wei Yan watched Zhang He with fiery eyes, realizing that they were evenly matched—both at the peak of Qi Refining, yet unsure how to break through.

Guan Ping continued to launch frenzied attacks against Zhang He, but each strike failed to land effectively. Instead, Zhang He seized on Guan Ping's weaknesses, delivering several fierce blows that put Guan Ping on the defensive. Lacking the experience to handle such a situation, Guan Ping started to panic.

Despite his panic, Guan Ping tried to fend off Zhang He while gathering his internal energy. However, Zhang He noticed his efforts.

"Die!" Guan Ping yelled, imitating his father by channeling all his energy and spirit into a single strike, charging at Zhang He with an unstoppable force.

Zhang He, who had anticipated this move, remained calm. Though the approaching strike sent chills down his spine, his battle spirit only heightened.

"Come on then!" Zhang He roared, dodging Guan Ping's attack. Though he narrowly avoided it, a portion of his arm was grazed, sending a chunk of muscle flying. Blood spurted from the wound, but Zhang He quickly staunched the flow before thrusting his spear at Guan Ping.

Exhausted from his all-out attack, Guan Ping was sluggish and couldn't fully evade the strike. With a sickening squelch, the spear tore into his right shoulder, ripping out a chunk of flesh. Unlike Zhang He, Guan Ping couldn't stop the bleeding, and blood poured from the wound.

"Charge! Save the general!" Zhang He's soldiers rushed forward to protect him, while Wei Yan didn't hesitate to lead his own troops into the fray. Both sides clashed in a chaotic melee, with hundreds of bodies left behind before the skirmish ended.

Back at Le Ling, Zhang He casually bandaged his wound and felt relieved. He could have avoided the injury, but he had taken the hit on purpose to make Guan Ping's forces think he wouldn't launch a night raid. After all, losing a chunk of flesh from his arm wasn't a big deal—he'd be fine in three to five days.

Meanwhile, Guan Ping sat in his camp, feeling downcast. His injury wouldn't heal for at least half a month, but the battle with Zhang He had revealed his flaws. Still, he wondered if the enemy would dare attempt a night raid, given that both sides' generals were now injured.

"Junyi, you're hurt?" Gao Lan asked in surprise. "I didn't think the opponent would be that formidable."

"If they were that strong, going out alone would've been suicide!" Zhang He replied, exasperated. "I let myself get hurt on purpose, so both sides' generals are injured. You get what that means."

"Well done!" Gao Lan immediately understood Zhang He's reasoning. Before, they might have worried about a night raid, but now that both generals were injured, the chances of such an attack were greatly reduced.

"I've already spotted the weaknesses in their camp. I'll sketch them out, and we'll find the best route for a nighttime assault to teach them a lesson," Zhang He said, smiling as he finished bandaging his arm.

"Hahaha, Junyi, you're impressive, managing all that in such a short time," Gao Lan praised.

"Wen Chang, do you think they'll still raid us tonight, even with their general injured? Sigh, I still have to recover," Guan Ping remarked, feeling less worried about a potential raid.

"They'll come," Wei Yan stated calmly. Though he wasn't entirely sure, he maintained a confident demeanor.

"Alright then, the main camp is yours tonight. I'll take the outer position!" Guan Ping said after the medics bandaged his wound and he drank a ginseng tonic to restore his energy. He tried to move his right arm, but it was still weak.

"You stay in the central camp. I'll take the outer position. It's late autumn, and the nights are cold. If you hadn't been injured, it'd be fine, but with your wound, it's better not to risk exposure to the cold dew," Wei Yan insisted, eyeing Guan Ping's injured shoulder.

Chapter 259: The Embodiment of Ancient Wisdom

While the scholars were rioting in Fenggao City, a carriage slowly entered through the east gate of the city.

"This Fenggao has truly become prosperous. I remember when Father left Taishan; the difference between then and now is enormous. This Chen Zichuan, though of similar age to me, possesses abilities I can only admire," remarked a young man dressed in white as he looked at his younger brother with a sense of awe.

"Let's head to the library. Regardless of anything else, I must see for myself this library of 100,000 volumes that Chen Zichuan spoke of," the younger boy said with a pale face, his eyes gleaming with a light that could leave others in awe. "Having met Uncle's expectations, I managed to delay our departure. But as Pang Shiyuan's junior, I refuse to be left behind."

"Sigh, Kongming, if you continue to push yourself like this, you will surely encounter trouble. Your talents are already extraordinary; why push yourself so hard? Pang Shiyuan is only two years older than you, yet he's still at a similar level. Why must you surpass him at all costs?" Zhuge Jin said with a bitter smile.

Zhuge Jin's younger brother was the most terrifying prodigy he had ever seen. The phrase "learning one thing and mastering ten" didn't even begin to describe his brother's abilities. Zhuge Jin had awakened his spiritual talent at eighteen and was already quite proud, while Pang Shiyuan had awakened his talent at fourteen, earning widespread acclaim. Yet now, his younger brother—sitting across from him—had awakened his talent at the age of twelve, and within a single day, had fully understood its nature. It was monstrous.

"He's too arrogant. I need to show him the reality of the world," Zhuge Liang said, opening his eyes, which gleamed with wisdom, causing Zhuge Jin to smile bitterly.

From a young age, Zhuge Liang was brilliant and congenial, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get along with Pang Tong.

For Pang Tong, standing before Zhuge Liang always seemed to dim his own light. No matter what he did, Zhuge Liang's brilliance overshadowed him. Whether it was music, chess, calligraphy, painting, appearance, or scholarship, Zhuge Liang excelled in all areas. It was as if he was a character in a game with cheat codes activated. Prodigies like Zhuge Liang and Pang Tong could never peacefully coexist.

To others, Pang Tong appeared modest and unassuming, but whenever he encountered Zhuge Liang, they would clash. If they didn't see eye to eye, they should've avoided each other, but Pang Tong loved to provoke Zhuge Liang. And similarly, the usually refined Zhuge Liang felt that overpowering Pang Tong was the right path.

Not long ago, Pang Tong had awakened his spiritual talent and came to flaunt it, which left Zhuge Liang feeling frustrated. On that same day, Zhuge Liang forced himself to awaken his spiritual talent prematurely, resulting in his current state. Clearly, Pang Tong had pushed Zhuge Liang too far, and his early awakening of his talent had left him struggling to cope with its immense power.

Zhuce Jin could only look on with envy at his brother's spiritual talent. Zhuge Liang's talent allowed him to assimilate all the abilities of his allies, whether passive or active, whether they were officials or generals. As long as they were comrades, Zhuge Liang's talent would raise everyone's capabilities. After seeing this talent, Zhuge Jin realized that perhaps heaven truly intended to create a genius—a jack-of-all-trades who could excel in everything.

Zhuce Jin was reminded of history, thinking of the time when Zhuge Liang commanded an elite force that included the Five Tiger Generals, Chen Dao, Wei Yan, Fa Zheng, and Jiang Wan. With such a formidable lineup, Zhuge Liang was nearly invincible. However, as his top talents dwindled and he had to rely on weaker generals like Liao Hua, Zhuge Liang's strength waned. This vast difference made Zhuge Jin marvel at Zhuge Liang's rise and fall.

However, while Zhuge Jin admired his brother's talent, Zhuge Liang himself found it burdensome. If given a choice, he would never have awakened his spiritual talent so early. But when Pang Tong had

provoked him, Zhuge Liang had acted impulsively and forced his talent to awaken. Now, even though he had this spiritual power, it weighed heavily on him. Zhuge Liang couldn't understand why he had awakened such a burdensome talent.

To others, this spiritual talent seemed miraculous, but Zhuge Liang saw it as a flawed ability. To use it without any strain, he estimated that he wouldn't be able to do so until he was at least twenty-five or twenty-six years old. Furthermore, the more spiritual talents he accumulated, the more it would shorten his lifespan. Zhuge Liang could feel it—even though the toll wasn't significant, he knew that relying on this power would cost him years of his life.

With Pang Tong's spiritual talent, Zhuge Liang already felt at his limit. Any more, and it would start to chip away at his longevity. To Zhuge Liang, this was evidence that his awakening had failed. Every time he thought of this, he felt a string in his mind snap, cursing Pang Tong for pushing him to awaken such a defective talent.

"Kongming, are you still feeling unwell?" Zhuge Jin noticed Zhuge Liang's dazed expression and thought his younger brother might still be feeling the aftereffects of his premature awakening.

"I'm fine," Zhuge Liang said, shaking his head slightly. "As long as I don't use my spiritual talent for extended periods, I'll be okay. But I am curious—those vast amounts of spiritual energy flowing in the heavens, could they be from a spiritual talent? It's strange that I can't use it."

"That must be the spiritual talent of one of the officials in Fenggao. It's normal that you can't use it—we're not their allies, after all," Zhuge Jin replied with a smile. "You should use your power sparingly. You awakened too early, and your talent is very strong."

"No, it's different. I can't use it at all, not because of any restrictions," Zhuge Liang said, his gaze fixed on the ceiling of the carriage as if he could see the spiritual energy swirling in the sky.

"You mean it's completely unusable?" Zhuge Jin was taken aback. If he understood correctly, this meant that even if they were on the same side as the one with this spiritual talent, Zhuge Liang still wouldn't be able to use it.

"Yes, it's unusable. I'm curious to know whose spiritual talent this belongs to," Zhuge Liang said with a calm but curious expression. To him, encountering an unusual spiritual talent wasn't too surprising—after all, the world was full of extraordinary people.

"Let's not dwell on it. We'll find out eventually. We should focus on our own tasks. Although Uncle agreed to our request, it's already decided that we'll move to Jingzhou early next year. I suppose you'll be attending the Lumen Academy," Zhuge Jin said, setting aside his curiosity about other people's spiritual talents. He knew his own limits, and that was enough for him.

"Lumen Academy... I'm only interested in their library. But if the Taishan Library really has 100,000 volumes, I'll have a way to convince Uncle to let me stay," Zhuge Liang said calmly. He had little interest in studying at Lumen Academy—Pang Tong's turf wasn't where he wanted to be. Instead, he would make Pang Tong come to him.

If Chen Xi had known about Zhuge Liang's thoughts, he would have stayed up all night printing more books to ensure the library would have 100,000 volumes ready by the opening day. But unfortunately, he was unaware...

Chapter 260: The Advantages of Youth

Zhuce Liang was now deeply grateful that his talent was an active one. If it had been passive, in a place like Liu Bei's domain, where spiritual talents were everywhere, he estimated that his lifespan would be drained within five years. Calculating it, it seemed that each activation reduced his lifespan by about twenty times, so Zhuge Liang figured that if he used it sparingly, only in critical moments, he could manage. After all, despite his dissatisfaction, the effectiveness of his talent was undeniable—if necessary, he could keep it active for a month straight, and as long as his allies were strong, Zhuge Liang could achieve incredible feats during that time.

While the talent had its advantages, its drawbacks were significant, and Zhuge Liang couldn't help but feel frustrated with Pang Tong for triggering his premature awakening.

Unbeknownst to him, two of the most formidable figures of the Three Kingdoms era had already arrived in Fenggao. Zhuge Liang was currently preoccupied with observing the scholars causing trouble outside the library. In this era, where scholars could easily transition into military roles, many of these scholars possessed some level of internal energy. After all, those who could afford to read could also afford to eat well, and that meant they could cultivate some degree of internal energy. A large group of them gathering together was indeed quite intimidating.

"Go tell them that the person who made them a promise has arrived. Those who willingly came here should stand to the left, and those who were brought here by force should stand to the right," Chen Xi instructed Hua Xiong's bodyguard to relay the message.

"Chen Hou has ordered that those who willingly came to Fenggao should stand to the left, and those who were brought here by force should stand to the right," Hua Xiong's bodyguard shouted boldly.

"Hua Xiong, make sure to keep an eye on this group. I'm going to protect the strategist," Hua Xiong said. Ever since Chen Dao had captured him, the two had become fast friends, and Hua Xiong had recruited Chen Dao as a junior officer under his command.

Although Hua Xiong's command consisted of 7,000 troops, he had given Chen Dao command of 3,000 of them, partly to avoid favoritism and partly because he genuinely admired Chen Dao's abilities.

"Don't worry, as long as I'm here, no one will get through," Chen Dao replied impatiently. He had decided to settle down here since he was a loner, and Taishan had everything he needed—especially military books.

When the scholars heard the soldier's message and saw the white-clad man leading two young officials behind him, they quickly guessed that this must be Chen Xi. The idea of impersonating him in Fenggao seemed too foolish to consider.

Seeing the young men behind Chen Xi, the scholars surmised that they must be high-ranking officials. The most striking difference between Fenggao and other places was that here, high-ranking officials were typically very young. The higher the position, the more likely it was held by someone young.

"Chen Hou, you once promised us the right to borrow books from the library. Why, then, are soldiers stationed here? Isn't this a breach of faith?" One of the scholars stepped forward before the others could split into two lines, his skepticism about the library's claimed collection of 100,000 volumes apparent.

"Did I say that? Fine, let's say you're right in taking my words out of context. But I also said the scholars should divide into two groups," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly.

Sitting on a balcony at a nearby tavern, Sima Yi watched the scene unfold with a sneer, clearly disdainful of the scholars below.

"Chen Hou, please explain why we are not being granted the right to borrow books," the leading scholar demanded forcefully.

"I only mentioned the existence of a library, not that you would have access to it. You don't have the right to make demands. I'm offering an opportunity—if you can seize it, good for you. If not, well, that's your problem," Chen Xi replied coolly. Here in Fenggao, he had all the confidence he needed.

"This is different from what was initially said!" the scholar protested angrily.

"If you're dissatisfied, you can leave. I said from the start that land would be granted, and I never promised access to the library. That's just a bonus—I decide who gets it," Chen Xi said, unconcerned. He hadn't promised anything about opening the library; that was just something Li You had thrown out there. As for the household registration he'd mentioned, most of these scholars didn't even have that.

"By the way, access to the library requires qualifications. These are books, not trivial items. I intended to do a good deed, but I can't let just anyone in. You should know whether you qualify. You should also be aware of the crime of attacking a family to steal their private collection," Chen Xi said lazily, his words sending a chill through the scholars.

"Looks like you understand the severity of the crime. I don't want to pursue it further. Go your separate ways. Soon, we'll publish the requirements for obtaining library access. You'll know where you stand then," Chen Xi said, narrowing his eyes. Most of these scholars had simply followed the crowd, and Chen Xi wasn't interested in their leader's motives. The library was off-limits for now.

"Those who have already divided into left and right groups may come forward," Chen Xi said casually, his goal of dividing and conquering nearly achieved.

Hearing this, those who had already taken sides—whether willingly or reluctantly—moved to stand beside Chen Xi.

"Congratulations, you now have the right to borrow books. Go to Li Wenru to get your household registration sorted," Chen Xi said offhandedly, his decision leaving those who had hesitated earlier feeling as if they'd been struck by lightning. If only they'd taken a step in either direction earlier, they could've gained this valuable opportunity!

But while others fretted, the three or four dozen scholars who had gained Chen Xi's approval were overjoyed.

"Zi Jian, send someone to escort them to Wenru for their household registration papers," Chen Xi said to Hua Xiong. The whole exercise had been a strategy to divide the crowd, and these people had fallen right into it.

Hua Xiong gave the scholars a look that seemed to say, "You got lucky," and sent one of his men off with Chen Xi's seal to Li You. The first batch of registrations needed to be prestigious.

Ignoring the others' frustration, Chen Xi maintained his usual casual demeanor. He'd brought Lu Su and Fa Zheng along, thinking the situation might escalate, but it hadn't. Now, it was smooth sailing.

Glancing at the leader of the scholars, who was now receiving glares from his peers, Chen Xi shook his head slightly. It seemed this guy had made a lot of enemies today.

"Zi Jian, keep guarding the library," Chen Xi told Hua Xiong, signaling that he was done there.

"Call if you need me, strategist. Hua Xiong will be at your service," Hua Xiong said before returning to his post.

Chen Xi glanced at the remaining scholars who were still lingering and considering speaking up. He turned and walked away, uninterested in debating with them any further.

As Chen Xi walked off, a commotion broke out behind him, likely leading to a scuffle. After all, the leader had been far too arrogant earlier.

"Zi Jing, Xiao Zhi, you two should return to your duties. I'm going to check on Qu Hanmo and see how he's progressing with the tasks I assigned him," Chen Xi said with a smile, ignoring the shouts behind him.

"Sigh, self-inflicted misfortune," Lu Su said with a sigh.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. See? This is the allure of fame," Fa Zheng said with a smirk.

Chen Xi paused for a moment, glancing at Fa Zheng. Indeed, every advantage came with its drawbacks. Having never experienced the frustration of being stuck in a dead-end job for years, Fa Zheng viewed life's greatest temptations with a rather detached perspective.